

Richard Caemmerer's Goal, Malady, Means: A Retrospective Glance

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2009 marks the fiftieth anniversary of Richard Caemmerer's homiletics text, *Preaching for the Church*.¹ It is time for a retrospective glance. Much has changed since Caemmerer first wrote this book: the field of homiletics, the place of Christianity in the American culture, and, I would argue, even the meaning of Caemmerer's homiletical methodology. It is this latter change that is the subject of this article. In homiletics, Richard Caemmerer gave the church goal, malady, means, and the church has changed it into something else. That change is going to be our main concern: the transformation of goal, malady, means from homiletical theology to law/gospel substitute. My argument is that goal, malady, means arose from Caemmerer's theology of preaching. It was his way of preserving the heart and fostering the art of Lutheran preaching in a time of great change. But its subsequent misuse has turned it into something that Caemmerer never intended: a law/gospel substitute that oversimplifies the integration of law/gospel proclamation in Lutheran preaching.

To be honest, this argument is not really my own. I am borrowing it from Caemmerer. You can hear it when he stops near the end of his career and evaluates his work. In 1965, Robert Bertram put together a festschrift for Caemmerer, who had been teaching at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, for twenty-five years.² Caemmerer was asked to write an autobiographical reflection on his career. In this opening piece, Caemmerer offers the following critical reflection on his work: "Years of teaching helped to develop the triad of 'goal, malady, means' which seminarians distort into sermon outlines and alumni mention with a grin."³ Years of teaching developed goal, malady, means, and year after year Caemmerer watched as seminarians distorted it. Notice how Caemmerer describes the distortion—into outlines. That is, they created a three-part sermon

¹ Richard R. Caemmerer, *Preaching for the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959).

² Richard R. Caemmerer, "Stance and Distance," in *The Lively Function of the Gospel*, ed. Robert W. Bertram (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966).

³ Caemmerer, "Stance and Distance," 4.

structure that starts with the law, proceeds to the gospel, and then closes with some form of application. It is this dynamic that I will examine: Caemmerer's teaching of goal, malady, means and its subsequent distortion in Lutheran preaching. First, we will examine how goal, malady, means arose from Caemmerer's teaching and embodied his theology. Second, we will consider how it has been distorted in contemporary Lutheran preaching as a law/gospel substitute.

I. Caemmerer's Homiletical Theology

To examine goal, malady, means as theology in Caemmerer's homiletics, it is helpful to begin with a larger view of his historical setting and then move in for a much closer examination of his work. If you place Caemmerer's work in the larger trajectory of homiletical theory, you will see that he taught at the very beginning of what became a revolution in homiletics. Simply put, homiletics was encountering several shifts: from an emphasis upon informative to performative preaching; from thematic, propositional sermons that focused on teaching to creative, inductive sermons that focused on experience; from sermons that focused on content being conveyed and minds being filled to sermons that focused on experiences being generated and lives being formed.

Hogan and Reid, in their book *Connecting with the Congregation*, offer a helpful analysis of this historical change in homiletical theory. For them, traditional preaching lies at one end of the spectrum. Traditional preaching focuses upon the logical development and communication of information about the faith. Its goal was to offer "an explanation of Christian belief" for the hearers to which they would agree. Its customary form involved "thematic presentations [in] which the speaker argues 'points.'"⁴ This is the preaching that is manifest in Caemmerer's discussion of outlines in sermon preparation and the examples that he offers. Caemmerer was firmly situated in this preaching tradition. At the other end of the spectrum lies the "thoroughly postmodern approach to preaching," in which preaching is not offering an explanation of belief but rather soliciting from those gathered their own formation of belief in response to the public performance of biblical texts. Here, there is no customary form for the sermon, as that would be imposing upon the gathered community ways of believing that are not necessarily organic to their context. Instead, the preacher generally facilitates communal involvement with the texts of Scripture. So, you might have a much more conversational and free-

⁴ Lucy Lind Hogan and Robert Reid, *Connecting with the Congregation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 122.

flowing form, dialogical (and I truly mean dialogical—with input from the congregation through small-group work, open discussion, and text-messaging displayed on a screen).⁵ In between these approaches lies the shift toward a more experiential form of preaching that we will be examining in our discussion of Caemmerer. This is the movement that Hogan and Reid define as kerygmatic preaching. Here, the emphasis is less upon the theological truth to be explained in the sermon and more upon the theological encounter of God with the hearers through the sermon. The word of God is understood primarily as an event that happens in the lives of the hearers through the proclamation of the sermon. Truth remains important for the preacher, but the goal of the sermon is to facilitate an experience of that truth through the proclamation of God's saving word.⁶

As we look at this larger spectrum, we notice that Caemmerer taught at the very beginning of this major shift in preaching: the shift from traditional to kerygmatic, from informative to performative, from preaching as teaching to preaching as an event. Homiletical theorists often point to the work of H. Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching*, published in 1958, as the very beginning of this shift.⁷ Although it was published only a year before Caemmerer's *Preaching for the Church*, Caemmerer was aware of this work and the change it foretold in preaching. In his listing of resources for further reading at the end of *Preaching for the Church*, Caemmerer writes: "Tremendously useful is *Design for Preaching*, in which H. Grady Davis, in a highly original and painstaking fashion, offers guidance to the process of developing a textual idea in appropriate forms of thought and language; nothing in the literature of preaching is comparable to this book."⁸ Caemmerer had encountered Davis's work and recognized it as something completely new. The homiletical field suddenly had much broader horizons. At the close of his autobiographical piece, Caemmerer notes that "the time is suddenly too short. In the homiletical field, the New Hermeneutics and logical analysis submit challenges which require intense concentration."⁹ This vision did not cause Caemmerer to

⁵ Hogan and Reid, *Connecting*, 129-131.

⁶ Hogan and Reid, *Connecting*, 124-126.

⁷ Henry Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958) and Fred Craddock's *As One without Authority: Essays on Inductive Preaching* (Oklahoma: Phillips University Press, 1971) are commonly cited as the works that enabled a revolution in preaching. On the citation of Davis, see, for example, Paul Scott Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 69-72 and Charles L. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 117.

⁸ Caemmerer, *Preaching* (1959), 301.

⁹ Caemmerer, "Stance and Distance," 6.

abandon the rational outline of traditional preaching—indeed, he still taught that and offered it as an example in his work—but it did cause him to recognize a broadening of the field of preaching, to see the possibilities that were being considered, and to prepare his students to remain faithful even as they walked into and explored that broader terrain.

Theoretically, we can place Caemmerer in this larger trajectory of homiletical theory. He taught at a moment of movement, a time when the sermon transformed from a propositional lecture to a kerygmatic event. Caemmerer himself, however, did not have the advantage of this history. He did not know of these larger trends that were just beginning to take shape, and he was not intentionally seeking to create them. Instead, Caemmerer was responding to the past. If we narrow our focus and look more closely at Caemmerer's work, we will see that he was responding to the problems of propositional preaching by drawing upon his studies in the theology of God's word.

Caemmerer wrote two preaching texts: *Preaching to the Church*,¹⁰ in 1952, and *Preaching for the Church*,¹¹ in 1959. During these seven years, goal, malady, means took shape. It appears in his first text under the rubric, "the problem, the goal, and the Gospel means."¹² Only in the later text does Caemmerer explicitly call it "goal, malady, means."¹³ Part of the impetus for this development was a danger Caemmerer noticed within propositional preaching. It was dull, deadly dull. As he writes in his first preaching text, "many outlines of sermons seem uninteresting and drab."¹⁴ Later, in his second text, he warns the preacher that "the materials from the text must be used not simply to inform people but to persuade them."¹⁵ For Caemmerer, the preacher who has studied the text and arrived at a good sense of its meaning "runs the danger of converting his materials into a Biblical lecture. His calling is to persuade people, to change them in the direction which God has in view for them."¹⁶ This emphasis upon persuasion arises not from rhetorical theory but from biblical theology. It is centered for Caemmerer not in the idea that the sermon should be a persuasive address, with the preacher standing like an orator before the

¹⁰ Richard R. Caemmerer, *Preaching to the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Mimeo Company, 1952).

¹¹ Richard R. Caemmerer, *Preaching for the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959).

¹² Caemmerer, *Preaching* (1952), 16.

¹³ Caemmerer, *Preaching* (1959), 87–90.

¹⁴ Caemmerer, *Preaching* (1952), 35.

¹⁵ Caemmerer, *Preaching* (1959), 87.

¹⁶ Caemmerer, *Preaching* (1959), 87.

people using the available means of persuasion to turn them toward his ends, but in the idea that the sermon is the living word of God, proclaimed among people, and by its very nature that word is persuasive, being used by the Spirit to change the hearts of the people. The preacher, then, is a servant of that word, standing before people, speaking the life-giving breath of God. This proclamation is more than a lecture, more than a teaching; it is an event that gives life to God's people.

Caemmerer's homiletical texts are bracketed by writings in which he studied this theology of the word of God. In fact, in his foreword to *Preaching for the Church*, Caemmerer tells the readers that his work is built upon these reflections:

this book attempts to relate the many facets of Christian preaching, its preparation and delivery, to a covering theological principle, namely that *preaching is God's Word in Christ to people*. This principle is in the forefront of contemporary Christian thought because of fresh interest in Biblical studies, concern for the theology of the church, and new insight into the meaning of the Word of God.¹⁷

It is this insight into the meaning of the word of God that I would like to highlight. In May 1947, before Caemmerer published his homiletics texts, he wrote an article entitled "The Melanchthonian Blight." In this article, he argued that the vitality of the proclamation of the gospel had been lost by an intellectualizing of the faith.¹⁸ In 1951, Caemmerer offered "A Concordance Study of the Concept 'Word of God,'" in which he called for a rediscovery of the idea that the word of God always entails both a communication from God and an activity of God, being both word and deed at the same time, an active communication, a forceful revelation.¹⁹ In 1963, after Caemmerer had published his homiletics texts, he contributed an essay on "The Ministry of the Word" to *Theology in the Life of the Church*. Here, he notes that "the Word of God is simultaneously the speech or

¹⁷ Caemmerer, *Preaching* (1959), xi (emphasis original). Caemmerer makes a similar assertion at the end of this preaching text as he offers notes on sources for further reading: "the current revival in the theology of preaching is due to Biblical studies in general and the investigation of the meaning of the Word of God and the church in particular," 297.

¹⁸ Richard R. Caemmerer, "The Melanchthonian Blight," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 18.5 (1947): 321-338. For an examination of Caemmerer's development of this biblical theology, see Robert R. Schultz, "Pastoral Theology," in *The Lively Function of the Gospel*, 9-22, esp. 13-16.

¹⁹ Richard R. Caemmerer, "A Concordance Study of the Concept 'Word of God,'" *Concordia Theological Monthly* 21.3 (1951): 171-172.

communication of God, and the acts of God.”²⁰ Regardless of what else was being said about the word of God during these years, Caemmerer remained consistent in this teaching: the word of God is both a word and an act. It is this theological understanding that both grounds his work in preaching and accounts for his contribution of goal, malady, means.

Caemmerer sought to bridge the divide between speech and act, between words about God and the working of God, through the rubric of goal, malady, means. Listen to how he introduces this rubric in his textbook:

In answer to these handicaps of aimlessness and staleness of preaching, let us confront the great aim and purpose of Christian preaching. It is not, strictly speaking, to inform but to empower toward goals and ends. Preaching imparts information and teaching, certainly. But its fact and teaching is a means toward further ends.²¹

These ends, as he notes, are the ends that “God Himself has in mind for [the people].”²² It is this joining of teaching and kerygma, proposition and power, that Caemmerer sought to accomplish by teaching students goal, malady, means. Caemmerer did not want to lose hold of the propositional content of the sermon, the communication of truths about God and his work in the world. Neither, however, did he want to dissociate such teachings from the power of God for salvation, the fact that the word of God is not just words about God, a teaching for God’s people, but the word of God, God’s word, alive, active, condemning and redeeming people, forgiving and forming them through the public proclamation of the sermon. Caemmerer sought to ground the intellectual nature of the traditional form of preaching in the activity of the gospel so that the gospel worked with (rather than against) doctrinal preaching. For Caemmerer, goal, malady, means created a dynamic interaction of God’s word with God’s people so that doctrine comes to life as God brings life, eternal life, in Jesus Christ and forms his people through repentance and forgiveness for faith and life in his kingdom.

Perhaps an example of how this worked might help. At the end of his homiletics text, Caemmerer provides a sample sermon study that takes his students from the reading of a text to the completion of the sermon. The text is First Timothy 1:12-17, personal words of encouragement from the apostle Paul to his servant Timothy, who was caring for the church in

²⁰ Richard R. Caemmerer, “The Ministry of the Word,” in *Theology in the Life of the Church*, ed. Robert W. Bertram (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 217-218.

²¹ Caemmerer, *Preaching* (1959), 16.

²² Caemmerer, *Preaching* (1959), 16.

Ephesus. The congregational situation was one in which the church was going through a pastoral vacancy and had asked Caemmerer to preach, and the time of year was September, a time when he notes that the yearly activities of the congregation were beginning to start up again. Caemmerer sought to offer an encouraging word to this congregation in the midst of a pastoral vacancy, calling on them to rely upon the very same strength that Paul calls on Timothy to rely upon in his service in Ephesus. The theme of the sermon was "God's Mercy Is Our Only Help for Our Task."²³ Caemmerer, working with the traditional form of preaching, used a synthetic outline to divide this theme into parts.²⁴ Using the logic of definition, Caemmerer clarified three tasks given by God to the church:

- I. Keeping the Faith
- II. Worshipping God
- III. Serving One Another²⁵

The sermon thus reveals to the hearers how God's mercy is their only help for keeping the faith, worshipping God, and serving one another.

God's word, however, is more than a teaching. It is an event in the lives of the hearers. While the logical teaching is revealed in the outline, the power of the teaching lies in the proper distinction between law and gospel that occurs in each section of development. For Caemmerer, goal, malady, means is the method whereby one develops this teaching for proclamation. In each of the major parts, Caemmerer uses a law/gospel dialectic in his proclamation, sometimes several times within one part. For each part, Caemmerer proclaims the law to reveal the malady that prevents people from faithfully participating in these tasks. Then, for each part, he proclaims the gospel, forgiving such sin, and freeing and forming God's people for service. Here, one sees how Caemmerer integrates goal, malady, means into the doctrinal teaching of the sermon. The outline of the sermon forms the doctrinal teaching, relying upon logic to communicate the central thought. The body of the sermon proclaims law and gospel, using goal, malady, means as a way of proclaiming the power of God's word to bring life to God's people. The law is not proclaimed only in one portion of the sermon, preparing the hearers for another section of gospel proclamation later on. Instead, law and gospel work together, with one another, throughout the sermon to bring life to this doctrinal teaching so that one has God's teaching joined to, indeed anchored in, God's Christocentric action for the hearers. In fact, as Caemmerer is debating

²³ Caemmerer, *Preaching* (1959), 322.

²⁴ Caemmerer, *Preaching* (1959), 95.

²⁵ Caemmerer, *Preaching* (1959), 317-320.

various outlines for this sermon in his text, he notes that he chooses one that provides for "more ample Gospel affirmation."²⁶ The gospel is not heard only once in the sermon, near the end, after the preacher has offered a long sustained section of law proclamation. Instead, the preacher proclaims law and gospel repeatedly throughout the sermon, even as he communicates this teaching of the faith.

This careful integration allowed Caemmerer to do two things: to preserve the heart and foster the art of Lutheran preaching. Because the preacher was cognizant of the goal, malady, and means for every sermon, the preacher would always be near the heart of preaching. In 1952, Caemmerer served as a reader of William Backus's master's thesis, *An Analysis of Missouri Synod Sermons Based on the Content of the New Testament Kerygma*. In this thesis, Backus examined two hundred Lutheran sermons, chosen by a random sampling method, and discovered that the majority of those sermons were unclear in the proclamation of the gospel and many of them had no gospel at all. Caemmerer later noted: "There are men, good Christian men, Christian preachers, who celebrate the sacraments, confirm well-instructed confirmation classes, preach nice 25-, 30-, sometimes 35-minute sermons, but they do not speak the Gospel."²⁷ In light of this analysis of the way in which teaching had obscured the gospel in preaching, Caemmerer offered goal, malady, means as a necessary step in the sermon writing process. It anchored the preacher in the proclamation of law and gospel for the forgiveness of sins, which is at the heart of every sermon.

Yet, even as Caemmerer preserved the heart of preaching, he also sought to foster the art of preaching. One can see this concern for the art of preaching in Caemmerer's placement of the step of goal, malady, means in the sermon preparation process. In his model of sermon preparation, Caemmerer followed the five canons of classical rhetoric. He moved from invention to arrangement to style to memory and then to delivery. The only difference, however, is that Caemmerer inserts the step of goal, malady, means into this process. He placed goal, malady, means as a separate step between the rhetorical canons of invention and arrangement. After the preacher has studied the text and the preaching context and arrived at a clear statement of the central thought, Caemmerer asks the preacher to consider goal, malady, means. It is done before the preacher considers how he will outline the sermon, structuring its sequence of ideas

²⁶ Caemmerer, *Preaching* (1959), 315.

²⁷ Quoted in Paul W.F. Harms, "The Gospel as Preaching," in *The Lively Function of the Gospel*, 40.

and experiences for the sake of the hearers. The placement of this step is intentional. It preserves the freedom of the preacher to engage in the art of biblical interpretation, and it preserves the freedom of the preacher to engage in the art of arrangement, choosing a form for faithful proclamation. Yet, even as it preserves these freedoms, it also focuses the preacher on the sermon as more than a lecture, as an event of proclamation.

You can overhear Caemmerer's concern to balance the heart and the art of preaching in his discussion of arrangement. As he instructs the students to form an outline for the sermon, he poses the question of the role of goal, malady, means in the outlining process:

Isn't it true that the accent on persuasion, developed in the preceding chapter, will suggest the major division for every text: I. Goal, II. Malady, III. Means? No; check (a) in the preceding paragraph makes that division possible only where the text discusses all three. Even then it may not be preferable, for that division tends to slot all of the affirmation of the Gospel into one section. When the preacher can confront the hearers with Law and Gospel repeatedly in the same sermon without muddling his plan, then he is on the track of a good outline.²⁸

So, for example, in his sample sermon, Caemmerer repeatedly proclaims law and gospel as he forms his hearers in three aspects of congregational life. In this emphasis upon the frequent interplay of law and gospel in the sermon, Caemmerer echoes Walther and his discussion of law/gospel dynamics in preaching.

Consider Walther's third evening lecture in *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*. Here, he offers his students a practical example of how law and gospel are proclaimed in the sermon. Walther writes:

Every sermon must contain both doctrines. When either is missing, the other is wrong. For any sermon is wrong that does not present all that is necessary to a person's salvation. You must not think that you have rightly divided the Word of Truth if you preach the Law in one part of your sermon and the Gospel in the other. No; a topographical division of this kind is worthless. Both doctrines may be contained in one sentence.²⁹

Walther's reference to law and gospel being contained in one sentence is instructive. Rather than have a sermon divided into one section law and then another section gospel, Walther envisions a frequent interplay

²⁸ Caemmerer, *Preaching* (1959), 96.

²⁹ C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*, trans. W.H.T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928), 25.

between the two in sermonic development. The sermon proclaims the teachings of the faith and, in that proclamation, uses the frequent interplay between law and gospel to drive the teachings home to the hearers. It is this frequent interplay between law and gospel that Walther focused on in preaching, closing his work with the admonition: "Do not hold forth with the Law too long; let the Gospel follow promptly. When the Law has made the iron to glow, apply the Gospel immediately to shape it into a proper form; if the iron is allowed to cool, nothing can be done with it."³⁰ In fact, it is this quality of Luther's preaching in which Walther delights. Walther does not praise Luther's sermons because he preached one part law and then another part gospel; no, Walther praises Luther's sermons for the way in which Luther used the frequent interplay between law and gospel as he developed a text or proclaimed a teaching:

Luther's sermons are full of thunder and lightning, but these are speedily followed by the soft blowing of the Holy Spirit in the Gospel. . . . At all times, Luther preaches the Law and the Gospel alongside of each other in such a manner that the Law is given an illumination by the Gospel which makes the former more terrible, while the sweetness and the rich comfort of the Gospel is greatly increased by the Law.³¹

For Caemmerer, as for Walther, the frequent interplay of law and gospel, seen in the sermons of Luther, was what was desired in preaching.³² For this reason, Caemmerer separated goal, malady, means from the canon of arrangement and bemoaned those students who distorted goal, malady, means into sermon outlines. Caemmerer sought to preserve the freedom of arrangement so that preachers would not be constrained to make every sermon sound the same, moving from one part law to one part gospel every Sunday. Instead, every sermon would be different, arising from the student's exegesis and artful arrangement of a theme. However, every sermon would also rely upon the power of God's word, properly divided to bring and form new life in the hearers.

In summary, goal, malady, means expressed the theology of Caemmerer's homiletics. It arose from two areas: first, from his concerns about propositional preaching, particularly the loss of the gospel and the reduction of preaching to merely teaching God's word; and, second, from his study of the theology of God's word, particularly his renewed

³⁰ Walther, *Law and Gospel*, 412.

³¹ Walther, *Law and Gospel*, 54.

³² Interestingly, as Caemmerer cites sources for his understanding of the theology of the Word of God in *Preaching for the Church*, he points primarily to Walther and Luther. Caemmerer, *Preaching* (1959), 297.

appreciation of the performative force of God's word. Caemmerer offered this homiletical theology to the church at a time of great change. As Caemmerer looked around him, he saw changes in the field of homiletics. At the end of his textbook, he wrote of a "current revival in the theology of preaching . . . due to Biblical studies in general and the investigation of the meaning of the Word of God and the church in particular."³³ As Caemmerer saw the nature of preaching changing, he did not so much change with it as he clarified what was essential for preachers. His vision broadened in terms of what preaching could be, but his foundation deepened in terms of what preaching must be. Goal, malady, means focused the attention of preachers on what was essential for preaching: the proclamation of law and gospel for the forgiveness of sins. The way in which Caemmerer used goal, malady, means, however, sought to preserve the freedom of preachers to develop the art of preaching, to enter into the future changes in preaching certain of what lies at the heart of preaching even as they delighted in the art.

II. Goal, Malady, Means as Law/Gospel Substitute in Contemporary Preaching

Ironically, in contemporary preaching, goal, malady, means has become the opposite of what Caemmerer intended it to be. Instead of freeing preachers, it has constrained them. Instead of encouraging development in the art of preaching, it has discouraged it. Instead of grounding preachers in the one thing essential so that they can faithfully explore the broader homiletical horizons without leaving home, it has limited homiletical vision to only one thing, law and gospel, so that some preachers oversimplify the integration of law/gospel into the art of preaching and others neglect it altogether, leaving goal, malady, means behind, as they venture out into homiletical territory far from home.³⁴ In essence, goal, malady, means has become a law/gospel substitute, revered by some, dismissed by others, and yet in both cases only a poor shadow of the challenging and difficult art of integrating law/gospel dynamics into weekly preaching that Caemmerer desired it to be.

I would like to use Caemmerer's placement of the step of goal, malady, means in the sermon writing process as an example to illustrate the misinterpretation of his work. As you will remember, Caemmerer offered

³³ Caemmerer, *Preaching* (1959), 297.

³⁴ For a discussion of this law/gospel obsession and negligence by contemporary preachers, see David R. Schmitt, "Law and Gospel in Sermon and Service," in *Liturgical Preaching*, ed. Paul J. Grime and Dean W. Nadasdy (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001), 25-49.

goal, malady, means as a step separate from the rhetorical canon of invention on the one side and the rhetorical canon of arrangement on the other. The oversimplification of Caemmerer's homiletical theology has led to using goal, malady, means as a substitute for the difficult work of invention and arrangement in sermon preparation.

In terms of invention, goal, malady, means has been used to put constraints upon textual interpretation. In his first homiletics text, as Caemmerer was working out his vision of goal, malady, means, he placed it within the process of textual interpretation. In fact, one could argue that it began to constrain the art of biblical interpretation, tempting the student no longer to listen to the word of God but to evaluate it on the basis of how well it supplied the preacher with these three components for the sermon. Caemmerer himself goes so far as to note that "the perfect text will include all three of these factors."³⁵ In his second homiletics text, however, Caemmerer separated goal, malady, means from textual interpretation. The preacher was to work through the text, practicing the art of biblical interpretation, and then consider the integration of goal, malady, means into the sermon as he proclaimed this text to the people. This encouraged preachers to develop the art of biblical interpretation rather than simply and simplistically looking at a text to find law and gospel content so that they could write a sermon. Goal, malady, means is law/gospel substitute when it becomes the preacher's pragmatic approach to a text. Rather than consider the text's content (its theology and meaning), rather than consider the text's rhetoric (its form and its function), rather than consider the text's contexts (historical and canonical), the preacher takes any text—oracle or narrative, proverb or parable, prayer or paraenesis—and reduces its study to simply finding a goal, a malady, and a means. Such pragmatic textual analysis has actually produced sermons that simply lift one word from a text (e.g., blameless, or righteous, or holy) and create a sermon by placing that word in this law/gospel machine. Richard Lischer has helpfully labeled such pragmatism as a confusion of law and gospel. He calls it the "mechanical application of Law and Gospel," where preachers "lay the same stencil over every text, asking where is the law and gospel? rather than What is God saying to his people?"³⁶

Not only does goal, malady, means constrain the art of textual interpretation, becoming a poor substitute for the much more difficult work of exegesis and integrating one's recognition of the law/gospel

³⁵ Caemmerer, *Preaching* (1952), 16.

³⁶Richard Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel* (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1992), 43.

dynamic into one's interpretation of a text, it also can constrain the art of arrangement. In this case, goal, malady, means becomes the outline of every sermon. David Smith tells the story of an encounter he once had in a doctoral seminar on preaching. The students were conversing about preaching in various denominations. One Roman Catholic nun noted how in Lutheran preaching "the first part of the sermon makes you feel real bad and the second part of the sermon makes you feel real good."³⁷ Goal, malady, means, for her as a hearer, had become the outline of the sermon. No matter what the text or the occasion, the preacher would begin by talking about sin, then move to proclaiming forgiveness, and then, if he was daring, end by glancing at an exhortation toward holy living. In the American culture, this kind of preaching can easily be misunderstood. Our world is saturated with advertising, in which everything from deodorant to medication for incontinence relies upon the psychological marketing ploy of making you feel bad so that you want the product that makes you feel good. In such a culture, Jesus could easily become the church's product and the sermon his advertising pitch, manipulating hearers into wanting some of that forgiveness to make life in this world more livable. Now do not misunderstand me: the movement from law to gospel can be a very powerful and effective sermonic form. Homileticians have articulated it in various ways, such as Eugene Lowry in *The Homiletical Plot*³⁸ and, most recently, Paul Scott Wilson in *The Four Pages of the Sermon*.³⁹ It can be a powerful and effective form. What I am concerned about is Caemmerer's fear that it becomes the only sermon form, one not intentionally chosen by the preacher as part of the art of arrangement but one used by the preacher without discernment because he believes that is the only way to preach.

To put it simply, when goal, malady, means becomes a law/gospel substitute rather than opening the text and the teaching of the sermon for the hearers, it becomes the text and the teaching for them. Regardless of what the text is, Sunday after Sunday the hearers hear the same sermon: they are sinners and Jesus died for them. Regardless of what teachings are present in the text or accented by the liturgical context of that Sunday, the hearers hear the same teaching: the doctrine of justification. Every text becomes an example of how we sin and God forgives us, and every sermon becomes a teaching of justification. Rather than have evangelical

³⁷ David Smith encountered this caricature of Lutheran preaching while pursuing doctoral work at the Aquinas Institute of Theology in 1996.

³⁸ Eugene Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980).

³⁹ Paul Scott Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon: A Guide to Biblical Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999).

proclamation integrated into the larger discourses of a sermon, its textual exposition, theological confession, and hearer interpretation, it becomes the only discourse of the sermon, revealing our sin and proclaiming our salvation as one teaches the doctrine of justification.

What frightens me about this development is the context in which it is occurring. Changes in our culture as we enter into post-Christian America, changes in our ecclesial practices as some congregations move toward new-member classes lasting as short as a weekend, and changes in our personal lives as some members no longer attend Bible Class or read their Bible during the week, leave us with hearers who are growing more and more biblically illiterate. They are losing a sense of the overarching meta-narrative of the Scriptures, the story of God creating, redeeming, and ultimately coming to restore the world. The Scriptures are encountered in bits and pieces, a sermon from a passage from Hosea one Sunday and then from Paul's epistle to the Romans the next. Each time these passages from the Scriptures are encountered, the hearers hear only one part of the story: sin and forgiveness. They see sin and grace at work in the text and, by analogy, hear about sin and grace at work in their lives, yet all the while miss the larger story unfolding in the Scriptures, the eternal fellowship of the triune God and this God's mission in creating, redeeming, and recreating the world to live in fellowship with God. The Scriptures become a collection of stories of various people who have sinned and been forgiven rather than a coherent revelation of the story of God. We see and identify with individual stories but miss out on the larger story of God. God suddenly becomes a supporting actor in our stories, helping us with forgiveness, rather than one who brings us into his story, taking us as individuals and forming us into a people, his people who have a purpose and live by his proclamation in his world. Suddenly, preachers are taking God and making him relevant, fitting him into our small human stories, having him meet our fragile needs, rather than proclaiming how God makes us relevant, taking us into his kingdom and giving our lives purpose in his world that lies beyond our fallen imagination and is yet to be revealed.

Not only do we preach to a people who live under the threat of growing biblical illiteracy, but we preach also to a people who seek to remain faithful in a culture of religious pluralism. Our culture tends to separate religion and spirituality.⁴⁰ Religion is the formal organization of dogmatic statements about faith and rules for its practice. Spirituality is the

⁴⁰ Michael Downey, *Understanding Christian Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 7.

personal appropriation from these systems of whatever the individual seems helpful for his or her personal spiritual formation. Such a culture produces practitioners of a private spirituality who often come to the church as they would to a religious supply store, looking for items they might use, as one person told me, in a "journey to resurrectedness." Such practical spirituality reduces Christianity to one among many systems of thought, one among many frameworks for the practice of belief. Hearers begin to pick and choose among beliefs in these various religious systems and try out different practices to see what happens to their faith. In such an environment, people can begin to think of themselves as Christian because they believe that they are sinners and Jesus died for them, and yet dislocate that event of personal salvation from the larger story of God as depicted in the Scriptures and from the larger body of teachings confessed in the rule of faith. Although they hold on to the teaching of justification, they also embrace other teachings from other religious traditions, incorporating Native American spirituality and Eastern meditative traditions into their personal practice of the Christian faith. To such a people, we would not want to dissociate the teaching of justification from the whole counsel of God or reduce the Scriptures to simply a collection of stories of various people who sin and are forgiven. Rather, we would want to preach and teach in such a way as to lead them from that moment of justification into the larger story of God and into the fuller Christian witness of God's ways in and for his world.

For this reason, I would argue, there is still some wisdom for us in Caemmerer's homiletical theology. While the art of biblical interpretation has changed since Caemmerer first wrote *Preaching for the Church*, and the art of arrangement has flourished as homiletics underwent radical changes in the art of preaching, Caemmerer's goal, malady, means can still offer guidance for the preacher. When not reduced to an overly simplistic way of reading a text for preaching, and when not reified into the only way of outlining a sermon, Caemmerer's work can still form the heart and foster the art of Lutheran preaching. Through goal, malady, means, Caemmerer sought to form preachers who engaged in a careful study of the Scriptures and a creative exploration of sermon arrangement so that the texts of the Scriptures would be preached and the whole counsel of God would be proclaimed, and yet this would not occur without the centrality of God's gracious work in the dynamics of the sermon.⁴¹ By anchoring the sermon

⁴¹ This combination of doctrine and evangelical proclamation is not new to Caemmerer but articulated by Walther in Thesis 2 of his *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*, 30.

in God's gracious work in Christ, Caemmerer sought to open the sermon to various texts and teachings, so that Sunday after Sunday, hearers would be brought through that one work of God into the whole counsel of God, awakening them to their place and their purpose in God's mission. In this way, teachings such as the omnipotence of God, the efficacy of prayer, the resurrection of the dead, the creation of the world, the institution of marriage, and the cross-bearing of discipleship are not set aside for the sake of goal, malady, means but are brought to life through goal, malady, means, and God's word on Sunday morning remains both a teaching and an event, giving and shaping life in his kingdom in this world.



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