



The Proclamation of the Word in Luther's Thought*

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Martin Luther the reformer was at once Luther the biblical professor and Luther the evangelical preacher. His career displays an indissoluble bond between the lecture platform and the pulpit.

In October 1512, Luther was made Doctor of Sacred Scripture and succeeded John von Staupitz as professor of Bible in the recently founded (1502) university of Wittenberg. From August 1513, when he gave his first lecture on the Psalms, until November 1545, when he gave his last lecture on Genesis, Luther appeared in the classroom three or four times weekly to expound the biblical books, devoting primary attention to the Old Testament. Already in May 1512, when he was made sub-prior of the Wittenberg monastery of Augustinian friars, Luther officially assumed the office of cloister preacher; toward the end of 1514, at the request of the city council, he became a regular preacher in the Wittenberg parish church. Thereafter he also delivered sermons in the Castle Church, in his own home (owing to illness), and in many other places while on journeys. It is estimated that he preached, on an average, two or three times weekly from 1512 to 1546, devoting primary attention to the Gospel lessons. The Weimar edition of Luther's works contains more than two thousand sermons, comprising about two-thirds of his total output.

This connection between podium and pulpit in Luther's career was neither incidental nor accidental, but discloses the mainspring of his theological and reformatory labors: the disciplined study of Holy Scripture to the end that the Word of God contained and attested therein might be brought to contemporary expression by the living voice of the preacher. Luther was convinced that the greatest abuse of the church of his day was that "God's Word has been silenced." The remedy was plain: "Let everything be done so that the Word may have free course instead of the prattling and rattling that has been the rule up to now. We can spare everything except the Word."¹ Luther's theology,

*To Richard R. Caemmerer, Sr. on his seventy-ninth birthday.

¹Martin Luther, *Luther's Works* (55 vols.; St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-76) 53.11,14 (hereafter cited as *LW*). Reference is also made to *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimarer Ausgabe; Weimar: H. Bohlaus Nachfolger, 1883; hereafter cited as *WA*), and to *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959; hereafter cited as *BC*).

therefore, is most appropriately called a "theology of the Word." It is truly a "kerygmatic" theology, a theology of and for proclamation.

My intent in this essay is twofold: first, to examine the leading features of Luther's

theology of the Word, as these relate to the proclamation of the Word; and, second, to give some preliminary attention to the difficult question of what “rhetoric of preaching” is called for by Luther’s central teaching that the justification of the ungodly is in fact a “Word event.”

I. “WORD OF GOD” AND PROCLAMATION

What does Luther mean by “Word of God”? And why does he accord the “preached Word” such pivotal importance in his theology? The following thirteen points supply an answer to these questions, with no pretension to completeness.

1. For Luther the “Word of God” is first and foremost *God himself*, since God is *Deus loquens*, the God who speaks. God is not silent or speech-less, but from all eternity has with him his Word or Speech, “a conversation in which he engages with himself and which reflects the thoughts of his heart” (*LW* 22.10). This *preexistent Word* is the Second Person of the Trinity, coeternal and coequal with the divine essence. He is no less the *cosmic Word* through whom God created the world and still preserves it. This eternal cosmic Word became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth in order to effect the fallen world’s redemption and to reveal God’s innermost being as pure love. The Word of redemption and revelation spoken in the *incarnate Word* makes audible the Word spoken in creation, while both the incarnate Word and the cosmic Word make audible the eternal Word as the Second Person of the Trinity.² Thus true and saving knowledge of God always comes through his Word, specifically through his Word made flesh. For Luther, accordingly, the metaphor “Word of God” always refers to God’s speaking in Christ, and this speaking, in turn, is always centered on, and clarified by, the historical appearance of Jesus Christ as the incarnate Word, God himself come among us in person.

2. Holy Scripture shows that God’s Word also takes the form of *concrete historical acts of redemption and revelation*, since according to the Hebrew idiom a word (*dabar*) is also a deed. Hence “in the case of God to speak is to do, and the word is the deed” (*LW* 12.33). In one sense all historical events are words of God because they are worked by the omnipotent God, who “masks” himself in them. Yet only those deeds are Word of God, in the special sense of that term, wherein God acts redemptively on behalf of his people and reveals himself as their Savior and Lord. The focal Word of God in the Old Testament was the Exodus, the deed which, when proclaimed ever anew by “Moses and the prophets,” made all God’s other deeds meaningful for his ancient people Israel (*LW* 19.135). In this Word God also prefigured or anticipated his ultimate Word of redemption and revelation: that Word accomplished in the birth, teachings, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The people of the Old Testament

²Jaroslav Pelikan, *Luther the Expositor* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959) 53. I am much indebted to chapter three of this book, “The Bible and the Word of God,” pp. 48-70, for my comments in this and the following paragraph.

and of the New are thus saved by one and the same God and by faith in one and the same Word of God, namely, the Word spoken in Christ—save that whereas faith was once directed to the anticipated Christ, it must now be directed to the Christ who has come (cf. *LW* 26.239). For Luther, accordingly, the Word of God as historical deed of redemption and revelation is always centered on, and clarified by, the historical appearance of Jesus Christ as the incarnate Word.

3. All God’s words and works find their ultimate purpose and meaning in the incarnate

Word. Yet even God's speaking and acting in Christ would remain *meaningless and ineffectual* without the oral witness to the Word made flesh, namely, the apostolic preaching or publishing of Christ to the world, the gospel or "good news" of Christ as "God for us." Hence the incarnate Word cannot be considered apart from the *spoken Word*, "for if Christ's life and suffering were not comprehended in the [preached] Word to which faith might cling, they would have availed nothing, for all those who were eyewitnesses received no benefit from their experience, or only very little" (*LW* 52.34; cf. BC 415). Faith is not directed to historical events as such, to God's Word as deed, but to these events as taken up into the church's present proclamation, into God's Word as gospel. Following Paul in Romans 10:14ff., Luther concludes that faith "comes only through God's Word or gospel, which preaches Christ, saying that he is God's Son and a man, and has died and risen again for our sakes" (*LW* 35.368). Christians, therefore, live not by their "eyes," in the mode of rationalists who believe only what they see to be true (and "seeing," in any case, avails nothing where Christ is concerned), but by their "ears," in the posture of poor, humble, needy suppliants who trust what they hear because that apostolic gospel alone satisfies their hearts (cf. *LW* 29.224). For Luther, accordingly, the Word of God as gospel is nothing but "a joyous sermon concerning Christ, our Savior," whereby Christ is rendered present to our hearing, to the end that the saving faith may be awakened which "unites us with Christ and makes us owners of all the possessions of Christ" (*LW* 52.20, 23).

4. The Word of God as gospel is found throughout the Old Testament, chiefly in the form of promises of the coming Christ, but no less in God's gracious dealings with his covenant people for the sake of the coming Christ. (Until Christ actually came, it was necessary to preserve the promises of his advent in written form.) The primary content of the Old Testament, however, "is really the teaching of laws, the showing up of sin, and the demanding of good" (*LW* 35.237). Thus the Old Testament is necessarily something written, a book of laws and promises, and the term "Scripture," *die Schrift*, properly designates the Old Testament alone. The New Testament, by contrast, is not *Schrift*, but *Botschaft*, something proclaimed: the joyous announcement that the promised Christ has at last come, the liberating news that the righteous God, notwithstanding his holy law and just condemnation of sin, freely forgives sinners for Christ's sake through faith alone. The gospel by its very nature of good tidings of deliverance requires the *viva vox*, the living voice of the preacher. In short, "the gospel should not really be something written, but a spoken word which brought forth the Scriptures, as Christ and the apostles have done. This is why Christ himself did not write anything but only spoke. He called his teaching

not Scripture but gospel, meaning good news or a proclamation that is spread not by pen, but by word of mouth" (*LW* 35.123). Hence the church is a *Mundhaus*, the place of the mouth and salutary speech, not a *Federhaus*, the domain of the scribe (*WA* 10-1-2.48). The Word of God is not properly understood, therefore, when it is simply identified with the "letter" of Scripture, and is not properly used when the reading of Scripture is placed above or even alongside the hearing of the gospel. *The Word of God must be preached to be fully effective*, for the Word "is not as fruitful or powerful as it is through a public preacher whom God has ordained to say and preach [it]" (*WA* 36.220).

5. The Old Testament Scriptures are precious because they are "the swaddling cloths and the manger in which Christ lies" (*LW* 35.236). Thus the gospel is at once contained and

concealed in the Old Testament, and this “manger” remains shrouded in darkness unless illumined by the “star of Bethlehem,” namely, “the new light, preaching and the gospel, oral and public preaching,” whereby the living voice “produce[s] in speech and hearing what prior to this lay hidden in the letter and in secret vision” (*LW* 52.205). Christ himself, and the apostles after him, brought the gospel hidden in Scripture to light through their teaching and preaching, which they transmitted orally. “So it is not at all in keeping with the New Testament to write books on Christian doctrine. Rather in all places there should be fine, goodly, learned, spiritual, diligent preachers without books, who extract the living Word from the old Scripture and unceasingly inculcate it in the people, just as the apostles did.” To be sure, Christ’s own preaching and that of the apostles eventually assumed written form, owing to the exigent need to preserve this preaching in its original purity and to protect it from the vagaries of false teachers and heretics. Still, “the need to write books was a serious decline and a lack of the Spirit which necessity forced upon us” (*LW* 52.206). Hence the highest responsibility incumbent upon the church’s ministers through all ages is to do what Christ and the apostles once did, namely, “to extract the living Word” from the Holy Scriptures—now including the New Testament Scriptures as well as the Old—so that the gospel may again be liberated from its bondage to the “letter” and may again come to salutary expression through the living voice, thereby awakening saving faith in its auditors, when and where it pleases God. In Luther’s thought (and in classical Lutheran theology), accordingly, all that concerned the “Word of God” came to focus on the *doctrina evangelii*, the present proclamation of the apostolic gospel by faithful preachers—thus leading to the primary identification of the Word of God with the spoken Word and so to a dynamic concept of the Word. In seventeenth-century Lutheran theology (and in Protestant Orthodoxy as a whole), by contrast, everything came to focus on the “inscripturation” of the Word, its past encoding in a supernaturally perfect Book—thus leading to an almost complete identification of the Word of God with the Bible and so to a static concept of the Word.

6. The Holy Scriptures are, for Luther, rightly understood when they are seen as *the record of past proclamation*, and are rightly used when the preaching there recorded is continuously transposed into *the modality of present proclamation*. Preaching, as noted, frees the gospel from its encapsulation in Scripture and so gives the Word “free course” in the world. The preached Word is also

the means by which all the Scriptures are brought to light and opened up for the ears of faith. This is not to say that the Scriptures lack sufficient clarity in their own right, for while individual passages or words (the *verba*) may be obscure, the central content or subject matter (the *res*) of Scripture—Christ himself and the witness to him—is luminous (cf. *LW* 33.25-26). Yet “when Christ is not known, it is impossible to have any understanding in Scripture, since he is the Sun and Truth in Scripture” (*LW* 11.110). The holy ministry or preaching office (*Predigtamt*) has been instituted by God precisely to make Christ known, to preach nothing but him: the preacher’s own *verba*, therefore, proclaim the *res* of Scripture and thereby illumine all the biblical *verba*. Hence the perspicuity of Scripture is wrongly construed if it is taken in isolation from the sermon and the preaching office. The familiar Roman Catholic criticism that Luther’s doctrine of biblical authority destroyed the living connection between Holy Writ and Holy Church, between the Bible and the church’s teaching office or *magisterium*, cannot be sustained. This criticism

neglects to consider that for Luther and the Protestant reformers “the preaching of the Word...is the living *magisterium* and bridge between Church and Scripture.”³ The architectural placement of the pulpit between the lectern and the pews visibly attests this “magisterial” and “bridge” function of the preached Word.

7. The Holy Scriptures are justly called Word of God, the *written Word*, because they have God the Holy Spirit as their ultimate author: the prophets and apostles all spoke and wrote under the inspiration of the Spirit. Yet the Scriptures are Word of God in a *secondary or derivative sense* because they always point beyond themselves to Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word, who is their matchless content; to the prophetic and the apostolic gospel of Christ, which is their glorious theme; and to the church’s continuous proclamation of this biblical gospel, which is their true reason for being. The Scriptures possess sole normative authority for the church’s faith and life inasmuch as they are the *source and standard* of its teaching and preaching. Preachers must “extract” their message from the Scriptures to insure that they are now preaching the *same* gospel that the prophets and apostles once proclaimed as the foundation of the church. Their message must be tested by the Scriptures to insure that it is *truly* gospel and so Word of *God*. Thus the Bible’s authority is ultimately rooted in the authority of the gospel of Christ, namely, that original spoken Word which brought forth the Scriptures and which is now available only in the Scriptures.⁴

8. The preceding considerations clearly show that for Luther the Word of God as gospel, the oral proclamation of Christ and his benefits, is *the basic form of the Word*. The written Word is revered for the sake of the spoken Word, because the gospel is the indispensable condition of the church’s existence and of Christian faith and life. “One thing, and only one thing, is necessary for Christian life, righteousness, and freedom. That one thing is the most holy Word of God, the gospel of Christ” (*LW* 31.345). Luther’s fundamental ecclesiological axiom

³Heiko A. Oberman, “Reformation, Preaching, and *Ex Opere Operato*,” *Christianity Divided: Protestant and Roman Catholic Theological Issues*, ed. Daniel J. Callahan *et al.* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1962) 234.

⁴See David W. Lotz, “*Sola scriptura*: Luther on Biblical Authority,” *Interpretation* 35 (1981) 258-273. I have drawn on this article for a number of formulations used in the present essay.

holds that “the church’s entire life and substance reside in the Word of God,” that is, in the spoken Word: “For the gospel—even more than the bread and baptism—is the unique, most certain, and noblest sign of the church, since it is through the gospel alone that the church is conceived, formed, nourished, born, trained, fed, clothed, adorned, strengthened, armed, and preserved” (*WA* 7.721; cf. *BC* 310). Although the church is truly “the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the Word of God” (*BC* 416), she is “the daughter who is born from the Word; she is not the mother of the Word” (*LW* 2.101). The church ever remains the *creatura evangelii*, the creation of the gospel.

9. The preached Word as gospel is the basic form of the Word of God and the creator of the church because it is nothing less than *the real presence of the exalted Christ*. The gospel is “of Christ” not only because true evangelical preaching has Christ as its *object*, but above all because the risen Christ himself is the *acting subject* of this proclamation. “For the preaching of the gospel is nothing else than Christ coming to us, or we being brought to him” (*LW* 35.121). Christ himself preaches through the voices of his ministers, making himself present to the ears of

faith as God's unconditional gift of forgiving love. Hence "no heart is ever satisfied unless it hears Christ preaching properly in the gospel" (*LW* 52.20). Thus when Luther identifies the gospel or preached Word as the basic and indispensable form of God's Word, he is really identifying Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word, as God's preeminent Word, since the gospel is not only a message *about* Christ but is truly the living Word in and through which the Lord Christ himself is *still acting* in the present, through the power of his Spirit, as he once acted in the past in the flesh.

10. To say that the gospel is the real presence of the exalted Christ is to say that *salvation is a present event of preaching*, and is thus a "Word event." God's historical deed of redemption in Christ, though finished and complete, avails nothing apart from the preached Word. Hence salvation is rightly understood not as a past event but as one that *occurs* whenever, in the economy of God, Christ and his Spirit awaken faith in the auditors of their spoken Word. "Today Christ is still present to some," says Luther, "but to others he is still to come. To believers he is present and has come; to unbelievers he has not yet come and does not help them. But if they hear his Word and believe, Christ becomes present to them, justifies and saves them" (*LW* 26.240). For Luther, accordingly, the faithful preaching and hearing of the gospel constitute the present event of salvation, and the justification of the ungodly ever and again occurs when Word and faith meet, because Christ himself is truly present in the gospel and truly present in the faith that comes by hearing.

11. Luther delineates the "Word event" of salvation in many graphic ways (cf. *LW* 31.351; 52.15). Central to all such descriptions, however, is the assertion that faith in the gospel *effects a personal union* between Christ and the Christian, and that this union is the sole ground of the believer's acceptance before God. Luther's 1535 *Galatians Lectures* present his fullest, and finest, exposition of this theme. "So far as justification is concerned," concludes Luther on the basis of Galatians 2:20, "Christ and I must be so closely attached that he lives in me and I in him." Whereas the scholastic theologians argue that faith is otiose unless "formed" by meritorious works of love (*fides caritate*

formata), Luther holds that faith is "formed" by Christ alone (*fides Christo formata*), which is to say that "Christ dwells in us as closely and intimately as light or whiteness clings to a wall." Even so, "living in me as he does, Christ abolishes the law, damns sin, and kills death; for at his presence all these cannot help disappearing" (*LW* 26.167). The real presence of Christ in and for faith is thus the sinner's justification before God, because the righteousness that holds good before God is precisely faith-righteousness, namely, Christ's perfect righteousness that becomes the believer's own when, through faith, Christ lives in the Christian. And Christ lives in the Christian *by means of the preached Word*, wherein Christ proclaims himself as Savior and Lord and whereby Christ "realizes" his presence in those who hear his Word in faith.

12. The preached Word that is the occasion of salvation is the Word of *law and gospel*. The gospel alone effects salvation, because it alone is the real presence of Christ the Savior. Yet the gospel must be preached *together* with the law. The law is God's holy will comprised in the Ten Commandments, which "show us what we are to do but do not give us the power to do it," and are thus "intended to teach man to know himself, that through them he may recognize his inability to do good and may despair of his own ability." Such despair is necessary and salutary

because through it one comes to yearn for, and be open to, the promises of God comprised in the gospel, which “give what the commandments of God demand and fulfill what the law prescribes so that all things may be God’s alone, both the commandments and the fulfilling of the commandments.” Such “fulfilling” takes place through faith in these gospel promises, which “communicate to the soul all things that belong to the Word,” namely, Christ himself and all his benefits (*LW* 31.348-49). Yet if the gospel *alone* were preached, this transcendent Word of divine deliverance from sin and condemnation would be trivialized, would be taken as axiomatic, would confirm the proud in their presumption, and would even be heard as a license to sin. Conversely, if the law *alone* were preached, this exacting Word of divine command would be taken as the divinely prescribed means of salvation, leading one either to overweening pride in its presumed fulfillment or to profound despair over one’s evident failure to meet its demands. One Word without the other leaves sinners in their sin, and so robs God of the glory due his grace. And if the gospel were preached *before* the law, it would be heard not as the Word of deliverance *from* the law but as a word of deliverance *to* the law, and so be made to serve that legal order of salvation that Christ himself, by his death and resurrection, had made of no account. In the church, therefore, *both* law and gospel must be preached, and in *that* order.

13. The church is the daughter of the Word and the creation of the gospel. The church’s ministerial office (*Pfarramt*), accordingly, is the office of preaching (*Predigtamt*). It is “the highest office in the church” (*LW* 40.23) and has no other work than “to bestow or present the gospel which Christ commanded to be preached” (*LW* 38.198). The ministry, in sum, is the service of the divine Word (*ministerium verbi divini*). Hence “the mouth of every pastor is the mouth of Christ” (*WA* 37.381), as Christ himself declared: “Whoever hears you hears me” (Luke 10:16). Thus when I hear even a lowly pastor offering the consolations of the gospel, “I must be discerning enough to say: ‘It is not you who is speaking

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to me. The voice is yours indeed, but it is really God who is speaking through you” (*LW* 22.508). *Praedicatio verbi Dei est verbum Dei*: the preaching of the Word of God *is* the Word of God!

II. THE LANGUAGE OF PROCLAMATION (FORM AND CONTENT)

The proclamation of the Word is the living center of Luther’s theology of the Word because salvation is a present event of preaching, the coming together of Word (Christ) and faith. It remains to ask: what type of preaching serves the “Word event” of salvation? Luther himself gave a partial answer to this weighty question in his classic treatise of 1520, *The Freedom of a Christian*:

...I believe that it has now become clear that it is not enough or in any sense Christian to preach the works, life, and words of Christ as historical facts, as if the knowledge of these would suffice for the conduct of life; yet this is the fashion among those who must today be regarded as our best preachers. Far less is it sufficient or Christian to say nothing at all about Christ and to teach instead the laws of men and the decrees of the fathers....Rather ought Christ to be preached to the end that faith in him may be established, that he may not only be Christ, but be Christ for you and me, and that what is said of him and is denoted in his name

may be effectual in us. Such faith is produced and preserved in us by preaching why Christ came, what he brought and bestowed, what benefit it is to us to accept him. (*LW* 31.357)

This passage at least enables one to say what evangelical preaching is *not* for Luther. It is manifestly not the self-advertisement of the preacher (cf. *LW* 52.69). Nor is it “edifying discourse” about matters spiritual, nor “political discourse” about the state of world affairs, nor “moral discourse” about the good life, nor “ecclesiastical discourse” about church polity, projects, problems. It is most emphatically not the moralistic call to “build the kingdom of God” through personal commitment to Christ and social-political action. Faith, indeed, is always active in love, but this presupposes the one thing needful: that Christ has in fact been preached “to the end that faith in him may be established.”

Not all “Christ discourse,” however, is evangelical preaching, for Christ may merely be preached as an *example* to be imitated. The “imitation of Christ” is surely a part of the gospel (cf. 1 Peter 2:21), though “this is the smallest part of the gospel, on the basis of which it cannot yet even be called gospel. For on this level Christ is of no more help to you than some other saint. His life remains his own and does not as yet contribute anything to you.” Before he is preached as a model of the godly life, therefore, Christ must first be preached as *pure gift*, namely, “as a present that God has given you and that is your own,” to the end that “when you see or hear Christ doing or suffering something, you do not doubt that Christ himself, with his deeds and suffering, belongs to you” (*LW* 35.119).

Christ is not truly preached as gift in the form of “historical discourse” about his words and works. Saving faith is not a mere historical faith, because even the devil and the damned believe the accounts of Christ’s birth, life, death,

and resurrection (cf. *LW* 52.14). Hence evangelical preaching cannot be a mere recital of, or commentary upon, these “mighty acts of God.” To be sure, the “Christ story” must be told, but be told in such a way that “what is said of him and is denoted in his name may be effectual in us.” The Easter gospel, for example, is not the assertion that the tomb is empty (a phenomenon that “reason” can explain in various ways); it is the announcement that “Christ is risen” *and* “I with him, you with him, so that the resurrection may be drawn into us and we into it. Not to learn this is to learn nothing” (*WA* 29.271). Likewise, the preacher of the Christmas gospel “does not just say: ‘Christ is born,’ but he appropriates Christ’s birth for us and says: ‘Your Savior.’ Thus the gospel does not merely teach the story and accounts of Christ, but personalizes them to all who believe in it” (*LW* 52.20).

This “personalized” form of speech, which presents Christ as God’s gift “for us,” is not dogmatic instruction or “doctrinal discourse,” which treats the gospel as if it “were simply a textbook of teachings or laws” (*LW* 35.119). Doctrine does not justify the sinner before God—not even the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Only the gospel justifies, because it alone is the real presence of Christ and his Spirit, and is thus the sole medium of the believer’s incorporation of Christ. The *doctrine* of justification exists only to serve the *event* of justification, by insuring that Christ is *properly* preached as God’s gift of forgiveness to the trusting heart. Were the gospel to be identified with the church’s doctrine of

justification, it would no longer be gospel but *law*, namely, the demand for “right belief”; and it would no longer be the offering of Christ as gift, but the exhortation to hold fast to a treasured *possession*, namely, the “right (= biblical-Reformation) teaching” about Christ as Savior. (Lutheranism, it must be noted, has been singularly prone to this doctrinalist distortion of the gospel.)

This cursory analysis of Luther’s prescriptions for evangelical preaching indicates that the question of such preaching’s *linguistic form* is no less central than that of its *content*. Luther envisions an appropriate “rhetoric of preaching” that can only be labelled “kerygmatic discourse.” Such speech does not narrate historical events, instruct in doctrine, describe outward states of affairs (such as “sin” and “grace”), nor exhort to moral activity. It proclaims, announces, declares that God in Christ loves, forgives, accepts you, me, us; and it invites, even incites, the heart’s acceptance of this gift. Such speech takes the objective reality of “God in Christ” and *makes (renders) it present and personal*: thereby it creates a new reality in my hearing, “God for me,” which through faith (and thus through the Spirit working through that speech) becomes yet another new reality, “God in me.” In the other forms of discourse, by contrast, the objective reality of God in Christ remains just that, namely, *something past, impersonal, outward*, and so does not come to utterance as a *saving* reality in my hearing.⁵

⁵I am not claiming that a sermon must be *nothing but* kerygmatic speech. Many of Luther’s sermons were intentionally “catechetical” and “didactic.” The point is that no sermon, if it is to be truly evangelical, can neglect to present Christ as gift for the ears of faith. Whatever else it does, it must not fail to do this. One could say, perhaps, that the evangelical sermon must use other forms of discourse only *in the service* of kerygmatic discourse.

In Luther’s thought, to be sure, the preached Word as gospel is intrinsically efficacious—it effects what it declares, i.e. it saves—because it has Christ himself as its acting subject and is instinct with the power of his Spirit. Yet this conviction did not keep Luther from giving rigorous attention to the proper language of preaching, for he clearly saw that “gospel” is not merely “Christ talk.” Rather, as we have seen, the “right and real nature of the gospel” requires that it take the form of a *personal word of address* that brings Christ home to the believing heart by including the auditor’s reality in the reality it proclaims, by thus allowing Christ to announce, “I am yours, and you are mine.” For “what good would it do me, if [Christ] were born a thousand times and if this were sung to me every day with the loveliest airs, if I should not hear that there was something in it for me and that it should be my own? When that voice sounds, no matter how furtively and imperfectly, my heart listens with joy, and the voice reaches through all the way and sounds splendidly” (*LW* 52.21).

The heart of Luther’s doctrine of salvation is the *fides Christi* (= *fides Christo formata; incorporatio Christi*): the personal union of Christ and the Christian through faith in the gospel. Little wonder, then, that the gospel must itself assume a linguistic form that serves this “incorporation.” *The form and content of evangelical preaching are inseparable*. The language of such preaching is not mere “window dressing” in which its subject matter happens to be clothed, as if any linguistic form were as good as any other. The subject matter of the gospel (“Christ for me,” “Christ in me”) requires to be expressed in the language of Christ’s and the Christian’s self-communication (“I am yours, you are mine”) and their personal union (“we are one”).

Nor does kerygmatic language merely “point to” an independent reality existing *outside* of language, as if words were only signs that stand for things, and function properly only when they convey reliable information *about* such extra-linguistic phenomena. (Our “scientific” culture and education have conditioned us to accept this “information paradigm” of language as axiomatic and alone adequate to the “truth.”) Kerygmatic language, rather, “leads into” and “opens the way to” a new reality that exists *within* this language and that is “realized,” called into being, precisely *through* its utterance. One is reminded of Auden’s lines: “A sentence uttered makes a world appear/ Where all things happen as it says they do.”⁶ Luther, for his part, knew that this creative power attributed to the spoken word holds good above all in the case of God’s Word: “What appears to be more meaningless than a word? And yet when God speaks a word, the thing expressed by the word immediately leaps into existence” (*LW* 13.99). *Verbum Dei est opus Dei*: the Word of God *is* the deed of God!⁷

Luther’s own sermons and his academic lectures (which were really “preached dogmatics”) offer some fine examples of kerygmatic speech (see, for

⁶W. H. Auden, “Words,” *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Random House, 1976) 473.

⁷See Peter Meinhold, *Luthers Sprachphilosophie* (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1958). Also relevant are Heinrich Ott, “The Problem of Non-objectifying Thinking and Speaking in Theology,” *Journal for Theology and the Church 3: Distinctive Protestant and Catholic Themes Reconsidered*, ed. Robert W. Funk (New York: Harper & Row, 1967) 112-135; and Gerhard Ebeling, “Word of God and Hermeneutics,” *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963) 305-332.

example, *LW* 51.259-87). Time and again he breaks into *direct discourse* (abandoning the impersonal “third person”); uses the *dialogue form* (“conversation” between the believer and God, Christ, even the devil); and engages in *dramatic monologue* (“picturing” the believer’s constant flight of faith from the “judgment seat of God” to “Christ the mercy seat”): all in the interest of rendering salvation through Christ a present and eminently personal reality.

This brief treatment of the proclamation of the Word in Luther’s thought suggests that our current celebration of the fifth centenary of his birth will be best conducted if we remember Martin Luther, biblical professor and evangelical preacher, as he himself wished to be remembered: as none other than a faithful servant of the Word of our God that endures forever.