

# *Categorical Preaching*

by STEVEN D. PAULSON

When theology operates out of its center, justification by faith alone, the first result is that theology is *for* preaching. After all, if it is by if faith alone, the immediate question is: “then how do I get that faith?” The answer is simple and profound: God sends a preacher. Yet that simple answer annoys the world to no end. If faith comes by preaching, and preaching by a preacher, then faith is not like a decision, leap, understanding or effort of my own, it *awaits another*. But waiting for a preacher is like waiting for Godot. What if he never comes? What if I don’t like him when he arrives? And what do I do in the meantime? Waiting to receive freedom that we do not have seems worse than the slavery we do have, just as years in the Sinai made the Israelites think fondly about Egypt. No wonder so few apparently believe—getting faith is out of their hands in the realm of historical accidents that reasonable human beings spend their days trying to avoid, just as they try to avoid a car accident or hail storm.

When Paul said, “Faith comes by hearing” (Rom 10), he answered the question of how one gets a gracious God, but opened a much larger Pandora’s box. Out flew divine *election and predestination*—two things more dreadful to sinners than their own disbelief in God. What God does with preachers is the answer to *the* theological question: “Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain . . . against the Lord and his anointed?” (Ps 2). This explains why it is the denial of faith that provides most people with their best sense of freedom; doubt gives them a sense of security, and the comfort of rejecting the magnificent terror of divine election. The wonder is not that there are so few Christians in Christendom, but that there are any at all.

## **Preaching Is an Accident**

If preaching gives faith, it does so far too selectively to be trusted. Preaching is by nature historical, specific, here and now, personal,

direct, and either occurs in time and space or does not occur at all. By its nature, preaching denies pure subjectivity. It is a real, objective phenomenon, like a car accident that happens without one's intention, desire or will. It is also external like a criminal sentence from a court judge, and even more life changing to my subjectivity because of its objectivity. It is the abject removal of freedom as defined by the law, and as such, preaching is experienced by its hearers as the robbery of their greatest hope until a new, greater freedom without coercion from the law takes hold. The minute a true preacher arrives is the moment that I die as a hearer—as an idealist, as a potentialist, as a nostalgist and even as one who is learning how to “live in the moment.” The arrival of a preacher means the end of my attempt at self-selection out of the horde of individuals populating the planet, who says to God and the world, “pick me, it only makes sense.” It also devastates any hope placed in the law as a way to give life, meaning, or a goal to reach—whether that law is “within” as Kant inferred, or outside in the state, art, religion and philosophy as Hegel surmised, or runs through biological transmutation like an invisible and blind hand as for Darwin.

When the Apostle Paul preached he put a particular *person*, born of woman, born under the law (Gal 4:4), exactly where lost and seeking sinners put Moses' law or the law in their consciences. The dreams of sinners include simple things such as that one day they will finish cleaning the garage and restore order or that their children will all be successful doctors, or the much more complicated dreams of Kant that one day we will all live in a kingdom of ends inspired by duty! So when true preachers arrive on the scene and replace the dream of a *catholic* law by the reality of a *parochial* preacher there is a terrible consequence that Scripture calls *death*. Paul preached a person, not a pure, spiritual, holy, divine law, and the trouble has never ceased because of it.

Persons, unlike laws, do not wait for you to self-select, they intrude upon you and impose themselves upon you in a way the law never would. A person, unlike the law, loves and hates, and in so doing “selects” persons in the same way that a man or woman selects a mate. When it comes to God selecting a mate, we call it

“election.” That much may be quite pleasantly received, as it was more or less for Samuel, David or Solomon, that is, as long as we believe that God manages to choose wisely. But the reason for God’s *personal* selection lies outside us; we do not choose, God does. God’s choice also, and terrifyingly, lies outside the universal, natural code of law that otherwise is the very best thing in life itself because it preserves that life. We have no rationale for the selection done by Jesus, although God knows we have tried to explain why, for example, Peter’s betrayal was forgiven and Judas’ was not, or why Jacob and not Esau received God’s blessing. It does not matter if that law is written on tablets of stone or on the human heart; the shock of God setting *law* aside for a *person* who selects lawlessly, even his only begotten Son, is beyond (or shall we say beneath?) all philosophical wisdom and the reasonable search for signs according to God’s ordering of history. Although the preacher’s election has always been troubling from the time of Adam and Eve, the self-named modern world has laid down its gauntlet before God at just this point—reason does not allow righteousness to arrive accidentally through preaching. As Lessing put it, accidental truths of history cannot ever be absolute truths of reason. Thus, in order to be truly free we must be free from one specific thing: from a preacher. To be free from a preacher is to be left alone in a universe of eternal, universal law in which one is either optimistic about discovering and enjoying (classical enlightenment teaching as in Kant), or one becomes pessimistic about its discovery and resigned to election by “nature” in the post-modernism inspired by Spinoza. In either case the modern and post-modern worlds are constructed precisely to reject preaching on the basis of the fear of divine election and the bondage of the will that election reveals.

Preaching is the DNA structure of the gospel that selects who shall inherit eternal life, and so if you are determined to preach, you will do so in the face of the world’s worst nightmare: that eternal life hangs upon an historical contingency of an alien person’s choice that excludes self-selection and is absolutely lawless. What are we left with, but only the whims of this particular person, Jesus of Nazareth? If that is not bad enough, this person, Jesus, believes himself to have been universally wronged, and may well be correct in that assumption,

from what we know about his cross; he is therefore primed for revenge according to the simplest laws of nature or by the law of Israel into which he was born. What hope is there in that?

To get a sense of what is meant by preaching in this way, consider that the Apostle Paul spent little or no time thinking according to the strange category Christians called “conversion,” which begins with a false premise about Jews and is usually confused about what makes a sinner sinful. The Apostle Paul did not so much convert as have his vocation changed from a scribe to a preacher. Moreover, the change was violent to his person, such a change in vocation also meant a total death to the old man. A scribe deals with the law alone and that in terms of what is written. Writing’s conservation of being, of what originally was and will so remain, or even writing’s cohort that tries to make what is written “live” by translation into new contexts, was Paul’s prior occupation as defender of God. Paul, however, was called out of this work to become a *preacher* for whom the living word beyond the law was set to be the falling and rising of many—his vocation radically changed and so the old Paul was dead leaving only the Christian.

Preaching both the law and gospel is a unique and unsettling occupation. It is the work of withdrawing another person’s freedom in relation to the law in order to give a freedom apart from the law in faith itself. The withdrawal of freedom is a terrible thing to behold, and is naturally opposed with every animal instinct for survival. This requires preachers to recognize how their work systematically emerges out of the doctrine of election, and election is the worst human spectacle imaginable. To take up this vocation is to enter this fearful spectacle of preaching, and to ask, if God indeed does use this means to withdraw freedom according to the law, and to give freedom apart from the law: How, then, should a person preach? What does a preacher actually say? How do you know if you have a true preacher or not?

### **The Categorical and the Dream of Deferring**

There are many competitors for the term “preaching,” and for that reason the Confessors always had to add a modifier like “true”

or “pure” or “right” to preaching. In his final work, *The Captivation of the Will*, Gerhard Forde suggested that we consider the term “categorical preaching” which Luther used to distinguish a preacher from a mere scribe or sophist (persuasive, earnest public speaker).<sup>1</sup> True preaching bestows two very different words from God that are called by shorthand *law and gospel*, whose effect is the withdrawal of legal freedom and God’s eternal election. Categorical preaching assumes that one can deliver this specific, divine dialectic that Paul describes bluntly: the letter kills and the Spirit gives life (2 Cor 3).

This way of speaking starts in the strangest place imaginable. It is an utterly unique speech event that delivers its words directly to bound wills who naturally reject them, but who nevertheless undergo those words passively and passionately on account of the Holy Spirit. The word “categorical” identifies both the content of the preaching, and also the nature of the deaf hearers to whom we preach. Christ is given as crucified to people who cannot hear because they *will* not hear, in other words, in order to elect the unelectable. Categorical preachers are not just playing to a tough audience; they are speaking to people who literally cannot hear them. This is why preaching categorically has no locus in ancient texts of rhetoric, and cannot even find its proper place in modern speech–act theory or the current fascination with the differences between writing and speaking.

Martin Luther used the term “categorical” to describe preaching while he was in the middle of a key argument against the prototypical post–modern skeptic, Desiderius Erasmus. Luther was demonstrating the single, continuous argument in Scripture that everything with a future belongs to Christ, and all else is consigned to the devil’s destruction, which distinguishes between old and new, law and gospel. Luther recognized that the argument is categorical, not just an isolated “Paulinism,” and so the Gospel of John makes the same argument:

Moreover, since Christ is said to be “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), and that *categorically*, so that whatever is not Christ is not the way, but error, not truth, but untruth, not life, but death, it follows of necessity that “free–will” inasmuch as it neither is Christ, nor is in Christ, is fast bound in error, and untruth, and death.<sup>2</sup>

The term that I am using adjectively, *categorical* preaching, is in Luther's Latin a prepositional phrase: *per contentionem* and as such functions to position or to *relate* words, in this case *Christ* and *truth* (way and life). The particular relation is contentious, as the Anglicized Latin still communicates to us, not between Christ and truth, but because preaching excludes from truth any other than Christ. Using this word of Christ is like a lead wolf in a pack possessing his territory precisely because this territory—truth, life, and way—is in dispute, contested for, under strife and so must be re-possessed. It was the repeated mistake of Erasmus, and is that of any modern skeptic, to think that truth, way, and life describe neutral territory liable to scientific investigation without ideology. The reality is that wherever there is a crack in life there are hundreds of thousands of wedges, as Charles Darwin once described it, trying to insert themselves. Preachers and their preaching contend for possessed space, as Paul did,

by categorical statement and comprehensive contrast; so that not only the natural force of words and the actual flow of speech, but also that which comes before and after, the whole surrounding context, and the scope, and the contents of his entire argument, unite to prove what his meaning is: Paul intends to say that apart from faith in Christ there is nothing but sin and condemnation.<sup>3</sup>

As usual, Luther refused to beat around the bush. The problem the world has with preachers is that they not only give strange and culturally local ideas like any after-dinner speaker might, but they proceed to elect sinners, which is to say they remove the free will. They do this categorically, that means *not hypothetically* and completely *without any condition*. Giving Christ sucks the air out for anything else, especially the free will. But is not the free will what religion is supposed to uphold? No. Free will is a synonym for death, since whatever it is, it is demonstrably not the person of Jesus Christ. Christ is life, and what is not life is death. Preachers destroy the myth of free will, which has become the ultimate hope, and this surgical removal is precisely why no one can hear them. This contentious preaching situation is what the philosopher Derrida calls "*differance*" whose special motive is to defer or delay the final

judgment, especially if such delay leaves us with nothing but the “experience of the law” as our only hope. No one *wills* to hear true preachers, no one desires or wants to hear them, since what preachers say does not fall into the category of things people hope will defer God’s arrival to claim everything. Those who are awaiting a preacher, that is the dying, do not want preachers when they arrive. Just like when a person meets a bear in the woods, the arrival of a preacher causes a hearer to delay, detour and postpone, hoping that the fearful presence will recede and leave only a trace of his appearance in order to tell a really good story later of how one nearly died—but did not. In fact, this delaying is what has appeared in recent philosophy as the meaning of “narrative” or “metanarrative”; it stretches out time as if the final judgment had not already occurred, so that the myth remains of having time to prepare for the End by means of a free will. Free will is, we could say, in the wrong category for God to love, bless, and give it eternal life. When the preacher arrives Christ arrives to choose his own, and as a result everything else comes to an end, including the free will. Whatever is not Christ is sin and condemnation. This, the world cannot stand and so is the reason why the First Commandment includes *fear* before *love*. It will help preachers to understand what this means for their work, since what they generate initially is the animal instinct of delay and fear.

“Categorical” means that everything the preacher says falls into one “category” or another—whether the preacher knows it or not. The categories are not plural, to our endless dismay, since our fondest tactic to delay the final judgment is to imagine that God is a pluralist in a decidedly non-contingent (monistic) way. We hope that when it comes to salvation all sorts of “ways” ultimately “converge” as Teilhard de Chardin liked to put it, under a large and generous catholic umbrella. Not so for God. The categories of preaching are God’s own, and they are not one or three or more, but exactly two. Moreover, the two are mutually exclusive: either P or not P. Good or evil. Christ or not Christ. Heaven or hell. A preacher’s job is to predicate properly so the categories can go to work.

When Luther made his argument with Erasmus he showed what happened when the categorical syllogism was applied correctly. By

this he did not mean that a preacher ever tried to convince a disbeliever by a mere rational proof, but he did mean to give the preacher a sense of the resistance of reason to the logic of preaching, and the reason to keep preaching in the midst of disaster. We could perhaps say that as a science, as a logic, preaching is extraordinarily simple. The difficulty is not in what to say, but to whom you are speaking. There the art becomes complex since sin sets itself in direct opposition to true preaching. Preaching truly sets out Christ, the subject with the proper predicate in this way: Jesus Christ alone justifies. Free will is not Jesus Christ. Therefore, free will does not justify.

We could, and must eventually, substitute any and every subject in the world below and heavens above for “free will” such as the “Angel Gabriel is not Christ,” or “the categorical imperative is not Christ,” or even “the visible church is not Christ,” and the major premise of the syllogism would work the same way. It gets downright frightening how categorical the negation here is. Try, for example, substituting your own name, or your fondest hope.

When we switch the *subject* of our inquiry to *ourselves* or to the heavenly Father, and take up *Christ as predicate* then we get right down to the heart of the matter. Even the very best thing in life, the most salutary doctrine of life—the law itself—is not Christ. Scripture normally says this by comparing Christ to Moses, and concluding: “the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). This marks the radical basis of preaching Christ. When you preach Christ categorically, you are preaching the distinction of the law and the gospel. The syllogism is this: no law is ever the gospel.

### **Predicating Christ**

Such categories immediately set off every warning signal. Is not this what we call “black and white” thinking? Are not such opposing categories a childish and harmful inability to think in the real world of ambiguous grays? The modern world and its post-modern appendix is a fantastic effort to overcome this truth, to become not “either/or” but “both/and”—to change the dialectic so that all the



parts fit into a greater whole, or so that thesis and antithesis are overcome in a higher synthesis, or so that some decision of pure subjectivity awaits you. In actuality, the situation for preaching is much worse even than the possibility of putting things into neat boxes. A categorical preacher does not assume that something is either black or white (one or another substance or quality), but preachers set out the premise that a thing is very specifically either Christ or not. How odd! If a person said, “The paper is white,” whiteness would then be predicated of the paper. That makes sense to us, since this is what subjects and predicates in a sentence are for. The predicate is to help identify the subject. But what Luther meant was that the key to the art of preaching is whether or not the preacher applies the predicate *Christ* to her or his subject at any moment. Is this not intolerable narrowing—things are either Christ or not Christ? Indeed it is, but only if a sermon is taken to be the exchange of ideas between a speaker and hearer, or a revelation of what God decided prior to and outside of time, or a proposal for your free will to adopt.<sup>4</sup>

Yet even the preacher who really wants to preach Christ (and not merely muse about the latest theological trends) is left with a real difficulty. Predicating Christ is harder than it sounds. One could say that “God is Christ,” and try to make of this a quality like “whiteness” or color so that Christ would then be something like “christness”—meaning certain ideas or qualities that accompany Christ would then apply to divinity, like “love” or “forbearance.” If you predicated in that way you would then excite people to imitate one of Christ’s many worthy qualities or at least to be influenced by him. In this mode, the common fashion today is to tell people that Christ accepts us as we are so we ought to accept others as they are. In the end, despite whatever intent the preacher had, and however many times Christ was mentioned, the sermon would end up predicating “not Christ” to everything. In place of the incarnate man, Jesus Christ, the preacher puts a “Christ idea.” Most “preaching” in churches never does any more than this, it makes Christ into an idea to imitate, and so the speaking is merely an exchange of religious ideas with the hearers that one hopes will help them transcend their earthly problems.

Christ is not a category of ideas or laws, but is the unique, incarnate, historical, individual who came down from above in a permanent act of interference in his own creation. When that sacramental Christ is predicated in preaching, then hearers have nothing left but to conclude, to their horror or joy, that they have *no other God than this man Jesus Christ*.<sup>5</sup> It may surprise you how seldom this happens, especially in people who talk endlessly about Jesus and his Christness.

### **God Hiding and Revealing: Not–Christ and Christ**

If we decide (as the Old Adam must), that the predicate “Christ” does not really work, since it is too constrictive for God, then of course we will necessarily be predicating “not–Christ” to God, which presents another set of problems—especially if you are one who has come under the experience of law and failed to justify yourself. God either comes as preached or not, in Christ or outside Christ. Since the true *subject* of preaching (the one speaking) is God, we must attend to what this God wants. God desires preachers specifically to predicate Christ of him, as Paul says, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor 5). That means that in any grammatical sentence a preacher will necessarily end up predicating *Christ* of God, or not. What comes out of preachers may be full of religion, and still predicate not–Christ.

Now what does it mean to give God the predicate not–Christ? What are we really doing if we balk at giving Jesus Christ to people because we are convinced they cannot hear him anyway, or we come to believe it is best to give an attribute or quality of Christ instead of the whole person? *God not–Christ* is a divine power whose intentions you do not know, but who judges all. In fact, if you spend any time with this God you would swear he, she or it is out to get you, and is even now removing your free will in relation to the law. In that case it would be much better, it would feel like release and freedom, to cease predicating anything at all of God. Secularism’s secret power is this faux–gospel that refrains from speaking for God out of a self–interested humility that eschews the categorical proclamation. Most people hide behind the screen of

mystery when it comes to God, since such divine things simply cannot be known, and so it is better to leave them to mystics, higher spiritual authorities, or the insane.

But God is relentless. If you listen to God's words in Scripture, God—without—Christ is a death sentence already delivered. Such a God is the Last Judgment that only awaits your personal execution. The normal reaction to God not—Christ is to delay and run. But successful running from God, as Jonah learned, requires not only a *get away*, but a place to *get to*. A gracious God is nowhere to be found unless God gives a specific word, and as Romans 3 describes it, this word is given only when and where God so chooses. The Jews received God's words, his oracles; the Gentiles did not. The Jews were near God; the Gentiles far away. God either "is" without words or "comes to you" with words. You can spend countless hours convincing people that God is good and merciful in himself, and still end up predicating not—Christ to God. When preachers assure you, for example, that God had nothing to do with a death, they are predicating not—Christ of God. If preachers predicate God without Christ, they must be able to identify precisely where he is mercy—not only in himself, but *for you*. Otherwise you leave people with a Last Judgment that is already made and a long silence afterward while they wait for the other shoe to drop. A successful escape from God requires that you be able to run from God—without—words to God—with—words. Hence, Luther's dictum: finding a gracious God. But this is not a pilgrimage of holiness into the beatific vision, but a flight for survival under terrible duress whose end comes only if a preacher gives Christ's benefits while you are on the run. For that there is no law and no possibility of becoming righteous in yourself, there is only the contingency of whether the preacher arrives or not. The chances of that happening seem ridiculously small and peculiar.

Any other "subject" than God with which preaching deals will also bear either the predicate Christ or not—Christ, so that if you decide one day to address "the human condition" in a sermon, the key, likewise, is how you predicate Christ—whether you are saying the human "is Christ" or "is not—Christ." The one is alive; the other is judged dead already. The one is raised; the other eternally

judged. The one is in heaven; the other is in hell. This is how so many preachers get confused about who exactly is dead and who is alive when they are speaking, since taking a person's pulse gives no clue to their actual condition before God. The truths and mistakes of Feuerbach lie in this matter: God is whatever you believe, and so you are the *creatrix divinitatis*, not in essence, but in relation to yourself. Someone like Cyril of Alexandria used to say "in the economy" of God.

Faith is the new locus of the Reformation, as Luther kept repeating, which philosophy and science does not know. Because those sciences are premised on the law alone, they know nothing of faith. In fact, faith is excluded because it deals entirely with the contingent—whether a true preacher arrives or not, and science is specifically charged with the elimination of the contingent. To deal directly and honestly with faith, with true hope for yourself in the end, then either you will believe God's words and have your faith given to you, or you will create a not-Christ God. The trick is not to run to this unpreached God, but from him. Freedom is not creating a silent God to worship, or a God who speaks just like you do, or the attempt to peer through a trace or sign to the mystery of God behind all things. Those are the bondage of will—they captivate the will by saying that there is a much bigger world of great possibilities out there beyond the narrow matter of "Christ" or "not-Christ." Freedom of faith is the absolute contingency of getting the God who is gracious to you, the God who forgives your own personal deicide and creates trust that those words of forgiveness survive the death of the law—for you specifically.

The two predicating categories "Christ" and "not-Christ" could possibly be tolerated by sinners if Christ is only an idea, principle, or character to imitate or be influenced by. But that is not what categorical preaching means by Christ. Christ did not become incarnate as "humankind," or "humanity," as if those were viable "categories" for him to enter into outside his normal category of divinity. Nor does he represent an *idea* of grace or love, but he came as a particular person with a history or "time-line," if you like. More to the point, Christ is crucified and his crucifixion was not a mistake, he was murdered for sinners' sakes, and therein is the

trouble. He, himself, is the way, truth and life. John's use of this in the "I am" sayings, brings the point home: "*I am*" means he alone "is," and therefore you "*are not*" Christ. Christ spoke there in what the church teachers called his *hypostasis*, his unique individuality and difference from all others, which has become historical and not only the distinction between Creator and creature. That produced an insuperable problem for all sinners seeking justification by some other means than the preacher who brings that man Jesus—all alone.

Sinners immediately reject the basic premise of preaching that all things are either Christ or not—Christ and take shelter in plurality's secret inner monism, like Adam and Eve hiding behind a leaf. This is why we make fun of people who categorize in twos; like the old joke: there are two kinds of people, those who think there are two kinds of people and those who do not. The humor is self-protection that reveals the truth under the guise of ridicule. Reason surmises that, since there are so many things in the world that just are not Christ, like fish in the sea and Hindus in India and possible life on Mars, that one would have to sacrifice too much that is good in order to believe this business about Jesus being "the One." Charles Darwin purportedly rejected his Christian faith prior to the *Beagle* voyage, not because of what he discovered on the Galapagos Islands but because he could not theoretically bear a world in which eternal life is determined by the exclusivity of Christ and the contingency of hearing a preacher—something akin to the very contingency that he was about to rediscover in another place and location, in the mystery of heredity, but this time presumably without God to blame. That reason for rejecting Christ alone as our salvation makes sense when you realize that things did not go well for Jesus in his "time on earth" and if we listened to his story truly, our own stories would already be over and done with. Where Christ is predicated, old time—my time—is over. The Judgment is past. So, here is the captivation of the will that preachers are facing. When everything is distinguished by the categories Christ and not—Christ, sinners quickly get the gist of the message that *they are in the wrong category*, and are out of possibility, so they do whatever it takes to deny the truth. What a jolt to discover that one is not Christ and therefore without any righteousness in oneself.

## Intermediate Preaching

The blind search for alternatives to the categories “Christ” and “not–Christ” leads to what Luther called “*something intermediate . . .* which, of itself, would be neither evil nor good, neither Christ’s nor Satan’s, neither true nor false, neither alive nor dead, neither something nor nothing (perhaps) . . .”<sup>6</sup> The devil is always something “intermediate.” Seeking “something intermediate” is deadly since it marginalizes Christ so that we need not live in the wrong category. Christ must be shoved over to make room for some other mediator who preserves our own time. The search for a softer “mean between the extremes” of the two categories leads to absenting Christ (at least partially) in order to create an imaginary “space” by which to escape final judgment. Once Christ is absent, sinners put their “highest and best” in the vacuum—free will. Preachers need to know that this is the secret tool of sinners who have Christ breathing down their necks—the delay tactic is to “defer presence” and so substitute for Christ a mere sign whose user is the free will. Jews seeking signs and Gentiles seeking wisdom are two versions of keeping Christ at bay so as to make him pursuable, something to aim at, all the while convincing us that the Last Judgment has not already occurred.

When a preacher who lays out the true syllogism arrives, it terrifies us, since it is the public declaration of the final judgment (which is, after all, what these “categories” mean). Final judgment means the delay is over, leaving the judged to pine for some past dream of mediation or synthesis. After all, we reason, “it takes two to tango.” I’ll admit my part of the problem in my life if God admits his! This strikes us as common sense, since earthly life is largely occupied with mediations in relationships, and of course everyone knows that successful politics practices the art of compromise. Religious extremists cause terrorism and violence in the world so that moderating types like to “imagine there’s no heaven, no religion too.” The modern world itself was really an experiment, a bet, that the hoped-for intermediate “something” between Christ and Satan was the *universal intuition of the law within*. The so-called post-modern world has now laid its bet that the intermediate

something is the human *ability to adapt* to the hard rule of law outside, to survive and evolve—which is more chaste, perhaps, but no less determined to locate freedom in an elongated human will. Love of duty or love of fate, Kant or Nietzsche, place your bet and take the consequences—none of which can be worse than Christ, and waiting around to see if you get to have a preacher, so it appears.

Whatever else this yields, it creates the kind of intermediate preaching that we are drowning in today. Current pulpit rhetoric has, to its temporal credit, a modesty about it, a kind of reduced expectation. We even call preaching by tepid names like “meditation,” or preachers announce they “would like to share some thoughts.” Yet, the pattern of give-and-take or seeking the mean-between-extremes that works elsewhere in our lives is not sufficient for our relationship to the all-worker God. God wants more. The relationship between Creator and creatures must deal with what Scripture calls a *jealous* God who does not compromise or meet us on middle ground. This God deals in totals because he wants all of you, not part, and will not compromise one iota on the law. To get this he sends all of Christ, not part of Christ, and when that happens preaching cannot give Christ in small doses to keep a sick patient alive. What we are after here is the eschatological end matter—what finally justifies. How can we stand before God at the Final Judgment? How do we get over the primal fear of contingency and election when we notice that some hear and some do not? In fact, it seems to reduce everything to the “miracle” of accidental truths of history, which Lessing taught us cannot be trusted to last a whole eternity. What if I wait and wait and no preacher comes? What if I once received a preacher, but then the Spirit was withdrawn and I must wait again? Who can live like this day after day in a world of accidents and chance events that He outside my own will?

Categorical preaching deals cleanly with these questions that swirl around a preacher by saying: “you cannot, Christ can—in fact he already has.” But the cost is too high for the Old Adam, who goes searching for a scheme that leaves him more time in which to become righteous in the self rather than wait around to see if a righteous God will miraculously appear. Most preachers and congregations opt for the dream of intermediate preaching.

Lutherans are miles behind most American churches in perfecting intermediate preaching. Since the outcome is disastrous anyway we might take pride in this fact, but once we enter the dusk of night in which all cows are gray we ought at least to attend to the professionals in the area. For that, let's recall a quintessential American event.

### **Emerson at Church**

One winter day, almost two hundred years ago, Ralph Waldo Emerson went to church. Why he went to church that day was a mystery, even to himself, since things had gotten so bad with Christianity that, as one of his friends told him, "On Sundays it seems wicked to go to church." Christians all over America were "signing off," dropping out of the church, because it did not answer their most basic questions or, as we say it today, "meet their needs." For this reason, Emerson reflected on that winter day in his classic "Divinity School Address (Harvard)" July 15, 1838. He thought of church as "Historical Christianity, suckled in a creed outworn," or what most people today call "organized religion." Organized religion lacked "soul," especially in a period of religious decline like his own in which the old, believing Puritans were long gone. For Emerson, there were only two reasons left to go to church at all. One was to join the democratic collection of Americans called out by the Sabbath tradition from their daily toils, habits, and class distinctions into the cheerful contemplation that they were, after all, *something more*. The Sabbath could be the best day of your week when it *lifted* you to the transcendent along with everyone else, whether you were a coal miner or college professor.

The other reason to go to church was for the preaching—"the speech of man to men" as Emerson liked to say—that great old institution brought over to our shores by the dissenting Protestants who nearly burst at the seams to preach since they were forbidden the pulpit in Europe (often enough by Lutherans!).<sup>7</sup> Even if you no longer got a good Puritan sermon from the likes of Cotton Mather, you could still hope to hear some stoical morality by the less gifted subsequent generation.



The particular day Emerson went to this church, the old democratic Sabbath seemed to be working just fine—all classes and types were mingling there—but what really flunked his ecclesial test was the preaching; it was simply vulgar. The pulpit, he said, was “usurped by a formalist” who preached dry doctrine about what others believed once-upon-a-time. Emerson heard tradition’s rundown on the way things used to be. He got, he says, the “usual,” the “second hand,” the historical, what *Paul* or *Wesley* believed, instead of the “necessary, eternal” truths of the law. Bad as the doctrine was, when it was over things got worse. What followed in the sermon was the inevitable request for contributions to foreign missionaries in order to foist on some poor, sodded primitives a thousand miles away what he as a Christian was barely able to endure here—more bad preaching about dead white males by dead white males! Then the preacher concluded with “come back next Sunday and we’ll run through the same thing again,” and a paltry invitation to the Lord’s Supper with its “hollow, dry, creaking formality”—a ritual of ancient sacrifice in the form of metaphors.<sup>8</sup> I hate to agree with Emerson on much here, but when Christ gets absented in order to make room for a sign that can be interpreted in endless, pluralistic ways (the secret of the old Mass Canon and modern Eucharistic prayers) it is true that even the Sacrament becomes hollow and dry.

In any case, on that famous old day, Emerson got bored. While the preacher preached, he looked out the church window and saw the falling snow of a winter storm. Then he thought to himself a nearly eternal thought—“the snowstorm is real, the preacher merely spectral.” The snowstorm outside was life and power and excitement and—well, it was Nature! Nature never forgets what is most essential about itself—the “ought,” the *law*, the divine necessity of life. Snowflakes fall down, as they ought, and do so without resistance. What Emerson wanted from his preacher was something of that snowfall—it was what he called “life.” He wanted the preacher to discharge “the great and perpetual office of the preacher,”<sup>9</sup> which was the means to convey the joy of the law from one man to another, to “beget a desire” for doing what is right. In other words, for Emerson preaching was persuasion of the will, whose test was

the “power to charm and command the soul,” so that we “find pleasure and honor in obeying.” There you go, you preachers, your job is to charm the soul into finding pleasure in obeying the law. The law and free will always seem to be the very best “intermediates” between Christ and not–Christ.

To charm another soul the preacher needs a style of “friendship,” not “formality.” So as Emerson sat there preferring the silent “preaching” of the snowstorm to the bluster of his minister, he wished the preacher would excite him with the law, lift up, “entertain,” as he says.<sup>10</sup> To preach *friendly not formally* meant the preacher needed to express his own soul in terms of his own, personal experience of life. God’s best work is the law, and the preacher works his charm when he presents the *law as a positive, personal experience*. So he complained of his dreary preacher:

Not one fact in all his experience, had he yet imported into his doctrine . . . Not a line did he draw out of real history. The true preacher can be known by this, that he deals out to the people *his* life . . . But of the bad preacher, it could not be told from his sermon, what area of the world he fell in; whether he had a father or a child; whether he was a freeholder or a pauper; whether he was a citizen or a countryman, or any other fact of his biography. It seemed strange that the people should come to church. It seems as if their houses were very unentertaining, that they should prefer this thoughtless clamor.<sup>11</sup>

This is what Emerson calls “preaching unworthily.” If people come to church at all, it must mean they have no entertainment at home. The preacher should inspire us by drawing on his own inner resources, so that we in turn can draw on ours. What are those inner resources? The ability to endure what seems unendurable, to get through a “rugged crisis,” at which times our true angel–selves are shown—so that when tested by fire we can rise above. Spirit is not found in revelations of the past, the external word, and so the preacher does not bring something we do not already have. Since we have law within, we have God within. Emerson wanted the preacher to help him discover his own inner prophet: “Yourself a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost,” and such new prophets of the Spirit are meant to chart new, untrodden paths to make of this world a better place to live.<sup>12</sup> Preachers

should help us find better laws by which to live, laws that live eternally within.

A preacher is a bad preacher for the quintessential American, Emerson, when the law comes out as something that must be imitated from outside, like when he tells you that there are Wesleys and Oberlins or for that matter even Jesus Christs to follow. Instead, the joy of the law is to be an *inventor*, to do what is natural to one. Soulful Americans do not *imitate*, they *invent*. They do not find the spirit in Bibles or Christs of long ago—they find the universal law within. Without this spiritual excitement “parishes are signing off,” and so we have what Emerson called a decaying and declining church. Our preachers have no soul; they do not express what is in them, and so cannot excite “soul” in anyone else. They make Jesus’ own gospel “not glad.” The preacher, in the end, must tell us to trust our own hearts where one finds the great and divine “Ought.” Otherwise your God is a tyrant, your law someone else’s, and your own invented hope will be crushed.

This most American of arguments desires Nature’s snow, not a preacher who ends the law. What Emerson wanted, what we all want, is to get rid of preachers entirely, once and for all. Preachers drag down, not lift up. They give us *their* opinions instead of listening to *ours*. They bring an external word, instead of turning us into ourselves to find the truth.<sup>13</sup> They make us experience the law as a burden, not a joy! They are contingent, and freedom lies in the eternal, invincible. The problem with the gospel in the end is that its subject is not “me,” and so Emerson finally gets to the real issue when he said that Christian preaching “dwells, with noxious exaggeration about the *person* of Jesus.”<sup>14</sup> When preaching dwells on Christ’s person, rather than his principles, it always comes back to one boring thing: it speaks as if the future is over and done with. No more possibility. Time is already up. Jesus is the end of the law, and so of me. Judgment is over. Such preachers “come to speak of the revelation as somewhat long ago given and done, as if God were dead.” Well, there is the trouble. God is dead in this old world, once and for all. And all history can do is point fingers. Who wants to hear that *preparation* and even *perseverance* for the Last Judgment is fruitless, that the Final Judgment is over? The only thing that

American glory, enthusiasm, and transcendence then required in order to become completely decadent was to take away Emerson's faith in the universality of the law. Without that old enlightenment belief in universal law, whatever is inside a person is understood to be utterly unique and different, and as uniquely posited it must be expressed in its plurality to the outside world in order to make each individual "free." The "holy office" of preaching is moved inside, eaten alive, and so anyone who attempts to preach either the law or its end in Jesus Christ is in for an eschatological, end-time fight with those great numbers who are "signing off" from categorical preachers who refuse to confirm that the hearers are, after all, God themselves. Instead of Christ crucified, and the forgiveness of sins "categorically," we want friendly preachers expressing their experience of life soulfully so as to excite the desire to heroic acts that overcome obstacles and find joy not in outward material, but in the inner spirit—which is the perfect, progressing, life-giving, inventive law itself.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Radical Gospel and the End of History**

Our problem with preaching is the problem of every age. The intermediate between Christ and not-Christ produces a search for the hidden God within. Luther called it enthusiasm. Seeking God within is what sinners do who do not want a word from God who is outside them, judging them. Enthusiasts do not like categorical preaching. They prefer the excitement of a preacher who "deals out to the people *his* life," or for those even more advanced in inner searching, they prefer the silent preaching of the falling snow. All we need in order to find Divinity and our happiness is time and a map! God's hiddenness then becomes something of an adventure like a robust mountain climb rather than a second shoe waiting to fall on us.

Preaching to bound wills means that the dream of being a potentialist, an optimist or pessimist, a delayer and denier is over. *God died* by a homicide that was religious, state-sponsored and irrevocable, and this historical accident changed everything. God has an accusation to bring, that the sin against the Holy Spirit has

been committed with universal complicity. Humans are not right; in fact, they are irredeemable and unforgivable by any measure of justice or any leniency of mercy. The wages of sin is death, so the sinner must die. Categorical preaching concedes no neutrality to the will nor does it concede that the will has any time remaining to change itself once the preacher arrives. That means preaching is always *preaching to the dead*.

There is no other rhetoric in the world that assumes bound wills who cannot hear because they *will* not to hear and so willing *cannot* hear. Preaching is therefore utterly unique as categorical speech, not as some supernatural form of communication called “revelation,” but precisely because it does the impossible in the most down-to-earth way—it gives something that cannot be heard unless God creates a new person to hear it. Preaching also *raises the dead*.

Passing on this categorical preaching has always been difficult. It must be done, as with Paul and the apostles, through the crucified body. In his inaugural essay for the second series of *Lutheran Quarterly*, Gerhard Forde made some suggestions as to how to preach what he there called “the Radical Gospel.”<sup>16</sup> First, he argued that it is always *proclamation and not theology* that justifies by faith alone. Theology has as its goal to get preachers to preach categorically. Theology does not accept that its work, like that of philosophy, is to eliminate contingency, but to multiply it. Talking *about* forgiveness must give way to actually *giving* it—thus theology is for preaching, and preaching elects historically.

Second, radical or categorical preaching must not compromise with sinners by becoming only “a repair job.” It speaks without any conditions about what death is—death is whatever is not—Christ. You and I are in the wrong category, but the gospel is a new creation because Christ forgives through preaching.

In this way a third matter emerges in categorical preaching: everything is marked by the distinction between what is preached and not preached, new and old. “Everything” includes yourself, the world, God—everything and everyone bears this distinction. Instead of living life so as *not to die* (what the world pushes us to do) we proclaim what it means to *die so that we truly live*.

That inverted world has been forcefully opposed, as we might guess, by the largest powers this world can muster: the devil, the fallen world, and our own sinful selves. These have aligned themselves from the beginning to oppose Christ, and when they saw their own demise in the cross, they went after the next best thing: the down-to-earth preacher of Christ. The entirety of history, in the form of ideas or acts, is the attempt to rid ourselves of contingency, as Hegel knew, which means nothing other than ridding ourselves of categorical preachers.<sup>17</sup> This is actually the secret, or the cunning of history, which hides its violence by supporting the life of many other forms of rhetoric. Getting rid of contingency means eliminating God's choice, which comes, as Hegel knew, in historical form in the act of preaching Christ categorically. History in all of its parts and scope is made by sinners refusing to let God elect anyone, including themselves—in order to overcome the fear that some may hear and others not. Even in its most ideal moments, history is deeply material, and the material is the most tangible, earthly rebellion that seeks to destroy God's preaching office. Christ has no place or time according to this worldly scheme. After all, if you are getting rid of preachers, you must get rid of the preacher par excellence, the one who spoke "as one who has authority," that is, the preacher who himself became the preached (Bultmann). Christ the Savior is downright dangerous to a will seeking to embrace either duty or fate—the two options of modern and post-modern worlds.

Christ was murdered in order to stop all preaching and election. The cross failed to do this, despite all human efforts, and now that Christ cannot be killed again, the next best thing is to execute the ambassadorial preacher. Sometimes blood is spilled again and we call it martyrdom, but more often it is easier to execute a preacher in a bloodless coup. If the preacher can be enticed to give something else than Christ as the proper predicate for the true Subject, the Creator, then a death occurs with no apparent violence. It seems like the perfect crime. Just predicate something other of God than Christ—you have the freedom to say whatever you want, do you not? Consequently, the largest offenders against God's mission on earth are preachers themselves.

The formula for bad preaching is simple, you mix law and gospel and come out with a law that sounds like the gospel in its excessive religiosity like: “Grace means unconditional acceptance of your good creation,” or even “acceptance of your acceptance while unacceptable,” “Try, but if you fail God will not condemn.” “The Gospel is free, now all you need to do is join God’s mission and spread it.” “God is love, so there is no law” or “Christ stands for no barriers or divisions.” Most especially, bad preaching offers Christ as a principle or a sign that is supposed to influence you to become like him as measured by the law. The intermediate mix-ups in preaching are many and common.

Categorical preaching takes place in the “bright light” of the distinction of law and gospel. It understands that Christ is present as Lord of his church as the one whom we crucified. Otherwise, one makes of Scripture a self-justification: “Choose me Lord, it only makes sense!” Categorical preaching assumes that God’s Word always meets a bound, addicted, captivated will that refuses the truth that there is either Christ or not Christ, that no other hope or future exists.

The content of preaching is summarized in the chief article of justification by faith alone, and can be given in a nutshell this way: Jesus Christ, our God and Lord was put to death for our trespasses and raised again for our justification (Paul in Romans 4:25). You killed him; the Father raised him (Peter in Acts 2). Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father but by me” (John 14). The law kills, the Spirit gives life (Paul in 2 Cor 3). Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20).

### **Potent Forgiveness**

A sermon first tells the basic story of the man Jesus Christ: that he is God, that he came down from heaven incarnate as this particular person rather than an ideal cause, and that this man preached to

elect the ungodly outside the law. For this he was killed, sacrificed, and even became a curse for us. He became contingent among those who refused God's own contingent mercy. The Father raised him up as Lord of a new kingdom, which he will never leave, and so he sits in judgment over all. That judgment is already made, but there is potent forgiveness, which is the resurrection of the dead. Receiving that forgiveness from a preacher as an external word is the way you "find" a gracious God—or better, that he finds you. This God speaks and so creates a new person who enters a new kingdom or world. Everything following this cross is thus categorically either Christ or not-Christ, belonging to Christ or not. Preaching elects, first by counting the trespass and denying the righteousness of the hearer, and then by creating anew.

If it is clear that the free will is not Christ, then neither is the law Jesus Christ, which is the hardest blow of all. Sin sees Christ as intolerably narrow; faith receives Christ as the fullness of life eternal. Categorical preaching is therefore the true worship of God in Christ that makes it possible to worship the unpreached God by running away because it gives the one place you can run to, Christ himself and alone. Getting rid of such a preacher leaves you with a God whose will you know in general, but you never know what he thinks about you in particular. Getting a righteous, gracious God happens through preaching so that the categories Christ and not-Christ do not remain abstractions, but are actually *predicated, given for you*. Most amazingly, they are predicated of us not because of what is in us; which is to say that getting a gracious God is none other than the act of forgiving the unforgivable apart from their contrition or guilt or mending of ways—on account of Christ alone. But forgiveness does not mean that the person remains more or less the same. It radically breaks the person eternally between old and new, dead and raised. By this "the true worship has now been restored, that is, the preaching of the Word of God, by which God is truly made known and honored."<sup>18</sup>

True preachers know the difference between heaven and hell, death and life, because they know a little something about Christ. They know we have no other God than Christ. Eliminating this announcement is the end of contingency, accidents, election, fate



and all the world's fears only in one sense: all have fallen short of the glory of God. What we all need is a *new contingency* to enter the world that the world knows not of, and so he has. We need Christ who chose sinners in what can only be called the most blessed contingency ever to happen to a person, better than dumb luck or winning the lottery or surviving an earthquake, namely, to have some preacher predicate Christ of me. Not even the great Aristotle would know how to categorize me then, other than to say that this is really, truly new—unprecedented, unrepeatable, neither scientific or metaphysical, and unheard of until now. When you have such a gracious God, being filled by grace in your old self becomes irrelevant. Categorical preaching to a lost cause is the only thing that honors God as the one who justifies himself by justifying me, for in that reconciliation the crucified Christ has become all in all. That is worth the wait.

## NOTES

1. Forde, *The Captivation of the Will*, 77–9.
2. Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 307.
3. Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, 299.
4. Lutherans are historically known for the caution of Protestant christocentrism that does not understand the first article and God's work in creation. This was notably applied by Lutherans to Karl Barth in the likes of Hermann Sasse and Gustaf Wingren, among others, but of course the real problem there was not the tension between first and second articles of the Creed, theocentrism vs. christocentrism. The real problem there is precisely what we are unpacking here, that is, the distinction between law and gospel.
5. Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration VIII, 81, quoting Luther from The Great Confession Concerning the Holy Supper, BC 631.
6. *Bondage*, 307.
7. Emerson, "The Divinity School Address," 91.
8. *Divinity*, 86.
9. *Ibid.*, 84.
10. *Ibid.*, 85.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, 89.
13. Truth "cannot be received at second hand . . . What he announces, I must find true in me, or wholly reject; and on his word, or as his second, be he who he may, I can accept nothing." No "secondary" faith for me! No bestowed, given, external word for me! Preachers must in the end go; even if they are needed as a "temporary crutch until I am healed." *Divinity*, 79.

14. Ibid., 81.

15. It is true that bad preaching produced this response of Emerson's in the first place. In particular it resulted from the very bad attempt of finding an intermediate by teaching both predestination and the third use of the law as the mind of God himself that forced this debacle upon us. When preaching became the substitution of Christ's merit for ours, and left us with the imitation of Christ, who can stand hearing time and again how much better than you is your brother? Preaching that fell into the external law alone is usually answered by demanding the end to preaching the law with its proper predication of "not Christ." One theological enthusiasm in Puritanism begets an even greater and opposite theological enthusiasm like Emerson's.

16. Forde, "Radical Lutheranism," 13-16.

17. "The sole aim of philosophical inquiry is to eliminate the contingent." Hegel, *Introduction to the Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, 28.

18. "Psalm 2," LW 12:4.