

# **A Grammar for Proclamation, Praise, and Prayer**

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What do we say and how do we say it? For the most part the information content of proclamation, praise, and prayer is pretty much understood by those concerned. The “WHAT” is pretty much a given. The “HOW,” however, is not so obvious. This little essay continues the proposition that there is a particular way of speaking the “Good News” which is as important as the content of the “Good News.” In other words: the HOW is as vital as the WHAT. HOW we speak and write is a “grammar.” So—in an attempt to distinguish Christianity from the realm of generic religious possibility—the following puts forth some ideas for a grammar of preaching, praising, and praying.

As we begin, I’m going to organize the essay by theological considerations such as the grammar of the gospel, the grammar of the bound will, the grammar of the cross, i.e. direction, etc. Other ways of organizing need to be discussed as well—such as liturgical categories, etc.

## The Grammar of the Gospel

I have two references from Dr. Nestingen about getting the grammar right. This first one comes from an audio CD program “Forgiveness, Freedom, and the Future” done by Luther Productions wherein Nestingen gives these points to his hearers:

### The Grammar of the Gospel

- Christ is the subject of the verbs
- Because Jesus is the actor, the proclamation is unconditional.
- The “hearer” is to be identified as THE direct object.
- The Gospel IS present tense.

--I would add here consideration of

- The Gospel gives everything away and mandates nothing;

The second comes from his “Martin Luther—a life” the most recent biography Nestingen has done of Luther through Augsburg:

*“In his mind, theology or doctrine isn’t an end in itself. Rather, it is a way of thinking about the word that has been heard so that it can be spoken again and thereby handed on to another. At this level, the doctrine of justification*

*functions like a grammar that describes how the Gospel word is to be spoken. As a kind of grammar, the doctrine of justification states that when Christ is preached, he is to be presented as the one in whom God is acting. As in the Gospels, Christ is the one who is always working—healing, freeing, forgiving sinners, raising the dead. The grammar of justification holds that Christ’s gifts and benefits are to be handed over to the people listening, so that they benefit by what he does. Because Christ is the one at work in the word, his gifts are to be given unconditionally here and now—without further mediation or qualification.”* (pp. 59 – 60)

Furthermore, Nestingen has claimed (I remember hearing it in his “Dusting Off Theology” lectures on the Lord’s Prayer done by Seraphim Communications) that when we pray the first three petitions of the Lord’s Prayer we are praying against ourselves:

- To pray for God’s name to be holy is to pray against the elevation of our “name;”
- To pray for God’s will to be done is pray against “our” will being done; and
- To pray for the coming of God’s kingdom is to pray against all earthly kingdoms and institutions.

### The Grammar of the Captive Will

- The sinner can do NOTHING with respect to God;
- The saint doesn’t need help or motivation;
- The sinner is compelled to act by the law (obedience);
- The saint acts spontaneously in the new life given by the gospel (freedom);
- The sinner is always visible, comprehensible, and predicted;
- The saint is only revealed in faith to faith, and is always a surprise and mostly in retrospect;
- The only way to serve God is to serve the neighbor (see Walt Wolff’s email to Christ Alone listserv of 3-11-06:  
*I am convinced that I am commanded to love the neighbor (because there is no other effectual way in temporality that I can love God in any sense of the term other than as a sort of Feuerbachian illusion));*
- Serving the neighbor doesn’t result in our righteousness neither does it reveal our righteousness but only serves to meet the neighbor’s needs

### The Grammar of the Cross (proper direction)

- God comes down to us;
- We go out to the neighbor;

- Worship is not for righteous people needing affirmation but for sinful people needing salvation;
- The Lord comes as a totality, an absolute, so that we're never in an in between state, partially this or partially that;
- Christ is handed over -- in absolution, baptism, communion – “for you;” we must always be attentive to this “proper application of the pronoun.”

### Questions on The Grammar of Prayer

- Do we pray for God to help us do things or do we pray for God to do them through us?
- Given Heidelberg #11 (*Arrogance cannot be avoided or true hope be present unless the judgment of condemnation is feared in every work.*) can we ever claim to be doing God's will and have righteous acts?
- Dare we put modifiers like comparatives or superlatives onto concepts like faith, repentance, love (such as a deeper faith, a more sincere repentance, a genuine love)?
- How do we come to express that the sinner can only be compelled to obedience under the law while the saint acts spontaneously in freedom with no thought of compulsion?
- If Jesus taught the disciples saying “when you pray, pray like this” and went on to address God as Our Father in heaven, what warrant have we to call upon “Our Father” with a plethora of un-recommended names?

### Considerations on The Grammar of “Freedom”

Nestingen has a great paragraph regarding “freedom” in “Martin Luther: A Life” as he discusses Luther's tract “The Freedom of a Christian.”

*“Luther uses the word **freedom** differently than it is now commonly understood. Particularly in the United States, freedom is political and personal: it is freedom of choice, the right to make your own decisions and follow your own lead. Luther used the word in a deeper way to speak of the liberty that arises in the deepest relationships of life—in faith, hope, and love. It is freedom **from** paralysis of the will, **from** compulsion, and even **from** choice, when the believer is so gripped and held by the love of Christ and the neighbor that there is literally no alternative. This is like the liberty of a long and happy marriage that hold together even in conflict, or the attention of someone so deep in the groove of some hope that everything else becomes irrelevant. It is what happened to Luther as the word took hold of him and what happens again and again as Christ asserts his tender grip. As the account of the Transfiguration in the Gospel says of the apostles, “They saw nothing but Jesus only.”” p. 40 (emphasis in original)*

How do we convey this particular sense of freedom in preaching, in our liturgy, in our prayers, even in our hymns? In many respects we can't even look to a “pristine” tradition, a so-called “golden age,” when everything was just right. The grammar of the gospel never really had opportunity to take hold beyond Luther's own use of it.

### Considerations on a Grammar of Vocabulary

Not only must the right words be used and used rightly, but those same words must also have meanings appropriate to and given by the radical Gospel—our justification by faith alone! In service of our proclamation we should look at three important words: Law, Grace, and Faith.

- Law cannot mean a divine, eternal order which the sinner can use to advance from heaven to earth, from sinner to saint, or in righteousness. Law must be reserved for God's use so that God can restrain sin and put sinners to death.
- Grace cannot mean a divine substance applied to the sinner's free will so that the sinner can make progress according to a mis-defined Law. Grace is not a noun but a verb. Grace is what God does when he puts sinners out of their misery and raises up saints—a *coup de grace*.
- Faith cannot mean the strength of the sinner's commitment, allegiance, or loyalty directed toward something or someone e.g. God, Jesus, church, creed, etc. Faith is location. Faith does not belong to the sinner; it originates in the presence of someone else, specifically the presence of Christ. For the creature, faith has no need of direction, held in Christ, it can't go anywhere.

### Considerations on a Grammar for God's “Hiddenness”

And, finally, how do we take into account such thoughts as these by Robert Jensen:

*“That is why we cannot control faith. It is why the faith-rhetoric of late modern Protestantism is so destructive precisely of faith. I cannot ‘share’ my faith. All I can share is my virtue and knowledge and trust; whether Christ comes to dwell in them is up to him. I cannot answer the question, ‘Do you really believe?’ For all I can find in myself is, in the best case, my virtue and knowledge and trust, within which Christ hides—or does not.”<sup>1</sup>*

Expressed as virtue, knowledge, and trust such faith is indistinguishable from the generic religious possibility—Christianity is just another religion and the necessity for a preacher grows dire. Jensen concludes:

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<sup>1</sup> Jensen, Robert W. “Luther's Contemporary Theological Significance” p.281, in The Cambridge Companion to Martin Luther, ed. Donald K. McKim, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003

*“It is an imperative specific to our time: the church must stop promoting faith, offering self-help courses in how to grow in faith, making faith easy or hard. We must learn to abide the deepest of God’s ways of hiding, in the obscurity of our own souls. Luther can teach us.”<sup>2</sup>*

### A Concluding Story

Recognizing the importance of grammar for proclamation, praise, and prayer can be found in the following story.

A village blacksmith found an apprentice willing to work hard at low pay. The smith immediately began his instructions to the lad: “When I take the metal out of the fire, I’ll lay it on the anvil; and when I nod my head you hit it with the hammer.” The apprentice did precisely what he thought he was told. Next day he was the village blacksmith.

The “Good News” is more than mere information: It is the electing deed of God in Christ Jesus through the living voice of the preacher.

Continuing a discussion on such a grammar as this is imperative so that the “*viva vox*” of the gospel can sound with clarity from the surrounding milieu of religious babble.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 281