



The Foundation of Youth Ministry:

Word and Sacrament

by Jerald Joersz

The Miracle of Sight and Sound

Sound waves reverberating and striking the tympanic membrane of the ear . . .

Can it be that through this miracle of creation another more wondrous act of God takes place? Is it possible that “in, with, and under” the sound waves, the Word of the eternal God Himself comes to us? Is it really possible that “in with, and under” the audible, attached to the visible, the Word of the eternal God Himself comes to us?

With adoration and awe we Christians are eager to respond, “Yes, this is how God comes to us!” The “mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things . . . has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets.” This “mystery,” revealed through the Scriptures, is the Gospel of the “unsearchable riches of Christ,” through whom God’s plan to save the world has been accomplished! (Ephesians 3:3–13) This Gospel comes to us through sound and sight: the spoken Word preached and taught, and “the visible Word” of the sacraments administered and received (Baptism and the Lord’s Supper).

These audible and visible ways of God’s entry into our life we call “the means of grace.” They are the instruments—and the only instruments—through which God has promised to communicate and give to us His saving grace revealed in Jesus Christ.

A Voice from Heaven

When we *hear* the Word of the Gospel, it is as if we have heard “God’s voice from heaven” (Augsburg Confession, XXV, 4). “My sheep hear my *voice*,” Jesus said (John 10:27). And when we *see* the water of Baptism and the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper used according to God’s command and promise—earthly things to which the Word of forgiveness is attached—God is telling us something. Jesus continues to speak to us through “sight and sound.”

Now the question is, what do we hear when “the voice of the Gospel” comes from God? In our technological age, we might imagine that God has left us a “voice mail” message, so to speak. We are eager to hear the message, and “*what is the message?*”

“God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them.” This is *the* message cherished by Christians and committed to them, so that they can say to themselves, to each other and to their friends and neighbors “we implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God” (2 Corinthians 5:19–20). Paul therefore calls the Gospel, “*the message of reconciliation.*” God reconciles people to Himself now through the message of the Gospel.

Without God’s reconciling act in history in the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ 2000 years ago, there would, of course, be no need to speak of “Word and Sacrament,” the means of grace. Without the historical fact that all sinners “are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ” (Romans 3:24), we would have only “the sounds of silence.” No sound waves from heaven, just a message-less “beep.” Consequently and sadly, there would be no saving grace revealed to us and we would remain in our sins, without the Holy Spirit and without faith in Christ.



In his explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed, Martin Luther put it this way:

Neither you nor I could ever know anything of Christ, or believe in Him and take Him as our Lord, unless these were first offered to us and bestowed on our hearts through the preaching of the Gospel by the Holy Spirit. The work is finished and completed, Christ has acquired and won the treasure for us by His sufferings, death, and resurrection, etc. But if the work remained hidden and no one knew of it, it would have been all in vain, all lost. In order that this treasure might not be buried but put to use and enjoyed, God caused the Word to be published and proclaimed, in which He has given the Holy Spirit to offer and apply to us this treasure of salvation. (Large Catechism, II, 38)

Thank God for the ways He has given us to beam His love into our hearts—the Word and the sacraments!

Ransom in Our Mouths

Jesus said during His Last Supper, "This My body given for you" and "This is My blood, shed for you." With the words "for you" Jesus "meant to remind [His disciples] that they ought to break forth with joy and gladness because the ransom that was to be paid for the sins of the whole world was, so to speak, *put in their mouths*" (C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, p. 152).

To many, such graphic language may sound offensive. It just does not seem possible that God would take ordinary created things such as sound waves, water, bread and wine actually to offer and convey to human beings His gifts: the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. Yet this is exactly what God our heavenly Father, who sent His only Son into the flesh, has done and continues to do! The Word and sacraments really give what they announce or proclaim.

The Gospel [the spoken Word]

St. Paul writes, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes . . ." (Romans 1:16). For the apostle Peter, too, the Gospel has power: "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God . . . and this is the word that was preached to you" (1 Peter 1:23, 25).

Jesus told His disciples before leaving them; that "repentance and the forgiveness of sins will be preached in His name to all nations . . ." (Luke 24:47). When we believe in Christ we have what He gives (Ephesians 1:7, 13). Literally, the Gospel "talks" forgiveness, life, and salvation into our hearts. The words of Jesus to the paralytic are spoken also to us and are "music to our ears": "Take heart, son [daughter]; your sins are forgiven" (Matthew 9:2).

The miracle continues to happen: the words of absolution, spoken by pastors and Christians to one another, bring forgiveness to penitent sinners.

Baptism

"God reaches down into the ordinary, takes water and enwraps it with His Word of command and promise. Just as God entered human flesh in Jesus Christ, who 'lived for a while among us' (John 1:14), so God takes simple water and through His Word



becomes present in it" (Jerald Joersz, *Augsburg Today*, p. 56). With the Word, the water of Baptism becomes a "water of life."

How can this be? How can water do such a great thing? The water of Baptism is such a treasure because it is God's way of conveying His salvation to us: "He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:5–7).

The Lord's Supper

"Here in the sacrament you receive from Christ's lips forgiveness of sins, which contains and conveys God's grace and Spirit with all His gifts, protection, defense, and power against death and the devil and all evils" (Large Catechism, V, 70). What powerful words our Lord Jesus spoke over the bread and wine of the sacrament: "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins"!

We must remember that each celebration of the Sacrament is an audio/visual event. As the sound waves of the Gospel strike our ears and so enter our hearts, so also the consecrating, distributing, and receiving the bread and wine [body and blood] "enters through the eyes to move the heart" (Large Catechism. 4, 30).

"To Obtain Such Faith"

Technology has literally changed the course of human events. A universe of ideas is rapidly becoming accessible through tiny instruments held in the palms of our hands. Paradoxically, the larger the universe of information, the smaller the devices we use to access it. We stand in awe.

However, the miracle worked by the Word Proclaimed and sacraments received infinitely surpasses anything human beings can either accomplish or comprehend. Through the message of Christ, by which faith in Him is born, God rescues "us from the dominion of darkness" and brings "us into the kingdom of the Son He loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:13–14).

"Baptism now saves you" (1 Peter 3:21) as the Holy Spirit creates the faith that grasps the grace of God revealed in Christ's saving death and resurrection. The Lord's Supper strengthens that faith by confirming and imparting the benefits of Christ's sacrificial death to those who come to Him.

Through the message of Jesus Christ, God gives His Holy Spirit who creates faith in the heart. As St. Paul puts it in the well-known passage, "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). Jesus prayed for those who would believe through the Word proclaimed by His disciples (John 17:20).

To obtain justifying faith, confessed our Lutheran fathers, God provided the ministry of the Gospel and the sacraments: "Through these, as through means, He gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where He pleases, in those who hear the Gospel" (Augsburg Confession, V, 1–2).

Paradoxically, the Word and sacraments by the power of God's Holy Spirit create the faith that receives the blessings that they offer!



Creating Space for the Word of Christ

Millions of homes in which young people live have created space to capture the sights and sounds of the world and culture around us. Big-screen TV's, digital surround-sound, and the computer monitor have in a sense become symbols of how we arrange our

lives to receive, and send, messages. These messages inform, entertain, inspire, terrify, prompt, captivate, sadden, thrill . . . In numerous ways our lives are being enriched and enhanced, but they can also be impoverished and deprived. The Word of the eternal and living God can be crowded out, squeezed into a very small corner of life.

"Give space to the Word of Christ," the apostle Paul writes to the Colossians and to us: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him" (3:16–17).

We give space to the Word of Christ by *using* the Word and sacraments. Christians use the means of grace when they gather as a congregation for public worship. The Word is preached, the sacraments are celebrated, the people of God listen and learn, and they respond through the "acts" of worship (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication). But God calls Christians also in their personal and daily lives to "let the Word of Christ dwell" in them "richly." In "whatever you do, whether in word or deed," implies that the Word of Christ is to permeate our existence here on earth.

A continuing challenge lies before youth leaders, parents, pastors, and the Christian congregation today: to encourage and help young Christians in their midst to really make use of the "one thing needful," the living and enduring Word of Jesus Christ. Since God awakens and strengthens faith only through the means of grace, every aspect of our ministry to youth needs to be driven by our desire to let the Word of Christ dwell in and among them richly!

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." Acts 2:42

"Living and Active . . ."

"The Word of God is living and active," says the writer to the Hebrews (4:12). The Gospel in Word and sacraments is full of energy. When the Spirit of God works through it, things happen. In a sense, youth ministry is a means of the means of grace. Use Resource Page 1 to analyze, energize, and strategize for youth ministry in your congregation. Try to be as focused as possible as you evaluate the present and envision the future for youth ministry in your congregation. Do all of this personally (in the first person) before you share with others in your group. As you conclude your session, provide adequate time for sharing and summarizing your common hopes and commitments for enabling the Word of Christ to dwell richly among you and your young people.



Resource Page 1

“As I analyze what we are doing in youth ministry, this is what I see . . .”

“*To energize* our youth ministry, I think we need to . . .”

“As we *strategize* for youth ministry, here’s what we can do . . .”

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