

Preaching Repentance

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Preaching Repentance Is a Problem

Theologically, there is no question about its priority. When the New Testament sums up the message of Jesus and the apostles, it identifies repentance with faith as the gospel's consequence: "The kingdom of God is at hand: repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:13). "And Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins...'" (Acts 2:38).

The Lutheran Confessions are equally adamant. Article twelve of the Augsburg Confession, in fact, speaks as though repentance were a condition for the forgiveness of sins. And when Luther in the Small Catechism addresses the significance of baptism, he describes a daily death by drowning in repentance that continues throughout the life of the faithful.

Yet even to name the theological priority of repentance is to come perilously close to undergoing it. For the preacher who is engaged by a text which calls for repentance immediately confronts a whole range of difficulties.

One difficulty is theological. The Lutheran witness to the gospel insists that it is an unconditional word of pardon and release in Christ. With much of the talk of repentance, there is the suggestion of a condition to be achieved. How can repentance be preached without giving the lie to the gospel?

Another difficulty is pastoral. The traditional language of repentance - sorrow over sin, contrition, desire to make amends - describes various dispositions of the heart. Such states are difficult to discern unambiguously. The problem is compounded when, in situations of pastoral authority, a person is called to assess repentance and make recommendations for action. Are there any signs of repentance which manifest its presence strongly enough to give those in authority sound footing?

Still another difficulty is perhaps even more basic: survival. There may have been good reason for the fact that the prophets generally lived out of town, not in parsonages, and not on housing allowances, either. Preaching repentance requires a willingness to stand against the hearer, to speak directly of matters that may call up conflict. How do you stand over and against people you are called to live in relation to? Is it possible to preach repentance without getting crucified for it?

Faced with such questions, one reasonable alternative would be to inquire of the Lutheran heritage to see what it might have to suggest.

According to the church constitutions, model or otherwise, we are obligated to do just this. And there is the possibility, too, of finding something helpful.

It has to be acknowledged, however, that the generation of Lutheran theologians currently in its ascendancy has by and large worked by a different procedure. This has been to identify a problem such as repentance; to attribute the problem to some personal, psychological difficulty of Luther or to a failure of the larger tradition; and then to run a shopping trip through various metaphors, models, or ecumenical alternatives for attractive solutions.

The generation that came to its theological calling in the late 1950s and early 1960s, amidst bobby sox and the excitement of Kennedy's new frontier, has been around long enough now so that it should be possible to evaluate this procedure, to ask what it has produced. There has been some fine scholarship, especially concerning Barth and some other neo-orthodox theologians. There have been some outstanding exegetes. And in the corners, among those by and large excluded by their contemporaries, there has even been some fine Luther research.

But it is equally clear that pushing off from the heritage, this generation of theologians - with few but significant exceptions - has defined its calling by pushing off against the preaching of the church. Theology has been professionalized; it has become a guild unto itself. Turned in upon themselves, the theologians have kept the church at a safe distance, treating preaching as incidental instead of as the goal of theological reflection. And so the church, with rare exceptions, has passed over this generation of theologians when it has sought leadership, leaving the guild to its own standards and devices and telling the schools, with increasingly slim financing, to fend for themselves.

Given such results, more importantly, given the church's calling to serve the witness of the gospel, there is good reason for trying something different. And there is precedent. Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, Hans Joachim Iwand, so too, Abraham Joshua Heschel or Emil Fackenheim, instead of rejecting their various traditions, went deep into them and built intelligently from what they had received to become the great theologians of the century. The best theologians in contemporary American Lutheranism have done the same.

In relation to repentance, there is especially good reason for proceeding to the heritage to see what it provides. The first of the Ninety-five Theses reads, "When our Lord Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' He willed the entire life of the believer to be one of repentance," indicating how fundamental repentance is to Luther's thought.¹ In addition, a major source in his discussion of repentance is only recently being translated, so that it is now possible to get a deeper insight into Luther's understanding of the role of the gospel in

repentance. And there is the deep sense, in Luther as well as in the confessional discussion, that repentance is not the end but the beginning of freedom, so that as the law breaks false alternatives, the gospel takes hold to break open the liberty of faith.

Repentance and the Law

Some years ago, Gerhard Ebeling raised a question all the more critical for the infrequency of its asking: If the law is known by its uses, who is the user?² If this question is addressed to Luther and the Lutheran confessions, the answer is surprising. For the law is defined in a particularly concrete way that leaves the identity of the law's user an open question. Accordingly, repentance begins in the generic stuff of everyday life.

The word "law" is one of the most complex in the Lutheran vocabulary, capable of any number of inflections. But for the purpose of analysis, it can be said that Luther uses the term in basically two ways: he speaks of law at the level of what it signifies or requires and he speaks of it in terms of what it does to its hearer.

The Catechisms, Small and Large, are some of the best examples of Luther's treatment of the requirements of the law. He explains the commandments in simple and direct language, identifying both what is enjoined and what is demanded. All the requirements of the law come down to two, the faith called for in the first table and the love of the neighbor set forth in the second.

Yet the very clarity of Luther's discussion masks the concrete way in which he moves at this level. On the First Commandment, for example, he does not begin with the Scripture, the Creed or the classical language of western theism - God's omnipotence, omniscience or omnipresence. Instead, Luther opens the discussion with a naked, seemingly naive inquiry: What is it to have a God? What do you have if you have one? How does it work?

Answer: A god is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need. To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe him with our whole heart."³

The warrant of Luther's argument is that having a god is a fundamental requirement of life. To be human is to be a creature, to receive life from outside one's self rather than from within. Thus it is to be vulnerable, to be found in need, to have to look outside of the self for help. to suffer misfortune and distress that require some reliable form of assistance. The experience of life demands a god, insisting on it with such determination that everyone has one and, in fact, serves one.

That's the way a god works. God is whatever you depend upon for help. If your god doesn't provide for you in a time of trouble, you must provide for it and in the end, be consumed by the relationship. Thus there can only be one god per person - a god demands such a level of fear, love and trust as to exclude any other possibility.

Luther's explanations of the rest of the first table and all of the second to follow the same logic. Having a god, it is necessary to use the god's name for its proper purposes and to hear what the god has in mind. By the same token, since having neighbors is a necessary feature of human life, there are some requirements involved in getting along with them: what happens with your original neighbors, your parents, has a way of playing itself out in the whole neighborhood. If there is going to be life in the neighborhood, killing must be kept under control; sexual disorder makes the neighbors nervous; a minimal level of property rights, the expectation of truth telling and an elastic public trust are constitutive of communal peace.

Set up this way, Luther's interpretation of what the law requires is analytical - a descriptive examination of the minimal conditions necessary for the determining relationships of life. The commandments hold not because God gave them to Moses, because they are found in Scripture, or because torah is actually gift. They hold because they make explicit what is implicit in the ebb and flow of human inter-relatedness, summarizing the non-negotiables of creaturely life!⁴

Because the law is so embedded in daily relationships, it is ineradicable. Johan Agricola, Luther's old friend, who after a stint of teaching Latin in Eisleben came back to haunt him as the antinomian, argued that the law could be set aside in favor of the gospel. Luther answered in the Antinomian Disputations by sending Agricola back to school, this time in the declensions of the law. What the law signifies is eternal, Luther argues (2:46).⁵ While the law is "emptied" or "quieted" in Christ for the believer,⁶ it makes its requirements known wherever sin and death are at work (5:12). Thus "they are completely ignorant and deceivers of souls who endeavor to abolish the law from the church. For that is not only foolish and impious but completely impossible" (5:15-16). It is a theoretical and conceptual resolution of the law, "a play put on in an empty theater" (5:32), as Luther himself put it, a conceptual trick that equates absence with ignored presence.

The second level in Luther's discussion of law describes it in terms of its impact or function in the hearer. At this level, the law makes itself known by what it does.

Whatever shows sins, wrath or death, exercises the office of the law... For to reveal sin is nothing else nor can be nothing else than law, or the most proper effect and power of the law. (2:18-19)

Significantly, the Formula of Concord - after a generation and a half of feuding over definitions of the law - returns to this level of the definition in its fifth article, citing the same passage from Luther's argument against Agricola.⁷

This second level is predicated on the first. Because the law is in the fabric of human relationships, it bears itself out in experience, particularly in relation to the First Commandment. The law is the accusing voice which sounds in the conscience. But the voice's speech may be inchoate - it may sound in a vague sense of dread, in being ill at ease, or in an apprehension of jeopardy. And the accusation itself may be difficult to formulate: in relation to the First Commandment, it concerns faith and thus involves a sense of place, purpose, or belonging. But like the wolf in John 10, the law at this level doesn't announce its presence - the only sign of its work may be evidence that something is missing, a sense of loss that refuses reduction to specificity.

The law may attack in this manner during some monumental point of passage: the death of a parent, irretrievable failure in something that has been life-orienting or purpose-giving, the death of a child, the end of a marriage, middle age's realization of mortality. Such an experience is a death in its own right, the real effect of the law, just because it cancels out what has been life-shaping.

But this attack of the law doesn't necessarily always appear in such large proportions. It may arise from the bumps of a house settling at night in winter cold; from a spouse or child's unanticipated delay in returning home; from a minor slip at work or from reading about the most recent civic disturbances in the newspaper. However it happens, whether in something major or seemingly minor, in relation to the First Commandment the law's accusation is aimed at faith. Its result is despair.

Compared to the first table, the law's attack on matters of the second is exactly that, secondary. But just because the law's demands are inherent to life itself; moral disobedience also has its requital. The proportion is not necessarily one to one - Luther is as aware as the psalmists of the wicked, seeking financial consultants while the righteous suffer. But if the proportions vary, the rule generally holds. "Victimless crimes" are just another illusion, a moral sleight-of-hand in which insensitivity empties the theater. The law doesn't turn away its eye.

So there is hardly a family that does not taste some deep levels of conflict, gaining first hand experience of the way troubles play themselves out. The sense of hostility in communal life - whether in traffic or with competing

neighbors - constricts it. The sexuality considered private and merely recreational has a way of implicating the public, and so on.

Again, this is a descriptive, indicative analysis. It is not that the law always should or must accuse. Rather, the law always approaches those in need, those who are troubled, those driven to the edge, as an accuser. In this age, under these conditions, law works this way. Its requirements, as good and just and right and true as they may be, are never neutral. They bear themselves out in attack that may vary in degree but proceeds nevertheless, relentlessly.

Because the law works this way, the question of its user is open ended. As Luther understood it, the law can become its own user - an aimless, purposeless power which simply makes demands or states conditions, continuing to expect fulfillment no matter what. This happens when as Luther put it in the great Galatians commentary, "the law ascends into the conscience and attempts to rule there." The law makes ultimate claims for itself, conditioning the most important relationships of life on obedience to its demands.

When the law makes its ultimate claims, it becomes a torturer, ceaselessly grinding away at its demands and accusations. If the law can be its own user, other powers may take hold of it as well. The devil can use the law, offering release on the basis of obedience to its conditions, only to disappoint and so confound the faith of anyone foolish enough to have accepted the original premise - that the law frees. There is a close relationship here. Allied with the devil, the law is also allied with sin and death. They are existential forces, powers of the age, that contend against the gospel and the Creator for the heart of the creature.

Placed in such a league, the preacher can only become a user of the law in a secondary sense. Since the law plays itself out anonymously, without stating its identity, it remains implicit in situations until it is stated. Much of its power is in its all pervasive hiddenness, its anonymity. Stating it, making it explicit, identifying the law as law is already an attack on its claim to ultimacy. Naming it brings the law out of its hiddenness, sets out the requirement in recognizable terms, and consequently gives the hearer standing, in relation to it.

This is the preacher's use of the law; this is why when Luther speaks of the commandment, *Gottes Gebot*, he does so in such positive terms. That which is unconditionally conditional in its relentless demand becomes in the speaking, in the naming, merely conditional. It is no longer high above you, but near to hand, as Moses and Paul have it (Deut. 30; Rom. 10).

So the preacher uses the law neither to become the accuser nor to make the accusation - that's the law's work. Rather, the preacher speaks the unspoken word, bringing to expression what is unexpressed, identifying the point where the law stands against the hearer. One of the best examples is the story of Nathan and David. Nathan's quiet parable brought the law into focus for David so that he could hear through all the illusions and denials the conclusion the law required. Nathan merely stated in what must have been a very quiet and thoughtful way what was already clear but unexpressed, "You are the one" (2 Sam. 12:7).

This is the beginning of repentance. The law comes first. Before any other word is spoken, it is at work in the conditions of human inter-relatedness, making its requirements and bearing out its accusations. Such is generic human experience, the seemingly ceaseless round of encountering limits and living with the consequences - the crises, minor or major, of having to have a god and neighbors, of living in the callings of everyday. Here the law is being itself, doing what law does, grinding out despair and pride as though it feared a shortage.

Repentance starts in just such hiddenness, in the garden variety nuisances and pangs of the day. But if it is going to be anything but garden variety, if it is going to continue on as repentance, there must be a voice - a witness, a preacher who has the kindness to name the limit, to identify the accuser, to speak against the law by naming the law, showing the law its limits and its true master.

The Gospel and Repentance

The relationship of the gospel and repentance is disputed in Lutheranism. Philip Melanchthon floated some theological trial balloons on the matter in the later 1540s and 50s, raising a controversy as a result. The issue was settled in the fifth article of the Formula of Concord. Nowadays, mentioning the gospel in relation to repentance doesn't recall Melanchthon so much as it suggests, at least to some more careful Lutheran observers, *prima facie* evidence of Barthianism.

This is one of the unfortunate results of the Antinomian Disputations being left untranslated for so long. Apparently, the original translators - in German as well as English - took Luther's verdict on an early stage of the antinomian controversy as applicable to the whole of it. He dismissed that battle as a "war of words." His own Disputations, a set of six issued for public academic debate between 1536 and 1539, are far superior to such a verdict. For, in the theses which he prepared for the debates, he gave extended and careful attention to the contribution of the gospel to repentance.

Once again, the starting point is Ebeling's question - the true agency of the law, its ultimate user. So far, three possible users have been identified: the law itself, the devil, and in a smaller way, the preacher. The preacher's use of the law, however, already anticipates and is only possible in light of the fourth and only legitimate user: the Holy Spirit, working through the gospel.

There is a strange collection of passages in some of Luther's writings where, caught up in the argument and in what almost appears to be a kind of transport, he directly addresses the law as though it were another person. One of the best of these is contained in the transcript of one of his exchanges with Agricola:

Although, moreover, we say that despair is useful. it is not so by virtue of the law, but of the Holy Spirit, who does not make a robber or devil of the law but a teacher. Thus whenever the law is dealt with, the nature and power and effect of the law is dealt with - that which it is able to do by itself. But when the law pretends that it follows or penetrates the gospel, 'Hear, quiet down, O law, see lest you jump your fences. You ought to be a teacher, not a robber, you can terrify, but beware, you may not entirely crush, as you once did to Cain, Saul, Judas; remember that you are a teacher. Here is your office, not of a devil or robber but of a teacher.' But these things are not by virtue of the law, but of the gospel and the Holy Spirit as interpreter of the law.⁸

Without the gospel, the law is indiscriminate. It merely drives, creating an appetite which in the realm of the legal itself is insatiable. So any port in the storm; when the trouble starts, any god will do. There is not one gospel, there are gospels by the thousands, all of them promising either to accommodate or possibly even to silence the voice of the law. "When in doubt, buy an appliance"; smoke a Lucky or drink a Miller; or try a new hairspray; or find an ample bosom; or shop 'til you drop; or whatever it takes to give the lightness of being some weight of significance.

In fact, the law offers itself as gospel. It makes one promise after another - offering to restore order, to give a new ethical tone, to elicit genuine striving that will put apathy to flight - all on a condition of minimal obedience. But in the end, the masquerade is broken and along with it the last, desperate illusion - that somehow, the sinner can also become a user of the law. The law turns on its deluded manager with quiet ruthlessness, dealing out disappointments that turn to cynicism which culminates in despair. It is the foreplay of death. They are all the same in the dark.

The one and only gospel takes hold of the law in order to bring it to its true end, placing it under the power of Christ. The random hunting of the law, its aimless self-use, is brought to a point, its true point, its *telos* (Rom. 10:4). Only when it has been brought to its end does the law become a teacher,

driving to the gospel. This happens at both levels of the law, in relation to what it signifies or requires and in relation to its accusation.

At the level of requirement, Christ brings the law to its end by fulfilling it in the believer. As he kept the First Commandment himself, Christ fulfills it in the believer by bringing into being the faith required. This fulfillment or restoration, as Luther calls it, is the subject of an argument that extends through several theses in the Antinomian Disputations.

4:35. But in truth, faith in Christ justifies, alone fulfills the law, alone does good works without the law. 36. It alone accepts the remission of sin and spontaneously does good works through love. 37. Truly, it is after justification [that] good works follow spontaneously without law, that is without the help or coercion [of the law]. 38. In summary: The law is neither useful nor necessary to good works, much less for salvation. 39. But on the contrary, justification, good works, and wholeness are necessary to the fulfillment of the law. 40. For Christ comes to save that which was lost and to restore all things, as Peter says. 41. Therefore the law is not destroyed by Christ, but restored, so that Adam might be just as he was, and even better.

Faith is the turning point. Rather than taking God on at the level of requirement, as though the law were some list out of a job jar, in Christ faith meets God in the relationship signified by the First Commandment: as God. Related now, grounded in Christ, faith is free to go about its business in relation to both God and the neighbor. As Luther says at another point, “whoever believes this is brought back to the point from which Adam and Eve fell” - set free to live as a creature in relation to the Creator and the creation.

As Christ brings the requirement of the law to its end by fulfilling it, he brings its accusative function to its end by silencing it. This happens in the absolution, through the forgiveness of sins. Luther spells this out in another series of theses.

2:45. For the law as it was before Christ, certainly accusing us, under Christ is placated through the remission of sins and therefore is to be fulfilled in the Spirit. 46. Thus after Christ, in the future life will then be fulfilled even that new creature which [the law] in the meantime demanded. 47. Therefore the law in all eternity will never be abolished but will remain either to be fulfilled in the damned or already fulfilled in the blessed.

Through the forgiveness of sin, the law loses its basis for accusation and consequently falls silent - it is “quieted,” “placated,” or “emptied.” The silence of the law in Christ contributes directly to its fulfillment. When the law stops its nagging and denouncing, a person can finally begin to live with what it really signifies: faith, hope and love.

At the level of the law’s requirement as well as at the level of its function, the end is an eschatological promise. The restoration begun is not yet complete. The “new creature” will only be himself or herself “what the law

in the meantime demanded” when all things have been completely restored in the future life.

The meantime occurs under the sign of the *simul*. Brought under the power of Christ in faith, the believer begins to fulfill the law and, in eschatological earnest, experiences the silencing of the law’s accusation - its mouth is stuffed. But until the final restoration, the law is always getting the gag off to shatter the silence once more.

5:40. Insofar as Christ is now raised in us, so far are we without the law, sin and death. 41. Insofar as he truly is not yet raised in us, so far are we under the law, sin and death. 42. Therefore the law (and likewise the gospel) is to be taught without distinction to the pious just as to the wicked.

The *simul* itself will only finally be resolved at the last day. Then the law, sin and death will all have lost their power, and Christ will rule in the undisputed sovereignty of the gospel.

Preaching repentance in the meantime involves, as Luther points out, both law and gospel. By stating explicitly what is implicitly demanded in creaturely relationships, by identifying the point where God stands against us, the preacher is already placing the law under the gospel’s control. But if the law is actually going to end in the gospel, if repentance is truly to find its end in faith, then the gospel itself must become even more explicit than the law.

This is a critical point in the dialectic, one often overlooked. If nature abhors a vacuum, the heart will not tolerate even the hint of one. To preach against the law and all the false gospels used to appease it without naming the name of the one who is the law’s true end is merely to entrench false alternatives. If it takes good money to drive out bad, only the gospel can expose all of its counterfeits. So Jesus’ own preaching of repentance begins not with the abstract demand or an attempt to convince people of their need for the kingdom of God, but with announcement of the dawn of the kingdom. Repentance and faith are the gift and consequence of the kingdom’s presence, not prior conditions for its arrival.

This is risky business in traditional Lutheran discussions because here the gospel is entering into the law’s realm, in effect, overlapping it. But Luther spoke of just this overlap, and as early as in the Commentary on Hebrews where he discussed God’s alien and strange work.⁹ By working this way, Luther argued, God takes the devil’s weapons, that is, what Satan would use to drive to despair and unbelief, and uses them to drive to faith. So the Spirit through the gospel takes hold of the law and without intermixing them, joins them to make them both function in the very same words.

For Luther, the best example of this overlap is the First Commandment itself. It is both law and gospel, law in that it is aimed at unbelief stating both requirement and accusation, and gospel in that it actually bestows what it

demands: "I am the Lord, your God." The great "I am" sayings of John's gospel have the same character. When Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life," he simultaneously grants the gifts of which he speaks and excludes all other possibilities. Law and gospel function in the very same words.

When the unconditional character of the gospel is turned into an ideology, conceptualized as though it were just another theory about how God deals with us, this overlap is lost. Having lost its edge, the gospel turns to mush, to an unqualified endorsement or a universalism of unlimited tolerance. It doesn't have what in this age, under the *simul*, always remains its characteristic bite.

As well grounded in Luther's own theological reflection as they may be, such considerations may seem to put an impossible burden on the preacher. The law is in the web of things; the gospel is an alien word, sounded from without. If the law doesn't get through the ear, it will get its pound of flesh in another way. But if the gospel is to challenge all of its pretenders - the illusions and evasions, the false alternatives - it must be spoken. Finding a way to speak it so that it retains its bite can be extraordinarily difficult.

There is a formal way of speaking the gospel in which the church has historically expressed its confidence: absolution. In the direct and personal declaration of the forgiveness of sin in Christ, the gospel overlaps the law, both confirming its accusation and bringing the law to its end. Only sinners are forgiven; if you are forgiven, you must be the one. Yet it is the very act of the absolution, with the freedom it brings, that allows the conclusion of repentance, "I am a sinner," to be drawn. Precisely here freedom dawns.

Though the rituals of absolution - private confession or the public confession which opens worship - have by and large passed from use in Lutheran congregations, there are still strategic points at which it must be spoken. One is in the pulpit. As in the Smalcald Articles, Luther equated preaching with the declaration of forgiveness.¹⁰ Good preaching always moves toward such a directly personal word of assurance and hope. Another such point is in person to person conversations, such as counseling or calling. It is reported that Karl Menninger said that some seventy or eighty percent of the people who want to talk to a counselor are looking for absolution. It is a matter of uttering it, of taking courage in hand and actually speaking the word of pardon in Christ's name. The *Lutheran Book of Worship* provides rites for the recovery of both private and public absolution.

But it is the genius of the Word that it is so pre-eminently capable of moving beyond what is formal or ritualized into more personal address. The gospel is never generic - it is always "for you." In direct contact, the gospel can be spoken in personal terms directly related to the situation of the hearer.

Far and away the example of such preaching is the story of Zacchaeus. When Jesus saw that little man dangling so far out on a limb, he didn't confront him with the abstractions of justice. Zacchaeus had undoubtedly heard all of that before and simply redoubled his security. Instead, Jesus spoke a word that is both law and gospel at the same time, marking the overlap: "Zacchaeus, I am coming to your house today" (Luke 19:5). His presence at table was law. He broke through all the illusions and evasions that had allowed Zacchaeus to keep a safe distance from those he was exploiting. It was also gospel. Jesus at the same time broke through the opprobrium, the rejection, the condemnation that came with the distance. "And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord. 'Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold'" (Luke 19:8).

Under the power of the gospel, repentance can come to its true end: faith. Beginning in the generic stuff of daily life - in family struggles, the frustrations of work, the problems of the larger community or in some deeper crisis - repentance is set in motion as we are dislodged. This is the law's work, to demand that we find lodging and continually to dislodge us. When the gospel enters, it overlaps the law, confirming its requirement and accusation by bringing the law to its true end in Christ. The believer, then, experiences the peace which comes when the law's voice is silenced. The conscience comes to rest in Christ and so under the power of the gospel. The believer begins actually to fulfill the law.

Repentance and freedom are correlative. For, in the light of the utter self-giving of Christ, a person begins to see the web of self-preservation in himself or herself; to see through and so to loathe the self for its illusions, evasions and entanglements. And in the light of Christ, a person actually begins to know God for who he is - not a theistic projection attempting to catch up with his pretensions, but the one Mary mistook for the gardener, the one who after Simon Peter had been sifted like wheat, made a bishop of him. This is the freedom of the gospel - freedom from all that entangles, freedom for life as a creature in relation to God, the neighbor and the earth.

Repentance and the Preacher

On the basis of this analysis, it is possible to address the three problems mentioned at the beginning: the condition implied in repentance, the question of the marks of repentance, and the situation of the preacher.

First, repentance is not a prerequisite for but a consequence of the gospel. In this sense, the gospel could conceivably be called conditional - there is no faith without repentance. But anyone who wants to construe such a

condition as though it were something to be achieved should not be allowed simply to talk about what good it would do the neighbors! Without the gospel, what is passed off as repentance will always go false in one way or another. It will degenerate into the cheap absolution of self-hatred, the perverse self-justification that thrives on its own put-downs. Or it will become a personal achievement that justifies the self's unyielding judgement of the others. If repentance is mere demand, the self will always lose itself one way or another, whether by drowning in its own mire or by claiming the ability to walk on it and then after brief delay drowning just the same.

True repentance happens along the lines of the prayer of St. Augustine that drove Pelagius crazy, "Give what you command, and command what you will." By providing the good money that drives out the bad, the gospel saves the self from becoming its own project. Then the law can rest, and happily, because its work is completed. And the joy of repentance is fulfilled in the easy laughter of faith.

Secondly, the problem of identifying repentance in progress is more difficult for it is not so much a theological as a political question. Theologically, the marks of repentance have traditionally been identified as sorrow over sin and a resolve to make amends, that is, to be restored to the relationship. According to Luther's analysis, these would be the appropriate marks to look for in a pastoral relationship, as persons are cared for in repentance.

But the question becomes considerably more complicated when it involves the *polis*, the larger community of the congregation, the church and possibly even state authorities. Then it becomes a political problem in the true sense of the term - that is, a problem of community order. The community may demand an evaluation of repentance to see if it is real or simply claimed. It may also be necessary to determine whether or not the person or people involved have come to terms with the situation sufficiently to be trusted once more.

Recognizing the problem as political is helpful in such situations because it allows a more limited burden of proof. Pastors undoubtedly have both the authority and the responsibility to speak God's word of judgement, addressing the person's relationship to God. But in such political situations, the question that complicates also helps to simplify the matter: it is the person's relationship with the community that is at stake. This changes the evidence requirement - while the deeper question of the person's relationship to God is not to be neglected, in such circumstances what the community seeks is evidence of reliability in relation to itself.

In this context, there may still not be a hard and fast set of criteria. But there are some outward signs which do manifest a person's willingness to

deal penitently with the people who have been offended. One sign is truth-telling, the willingness to take responsibility for what has happened. The normal escapes - it was the other's fault, the circumstances were bad, I couldn't help it, and so forth - all indicate evasion. While it may take some time to develop, straight forward acknowledgement of the offense and with it, acceptance of responsibility, indicate that the person is coming to terms with what has happened.

Another mark is to deal directly with those who have been offended. Denial requires a safe distance, just enough so that the offense may remain theoretical and the people offended mere abstractions. Facing the offense and the offended directly breaks the distance and gives external evidence of an internal willingness to deal responsibly with the matters. David did not give Nathan a lesson in the nature of sexual addiction or the risks of military engagement. Neither did Zacchaeus offer Jesus a Chamber-of-Commerce course in the free market economy.

Both marks require patience, however. Early denials may merely set the stage for later confessions; unwillingness to face those offended may recede as a person gains confidence of a future shaped by forgiveness. One of the arts of hearing confessions is timing - as urgent as the situation may be, the Word also has its due season. Sometimes the absolution can only be spoken after a thorough confession; at other times, there will be no confession without a prior absolution. Discerning the time, however, is more difficult in the abstract than it is in actual conversation. There is often a palpable sense of when further confession or immediate absolution is demanded.

Finally, the answer to Ebeling's question indicates the helpfulness of Luther's analysis for preachers. If it is assumed that the preacher is the user of the law in an unqualified way, then the preacher is put into an impossible situation. The preacher must literally be the Holy Spirit, calling, gathering, enlightening, sanctifying, keeping and thus bringing to repentance and faith every believer in every congregation that calls! Under such circumstances, it would make sense to break off the story of Jonah while he is in full flight, summing it up with an appeal to go and do likewise.

The fact that the Holy Spirit is the ultimate user of both law and gospel frees the preacher to preach, and to do so in the close pastoral relation to the congregation that characterizes effective ministry. If it is the work of the law to accuse and denounce, the preacher is called to a more limited responsibility: to destroy the law's anonymity by naming it, to identify what is beginning in the law so that the gospel, by overlapping it can bring repentance to its true end: faith in Christ. The preacher destroys the law's cover through the full-square declaration of the gospel, by declaring its end in Christ through

the forgiveness of sin and then by going about the quiet business of nurturing the new life that comes forth with the Word.

There is still plenty of risk, here. To make explicit what is implicit is to be identified with what has become explicit in the law. To hit the overlap, to preach the gospel in such a way that it retains its bite, is to be held responsible for the tooth marks that follow. The gospel is far more difficult to handle than the law. There is no resurrection without crucifixion. But in this connection, at least the crucifixion is for the right reason. And there's company in it, true companionship, the fellowship of his sufferings.

1 Luther's Works, American Edition, 56 vols., cds., Pelikan and Lehmann (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff), 31:25. Hereafter cited as LW.

2 "The Doctrine of the Triplex Usus Legis," in Word and Faith, Gerhard Ebeling, tr., James Leitch (London: SCM Press, 1963), 71.

3 Book of Concord, ed., Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 365. Hereafter cited as BC.

4 The best analysis of Luther's interpretation of the place of the commandments is Heinrich Bornkamm's Luther and the Old Testament. trs., Eric and Ruth Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969).

5 The Antinomian Disputations are found in Luthers Werke, Weimar Edition, 57 vols., eds. J.F.K. Knaake et al (Weimar, 1883ff.), 39:1.334-358. They are cited here by disputation number (1-6), followed by the number of the particular thesis. (Hereafter Luthers Werke is cited as WA.)

6 WA 39:2.433. There are summary transcripts of the first three debates involving the Antinomian Disputations on pages 359-584.

7 BC, 561.

8 WA 39:1.445.

9 LW 29:135.

10 BC, 310.