



Preaching from a Theology of the Cross

JONATHAN P. STRANDJORD

Five Points Lutheran Church, Blue River, Wisconsin

The flowering of historical criticism of the Bible in the past century has had an enormous impact on preaching. That impact, for the most part, has been beneficial. The sorting out of all the various layers of tradition with their differing theologies and historical contexts has helped preachers see the Bible as the fascinating, polychrome, and multifaceted thing that it is. Moreover, the rigor of the historical critical method has helped preaching remain meaningful in an historically conscious age.

Along with these gifts, however, historical criticism has given the preacher a knotty problem. How does one move from exegesis to proclamation? After all the layers of the pericope have been carefully separated and their tendencies noted and theologies distinguished, after the commentaries have been consulted and the history of interpretation established, what then is one to preach? The oldest, most “authentic” layer? The final, canonical form? The theology of the redactor? The “trajectory” of the tradition history of the text? The meaning of the text as it has impacted the lives of Christians throughout history or in some particularly normative period (e.g., the Reformation)? Whatever seems best to fit the situation of the congregation? Or should one perhaps take the shotgun approach and try to preach *all* these layers of meaning in *all* their distinctiveness at once? To put it differently, how is one to go about the task of bringing a word on Sunday morning that has an authority greater than one’s own, a word which genuinely stands over against both the congregation and oneself, a word which is the Word of God?

Clearly what is needed is some way of talking about the coherence of Scripture. A grab-bag of particulars cannot function authoritatively, for when particulars are purely individual and isolated, their impact is fleeting and trivial. If the Bible is to function at all, the preacher must have some notion of its coherence. If it is to function in a genuinely authoritative way, then the understanding of its coherence must be appropriate and not simply the invention of the preacher.

Historical criticism has not and will not tell us what the coherence of Scripture is. Critical tools take things apart. They do not put them together. Therefore, it is no surprise that the flourishing of the analytical disciplines of historical criticism has been accompanied by a whirlwind of systematic theological activity. Neo-orthodoxy, existential theology, the theology of hope, process theology, liberation theology, feminist theology—all these differ widely, and no coherent theology can be constructed out of all of them, but each one offers a vision of coherence. The question then is, which vision offers the preacher the most help?

I. THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS AS COHERENT CENTER FOR THEOLOGY

It is my contention that the most significant current in recent theology for preaching is the theology of the cross. First enunciated by Paul (see especially 1 Cor 1:18-2:5), developed by Luther,¹ and taken up at the beginning of this century by the theologians of crisis, it has had a deep and far-ranging impact on a broad spectrum of theologies and theologians. Books detailing the *theologia crucis* have become theological best-sellers.² Indeed, the phrase has become a sort of watchword. Professorial and pastoral heads are guaranteed to nod if someone says, “Our theology must be a theology of the cross.”

So then, what is the theology of the cross, and what does it have to do with preaching? Since excellent full-length treatments of the first question are in wide circulation,³ we may proceed directly to the second, pausing only to sketch in brief outline the main features of the *theologia crucis*.

First of all, it is a theology of incarnation. Hall is emphatic:

It must not be overlooked that the whole intention of this theology is to bear witness to *the incarnation*. The theology of the cross is first of all a way of speaking about the character of God’s entry into the sphere of human history.⁴

An emphasis on incarnation is, of course, hardly unique to the theology of the cross. What makes it distinctive is the radical seriousness with which it takes the crucifixion of Jesus Christ as the focal point and completion of the incarnation. Again Hall:

A theology of the cross...insists that God, who wills to meet us, love us, redeem us, meets, loves, and redeems us precisely where we are: in the valley of the shadow of death.⁵

The resurrection is also taken seriously—but not in such away that the cross is

¹See especially theses 19-24 of the Heidelberg Disputation in Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works* (55 vols.; St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-) 31.40-41, 52-55.

²E.g., Walther von Loewenich, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976); Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974); Douglas Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976).

³See previous footnote.

⁴D. Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness*, 149.

⁵*Ibid.*, 149.

left behind. Beginning with Paul, the proponents of this theology insist that we have the exalted Christ only as the crucified Christ.⁶

The second main feature is closely related to the first: the radically cruciform character of the incarnation becomes a principle of theological knowledge. Theses 19 and 20 of Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation state:

That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as if they were clearly perceptible in those things which

have actually happened. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.⁷

Von Loewenich summarizes this principle thus:

God reveals himself in concealment, God's wisdom appears to men as foolishness, God's power is perfected in weakness, God's glory parades in lowliness, God's life becomes effective in the death of his Son.⁸

This means that the cross of Christ is not just a subject within theology; it is the center and criterion of *all* theology.

The final feature we need to note here of the theology of the cross is that the crucified knowledge of God it gives us is not a mere mental puzzle or shell game. It is not so much a paradox as it is a *skandalon*. The intention of this hidden revelation is not to mystify or confound, but to convert; to crucify the old Adam,⁹ to alienate alienated humankind.¹⁰ It reaches its goal when the hearer takes up his or her own cross, his or her broken humanity, and follows Christ.

So much for our sketch of the theology of the cross. What applications can be made to the preaching task?

II. WHAT, THEN, SHALL WE SAY?

First of all, let us turn our attention to the problem with which we began: given the complex variety of Scripture revealed by historical criticism, how is the preacher to know what to preach? Is there an authentic coherence to Scripture which would guide us in ordering the unruly particulars unearthed in exegesis into an authoritative whole? The theology of the cross does point us to such a coherence. It does so by both naming the central focus of the Bible and describing the nature of Scripture.

The central focus of Scripture is, quite simply, the cross; not the scriptural texts about the cross or the theology of the cross, but the *event* of the cross. It is the cross itself which norms Scripture and all theologies of the cross. This view is not simply a dogmatic assertion but takes seriously the history of the formation of the canon. It was the cross (and, of course, the vindication of the crucified one

⁶Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 41.

⁷Luther, *Luther's Works*, 31.52.

⁸von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology*, 11.

⁹Luther, *Luther's Works*, 31.53.

¹⁰Moltmann, *Crucified God*, 39.

by the resurrection) which created the Christian community, and it was around this event that the community gathered old traditions and created new ones, all of which were understood as pointing to and interpreting this event. This is not to say that there is an absolute distinction between the event of the cross and the words which were gathered around it. For the event itself

had a word-character; that is to say, the event, in part, consisted of words and, *in toto*, engendered words. However, if we are to take seriously the particularity and historical nature of the cross event, then a distinction between the cross and the words witnessing to it must be maintained. Moltmann states:

The crucified Christ is more than the preaching of the cross. For the very reason that this preaching is the only adequate access which the godless have to God who was crucified, this intrinsic distinction must not be removed....The crucified Christ remains the inner criterion of all preaching which appeals to him.¹¹

What this means for the coherence of Scripture is that the biblical writings are indeed a unity but not a self-contained unity. Their coherence consists not in some uniform character of inspiration or inerrancy, nor does it consist in some “canon within the canon” (e.g., the Gospel of Mark and the Pauline epistles) which norms the rest of Scripture. Rather, their center, their unity, lies outside themselves in the event which engendered both words and the collection of these writings around itself. The Bible, understood in this way, is not strictly speaking, *norma normans non normata*. Rather, it possesses authority precisely because it is normed by the cross.

So much, then, for the center of Scripture. What can we say of its character? The *theologia crucis* points to the cross as the form of God’s self-revelation and activity. Therefore God’s activity in Scripture is understood as radically incarnate and cruciform. The “divine nature” of the Bible does not consist in some superhuman quality or mystic aura (contrary to the artwork on greeting cards pastors generally receive from parishioners). It can be found only “deep in the flesh,” immersed and enmeshed in the human particulars of these writings.

What wisdom is there here for the preacher as exegete, faced with the task of deciding what a specific text has to say? The preacher as exegete will respect the humanity (and, therefore, the particularity) of each text. He or she will not approach the text assuming to know already what the text says, but will use all the critical tools which make once familiar pericopes strange. Careful textual, historical, literary, and theological work must be done in order to hear the distinctive voice or voices of the text in all their harmony and dissonance with other biblical voices. But the preacher as exegete won’t stop there. For if one does (and assuming one is really faithful to the distinctiveness of each voice), then one’s preaching ends up being an incoherent cacophony with no real authority. The hearer is either simply confused or has to try to create order out of the chaos by picking and choosing those voices that appeal. No one is confronted; no one is changed by sermons with titles like “Four Biblical Views of Salvation” or “Three Biblical Understandings of Law” in which the particulars

¹¹Ibid., 75.

are simply set side by side, smorgasbord style. The theology of the cross calls the exegete to make yet another move. The exegete will listen to hear what happens to the voices of the text when they are drawn into the orbit of the cross. *What does the text have to say about the cross?* How does it point ahead or point back to that event.? Where in the text do we see the God revealed in the incarnate, crucified Christ? What features of the incarnate God are brought out in high relief by this text? *What does the cross have to say about the text?* How does it speak to the

text's questions, contradict and fulfill the hopes expressed there, and transform its message? What new dimensions and polarities are given the text by relating it to the cross?

Asking these kinds of questions will grant one's preaching coherence—not an easy, obvious, “Cream of Wheat” coherence (the stubborn, human particularities of the text are respected), but a real coherence nevertheless. The preacher floundering in a sea of exegetical data will welcome this gift. This might seem like all a preacher could ask for. But the theology of the cross has yet more help to give us as we search for what we shall say when we venture into the pulpit.

It is not enough to relate the text to the cross. The preacher must also relate the text to the hearer. Indeed (and this cannot be stated too emphatically), *all preaching which is true to the theology of the cross will be unabashedly apologetic*. This may well strike the reader as a strange assertion. After all, the major theologians of this century who have carried the banner of the *theologia crucis* have stressed the impact of the preached word on the hearer and not its connection with the hearer's thought forms, pain, and hope. The dynamic character and the otherness of the word of the cross have been the focus of attention. Indeed, one sometimes hears the motto, “The Word creates its hearer.” The view of preaching this expresses is that the word first annihilates the hearer (“We must become nothing to the same degree as we were nothing before creation”¹²) and then creates that person *ex nihilo*. There is, therefore, no need to find a point of contact between the word and the hearer. The discontinuity between the old and the new is absolute.

The problem with this view is that it does not take seriously the incarnation. It grasps the form of the cross (contradiction) but loses its content (incarnation). It holds onto the cross as something God does to us but ignores the reception of the human (in all its concreteness and brokenness) into God in Christ. It discounts the continuity between Christ crucified and the risen Christ. It therefore ends up with a gnostic proclamation of a docetic Christ.

The preacher who takes seriously the incarnation will preach an apologetic kerygma. This is not to say that such preaching will be less kerygmatic. That would be the case only if kerygmatic preaching were properly defined negatively by the absence of apologetic concern. In fact, careful attention to apologetic issues can intensify the impact of the kerygma. The more incarnate one's preaching, the greater its potential to engage the hearer deeply and move that person to repentance and faith.

The preacher who is a theologian of the cross will therefore, for the sake of proclamation, “exegete” his or her hearers as carefully as the text. Here the

¹²von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology*, 78.

preacher will use the critical tools given by the social sciences and also will broaden his or her experience by reading history and literature. But most of all the preacher will pay close and careful attention to individual hearers in all their particularity. In what specific ways are their lives broken? For what specific things do they hope? What are their “world-views”? After all, the gospel must be heard by particular individuals in all their peculiarity.

Of course the apologetic task can be bungled. This generally happens in one of two ways. The preacher can hold on to the specificity of his or her hearers but give up the kerygmatic dimension of the message. In this case, the preacher ends up “meeting perceived needs” (which is

the business of prostitutes and political speech writers, not preachers). Or the preacher can hold on to the distinctiveness and “over-againstness” of the kerygma but reduce the actual hearers present to a uniform, abstract generalization. This is a serious flaw with much Lutheran preaching. We preach to humankind instead of human beings. Laudably, we take seriously the fact that the problem is not just sins but sin. We fail to recognize, though, the many shapes sin can take in different lives. Instead of letting the gospel meet people where they are, we insist that it come to them in a standardized way. The result is mishearing and non-hearing of the gospel. For example, as feminist theologians are finally forcing us to consider, perhaps the fact that our congregations are primarily female is not cause to rejoice.¹³ True, the dispossessed are supposed to be our primary audience. But could it be that rather than being a “religion of slaves” (a designation we should not fear), we have created instead a “religion of slavery”—an ideology of resignation? This is a damning charge, and one not easily dismissed.

The preacher who is a theologian of the cross will work hard to speak an appropriate word to *all* the sorts of people who come within the range of his or her voice—

- to the fatalists who still make up a large portion of congregations (rural midwestern ones, and elsewhere, too) and whose sin can hardly be called pride.
- to the true American optimists (whose oracle is Paul Harvey).
- to those who are bitterly disillusioned as only former optimists can be and who therefore threaten to fall back into fatalism or nihilism.

These three types are radically different from each other but even so only begin to describe the spectrum of varieties of human experience—not only between persons but within persons—the preacher is called to engage. The solution is not to try to preach to everyone at once. That simply cannot be done. The preacher will speak many different sorts of words in order to bring many different hearers into a concrete, transforming relationship to the one cross.

III. HOW, THEN, SHALL WE SAY IT?

Because the theology of the cross takes the incarnation so seriously, it directs the preacher to pay careful attention to *how* particular texts may best be preached to particular people. First of all, it will not allow the preacher to ignore the form of

¹³E.g., Dorothea Soelle., *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975); Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1980).

the text. Our task is not to disengage the message of a text from its form and then present that message discarnately to our hearers. The form of the text tells us a great deal about how the text was intended to impact its hearers. This does not mean, however, that the sermon must be constructed using the same form or forms found in the original text (using parables for preaching a parable, proverbs for a proverb, doxological hymns for a doxological hymn, etc.). For the preacher must also consider how different forms of speech impact various hearers. Forms of speech are not eternal constants which function identically at all times and places. Some people, cultures, and eras have a tin ear when it comes to hymnic language; some are utterly unmoved by an historical account; and some are too literal-minded to “get” a parable. The theologian of the cross preaches to the hearers present, not some ideal audience.

We do not have the space here, of course, to consider the many mutations preaching can

take. We can focus briefly on two major forms of preaching which are now the subject of much discussion—*didactic* and *narrative* preaching.

Certainly one of the most significant homiletical developments in the past few years has been a growing appreciation of the possibilities presented by narrative preaching.¹⁴ Briefly defined, this is preaching in which stories are not used as illustrations but are in and of themselves the preaching of the text. Instead of explaining a biblical story (that is, extracting a meaning from the text which is then presented directly to the hearer, either with or without the benefit of illustrations), the preacher tells one or more stories which are calculated to have the same effect as the text did on its first hearers. The goal is not to communicate information but to enable engagement, identification, and appropriation.

The proponents of narrative preaching do not, generally speaking, call for the complete abandoning of didactic preaching (which aims to transmit information). Yet, in reading many of these books, one is hard pressed to find a reason to preach anything other than a narrative sermon. A theologian of the cross should be suspicious of such total commitment to a form, since it does not take into account the multiplicity and polyformity of either the Scriptures or the world. Furthermore, folk who talk about “mere information” are not taking seriously the historical, objective character of the cross. A preacher who wishes to be true to that cross will work to preach effective didactic sermons. For it is in this way that we join our hearers to the historical cross historically situated. The point, of course, is not to “prove” the faith or to give one’s hearers a special, sacred knowledge which it is then their task to believe. Rather, the goal of legitimate didactic preaching is to anchor faith in the historical Christ and thus prevent it from becoming simply subjective and therefore something other than faith in Christ.

This does not mean, however, that we ought to reject narrative preaching. It has tremendous possibilities. When we preach to “crucify,” to bring people face to face with their broken and twisted condition, narrative can be an extremely effective tool. Instead of directly confronting and battering people, narrative can almost imperceptibly slip a knife between the ribs as in Nathan’s story (2 Sam 12:1-15) and many of Jesus’ parables (e.g., the Pharisee and the Tax

¹⁴For a discussion of this trend see Richard Jensen, *Telling the Story* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980) 114-160.

Collector, the Prodigal Son, or the Good Samaritan). The powerful phenomenon of identification enables the narrative sermon to cause deep and lasting appropriation of the troubling, crucifying word.

It is also an important tool in declaring the good news. Our preaching of the gospel is often abstract. Of course we would expect that the gospel would be harder to flesh out than the law for people who live this side of the Parousia. The discontinuity between the old and the new is real. Yet we dare not preach a gospel which consists only of fleshless, abstract assertions (“Jesus died for you,” “God loves you”) or which tries to flesh out the gospel with the sole aid of a few, overstuffed words (“grace,” “justification,” “salvation,” or “*shalom*”). Because of the incarnation we can legitimately preach a narrative gospel in hopes of striking deep chords in our hearers. Buechner has a large piece of the truth about preaching the gospel when he describes it as telling

the tale that is too good not to be true because to dismiss it as untrue is to dismiss along with it that catch of the breath, that beat and lifting of the heart near to or even accompanied by tears, which I believe is the deepest intuition of truth that we have.¹⁵

The theology of the cross, with its recognition of the depth of human brokenness, will not let us worship either this intuition or the narratives which can occasion it. But neither will it let us scorn them or the possibilities presented by the many other forms language can take. The preacher is free to exploit them all.

IV. HOW, THEN, SHALL WE KNOW IF WE HAVE SAID IT?

The theology of the cross aids us not only in preparing and preaching sermons but also in evaluating them once they are preached. It points us to a double criterion—the cross of Christ and the cross of the hearer. Was the sermon, whether it mentioned Christ or not, true to the cross? And did the sermon serve the death of the old Adam and the birth of the new in one's hearers?

This is not an easy criterion to apply. It is difficult to know if one's preaching has indeed been true to the cross of Christ. How can one claim that the text has been fully or even adequately related to the cross when one cannot claim to grasp either completely? Even more difficult is knowing whether one has significantly related the text to the cross of the hearer. This is the case because we cannot peer into the souls of our hearers and, even if we could, even the best preaching does not have a guaranteed effect (such as repentance or faith). Yet we cannot be content to be unconcerned about the impact of our preaching. We will seek to find out as best we can whether we have been heard or misheard. Good preaching does not always produce faith, but it does always "scandalize," trip up and engage the hearer. It may not necessarily move people to faith but it will certainly not leave them unmoved.

The difficulty of applying this double criterion points us to the importance of the preacher, besides having a theology of the cross, being a theologian of the

¹⁵Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977) 98.

cross. For only as the preacher takes a stand within his or her own broken humanity, only as the cross of Christ continues to break and bless him or her can the preacher even begin to apply this double criterion to preaching. We cannot know with any confidence whether others have heard unless we ourselves hear the word of the cross.

The greatest gift the theology of the cross has to give the preacher is the call to hear that word.