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Who communicates what and why in the „communication of the gospel“?

Questions for a prominent concept in German practical theology

Thomas Kräuter

In contemporary German practical theology, the formula “communication of the gospel” (Kommunikation des Evangeliums) is a prominent concept. First introduced by Ernst Lange in 1981 as a more dialogical alternative to the “proclamation” (Verkündigung) of the Wort-Gottes-Theologie, it has since been variously adopted in the academic discourse.¹ One of its key proponents is Christian Grethlein who in 2012 reimagined the entire discipline of practical theology as “theory of the communication of the gospel.”² While Grethlein contributes many important insights for contemporary practical theology and hence is rightfully appreciated, his approach has also been variously criticized.³

The criticism focuses primarily on the insufficient definition of the content and intent of the “communication of the gospel”⁴ – a consequence of Grethlein’s radically situational understanding of gospel communication.

¹ Michael Domsgen/Bernd Schröder (Hg.), *Kommunikation des Evangeliums. Leitbegriff der Praktischen Theologie* (APrTh 57), Leipzig 2014, 7–9.

² Christian Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie*, 2. Aufl., Berlin 2016, 8.

³ See the essays in Domsgen/Schröder, *Kommunikation* (s. Anm. 1); Stefan Schweyer, “Kommunikation des Evangeliums”. Reflexionen zu einer praktisch-theologischen Leitformel, in: Philipp F. Bartholomä / Stefan Schweyer (Hg.) *Mit der Bibel – für die Praxis. Beiträge zu einer praktisch-theologischen Hermeneutik*, Gießen 2017, 19–31.

⁴ Wilfried Engemann, *Kommunikation des Evangeliums. Anmerkungen zum Stellenwert einer Formel im Diskurs der Praktischen Theologie*, in: Domsgen/Schröder (Hg.), *Kommunikation* (s. Anm. 1), 26–30; Bernhard Kirchmeier, *Drei Kommunikationsmodi – eine Funktion? Erwägungen zum Zweck der Kommunikation des Evangeliums*, in: Domsgen/Schröder (Hg.), *Kommunikation* (s. Anm. 1), 34; Schweyer, *Kommunikation* (s. Anm. 3), 21; Dirk Kellner, *Charisma – die menschliche Praxis Gottes. Zur Frage nach dem Gegenstand der Praktischen Theologie*, in: JETH 27 (2013), 14–15; Helge Stadelmann, *Rezension zu Christian Grethlein, Praktische Theologie*, in: JETH 27 (2013), 119; Markus Printz, *Gemeindepäda-*

According to him, the meaning of “gospel” is always only generated in the actual process of communication.⁵ With this insight, Grethlein wants to do justice to the contextual dependency of human communication, a process that would be impeded by any preliminary transcontextual fixations of intent or content. However, this leaves the question of what gospel communication actually communicates and to what end. In this article, I will suggest that including God as communicator into the process of communication may aid in overcoming the tension between the context-dependency and content-distinctiveness of gospel communication. Furthermore, I employ the Lutheran conception of the dialectic of “gospel” and “law” to further specify the intent of gospel communication.

1. Grethlein’s theory of the communication of the gospel in the present

Grethlein begins his “Praktische Theologie” with a review of recent contributions to the field. In so doing, he observes a struggle in determining the actual subject of practical theology. He then lists several attempts to do so, which include the task of the pastor, the activity of the church, religion in society and practice as forming reality.⁶ However, Grethlein finds all of them insufficient. Focusing on the pastor or the church wrongly narrows the subject and thus disregards important areas such as volunteer work, media or the everyday faith practice of people beyond the organized church. General concepts such as religion and practice fail to define the discipline as a distinct Christian branch of study.⁷ Instead, Grethlein attempts to define practical theology “von der Sache her”⁸, focusing on the gospel and the modes and social forms in which it is communicated. Furthermore, he aims to locate practical the-

gogik in der Sackgasse? Eine kritische Analyse der Veröffentlichungen zur Gemeindepädagogik der letzten fünf Jahre, in: JETH 30 (2016), 162–163.

⁵ Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie* (s. Anm. 2), 159.

⁶ Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie* (s. Anm. 2), 4–7; Christian Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie als Theorie der Kommunikation des Evangeliums in der Gegenwart – Grundlagen und Konsequenzen*, in: *International Journal of Practical Theology* 18/2 (2014), 287–294.

⁷ Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie als Theorie* (s. Anm. 6), 294.

⁸ Bernd Schröder, *Das Priestertum aller Getauften und die Assistenz der Kirche. Überlegungen zur Neuformatierung der Praktischen Theologie im Anschluss an Christian Grethleins Praktische Theologie*, in: Domsen/Schröder (Hg.), *Kommunikation* (s. Anm. 1), 141–142.

ology firmly in both Christian theological discourse (gospel) and that of the human and social sciences, most notably communication science (communication).⁹

"Gospel" is, according to Grethlein, "der christliche Grundimpuls" as conveyed in the presence, ministry and fate of Jesus of Nazareth.¹⁰ He bore witness to the coming kingdom of God and hence helped people change their perspective on their lives and reorientate it towards the "liebende und wirksame Gegenwart Gottes."¹¹ Following New Testament scholar Jürgen Becker, Grethlein observes three modes of communication thus employed by Jesus: (1) teaching and learning, (2) communal celebrations and (3) helping for living.¹² In these forms of expression the gospel was then and is now communicated and comes about, integrating people into community with God and making his loving and effective presence felt.¹³

Because practical theology must interpret "gospel" as a communicative process, it underlies the same dynamics as any form of communication. Gospel communication therefore has to be understood as dynamic, delicate and open-ended process generating new insights on the way.¹⁴ "Gospel" is consequently "keine feststehende Größe unabhängig von der konkreten Kommunikation", but instead "ergibt sich kommunikativ immer wieder aufs Neue in konkreten Situationen."¹⁵ Hence, on the one hand, gospel communication always refers to Jesus' ministry and the presence of God communicated by him. On the other hand, as gospel communication occurs in ever new contexts it needs to be transformed and adapted regarding content, organization and media, "um in veränderter Kommunikationssituation den christlichen Grundimpuls zur Sprache zu bringen."¹⁶ The goal of gospel communication is a new perspective on the everyday life.¹⁷

⁹ Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie* (s. Anm. 2), 9–11.

¹⁰ Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie* (s. Anm. 2), 160.

¹¹ Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie* (s. Anm. 2), 160.164.

¹² Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie* (s. Anm. 2), 165–169.

¹³ Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie* (s. Anm. 2), 171–172.

¹⁴ Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie als Theorie* (s. Anm. 6), 297–298.

¹⁵ Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie* (s. Anm. 2), 159.

¹⁶ Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie* (s. Anm. 2), 216.234.

¹⁷ Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie* (s. Anm. 2), 587.

1.1 Important insights

One has to applaud Grethlein for managing to locate practical theology as a distinct Christian theological discipline and at the same time bringing it into a conversation with the human and social sciences.¹⁸ Furthermore, by defining the discipline's subject as "gospel communication" and rearranging the field apart from the traditional subdisciplines, he is able to include other theological professions, volunteer work and other topics that usually appear only marginally, such as healing, the relationship between gospel and culture or prayer.¹⁹ Moreover, because of his focus on the contextuality of gospel communication, Grethlein offers a detailed analysis of contemporary societal and cultural circumstances and developments.²⁰ In addition, his emphasis on the situatedness of gospel communication needs to be taken up. Gospel communication for Grethlein can only be conceived with regards to a person's biography.²¹ Gospel is never detached from context but is always a concrete communication of the loving and effective presence of God that changes one's perspective on life. Also, gospel communication does not just occur verbally. In doing so, Grethlein distances himself from the (often evangelical) notion that *the* gospel can be fixated and verbally shared in a few abstract propositions with no connection to the individual situation.²² For him "gospel" in a way is only good news when it is really experienced as good news in a specific context. Finally, even though his approach is decidedly German protestant, Grethlein adopts insights from both Catholic as well as American practical theologians.²³

1.2 Points of criticism

These things withstanding, Grethlein's approach has also been rightfully criticized. I will take up two major strands of criticism, namely the insufficient

¹⁸ He regrets that in most contemporary practical theological approaches the Bible "spielt [...] keine bzw. nur eine marginale Rolle." Instead, rooted in the tradition of protestant theology he wants to inquire after biblical insights. Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie* (s. Anm. 2), 160.

¹⁹ Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie* (s. Anm. 2), 190–195.462–472.545–551.573–579.

²⁰ Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie* (s. Anm. 2), 196–255.

²¹ Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie* (s. Anm. 2), 212.

²² Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie* (s. Anm. 2), 169.185.

²³ Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie* (s. Anm. 2), 99–135.

definition of the content and intent of gospel communication and the missing theological reflection on the communication process.

Several scholars remark that Grethlein fails to sufficiently establish the content and intent of the communication of the gospel. For instance, Engemann asks:

Was soll mit den Menschen sein, nachdem sie [...] in den Genuss der "Kommunikation des Evangeliums" gekommen sind? [...] Was bedeutet es, dass das Evangelium "inhaltlich in die Mitte christlichen Glaubens" führt, wenn andererseits unterstellt wird, dass das Evangelium "als Inhalt von Kommunikation keine feststehende Größe" sei?²⁴

Similarly, Eiffler remarks that Grethlein's vague definition of the content of the communicated gospel cannot answer "was überhaupt kommuniziert werden soll."²⁵ This of course is due to Grethlein's radical situational understanding of gospel communication. As the meaning of gospel is only realized in a concrete situation, any preliminary fixation of the content of gospel seems to hinder its communication.²⁶ However, even such a situational understanding of gospel communication needs some indications as to content and intent to distinguish it from other forms of communication. Grethlein offers these with his reference to the "Auftreten, Wirken und Geschick"²⁷ of Jesus of Nazareth and holds as its goal "ein neues Verständnis des alltäglichen Lebens."²⁸ Engemann finds these too vague to actually orient gospel communication. He argues that the intent of gospel communication should be more accurately defined anthropologically as the aiding of the life of faith in which humans appear as humans. This means "dass sie ihrer Würde gewahr werden, dass sie einen Schritt in die Freiheit tun können, dass sie Zuwendung erfahren und gewähren, dass sie sich durch ihren Glauben ein positives

²⁴ Engemann, *Kommunikation* (s. Anm. 4), 26–27.

²⁵ Felix Eiffler, *Kirche für die Stadt. Pluriforme urbane Gemeindeentwicklung unter den Bedingungen urbaner Segregation*, Göttingen 2020, 295. See also similar comments in: Kirchmeier, *Drei Kommunikationsmodi* (s. Anm. 4), 34; Michael Domsgen, *Kommunikation des Evangeliums. Perspektiven der Lebensbegleitung*, in: Domsgen/Schröder (Hg.), *Kommunikation* (s. Anm. 1), 80; Schwyer, *Kommunikation* (s. Anm. 3), 21.

²⁶ Kirchmeier, *Drei Kommunikationsmodi* (s. Anm. 4), 42.

²⁷ Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie* (s. Anm. 2), 170.

²⁸ Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie* (s. Anm. 2), 587.

Lebensgefühl aneignen.”²⁹ Likewise, Kirchmeier sees the distinct content of gospel as “etwas, das Menschen physisch und psychisch aufrichtet” and helps them see themselves as “Subjekte ihres Lebens.”³⁰

While these anthropological remarks further expound Grethlein’s approach, they do not aid in overcoming its main weakness; a theological underestimation of its key concepts “gospel” and “communication.” Grethlein biblically defines gospel as inherently connected to the person of Jesus Christ. However, he inexplicably restricts it to Jesus’ earthly ministry. While Jesus is understood to have communicated the loving presence of God through teaching, celebration and healing, Grethlein fails to reflect on Jesus as crucified, resurrected and ascended Lord and Christ currently present through the Holy Spirit.³¹ However, in the New Testament the earthly ministry of Christ is inextricably linked to God’s saving work through him in his death and resurrection.³²

Furthermore, despite the situatedness and context-dependency of gospel communication, it must not be missed that Jesus’ communication of the loving presence of God implied first and foremost a self-communication.³³ In Christ’s communication of the gospel and in the church’s testimony of Christ, God self-revealingly communicates himself. It is interesting that this foundational divine communication is nearly non-existent in Grethlein’s communication-centered approach. The closest he gets is his “helping for living” which he defines as “Kommunikation von Gott her”.³⁴ In that section he states that speaking theologically the “Zuwendung Gottes zum Menschen” is the basis of any communication with him.³⁵ However, apart from

²⁹ Engemann, *Kommunikation* (s. Anm. 4), 28.

³⁰ Kirchmeier, *Drei Kommunikationsmodi* (s. Anm. 4), 42.44.

³¹ Eiffler, *Kirche* (s. Anm. 25), 300; Schweyer, *Kommunikation* (s. Anm. 3), 30; Stadelmann, *Rezension* (s. Anm. 4), 119.

³² Matthias Clausen, *Das Evangelium mit Worten kommunizieren*, in: Heinzpeter Hempelmann et al. (Hg.), *Handbuch Milieusensible Kommunikation des Evangeliums. Reflexionen, Dimensionen, praktische Umsetzungen*, Göttingen 2019, 78; Eiffler, *Kirche* (s. Anm. 25), 298; Schweyer, *Kommunikation* (s. Anm. 3), 30.

³³ Jan Hermelink, *Kritik und Konflikt. Die praktisch-theologische Wahrnehmung ehrenamtlichen Handelns als Präzisierung von “Kommunikation des Evangeliums”*, in: Domsgen/Schröder (Hg.), *Kommunikation* (s. Anm. 1), 134; Heinzpeter Hempelmann, *Der menschliche Faktor. Milieusensible Kommunikation des Evangeliums als Arbeit und Mühe*, in: Hempelmann et al. (Hg.), *Handbuch* (s. Anm. 32), 72.

³⁴ Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie* (s. Anm. 2), 567.

³⁵ Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie* (s. Anm. 2), 568.

this "communication" is solely defined by insights from the human and social sciences. God as an agent of communication is not considered.³⁶ Thus, the three modes of gospel communication might constitute communication about, with, and from God, yet the emphasis lies solely on the human communicative agents.³⁷ This is a crucial weakness of his approach and has been coined "offenbarungstheologisches Defizit"³⁸ by Schweyer. For as Kellner remarks in critiquing Grethlein, practical theology never just deals with human praxis but reckons with the effective presence of God, who as a self-communicating God is "der Ausgangspunkt und das eigentliche Handlungs-subjekt der Kommunikation."³⁹ Therefore, gospel communication always implies God's self-revealing self-communication. Furthermore, this self-communication has a clear goal, namely the reconciliation of humanity to God in Christ, as "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Kor 5,19a). This same goal is also the determining factor of present gospel communication as God "entrusted to us the message of reconciliation" and "is making his appeal through us. [...] be reconciled to God!" (2 Kor 5,19b.20b).⁴⁰

Thus, a theory of gospel communication should include reflection on the role of God as communicator in the process of communication and consider gospel communication as bringing about reconciliation between God and mankind. Traditionally, this was expressed in a discussion of concepts such as sin, justification and redemption.⁴¹ However, Grethlein's book unfortunately lacks any noteworthy discussion of these topics.⁴² In the remainder of this article, I will therefore propose two lines of thought that could help to include these aspects in a contextually responsible discussion of gospel communication in the present.

³⁶ Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie* (s. Anm. 2), 146-159; Schweyer, *Kommunikation* (s. Anm. 3), 23-24.

³⁷ Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie* (s. Anm. 2), 528-586.

³⁸ Schweyer, *Kommunikation* (s. Anm. 3), 23.

³⁹ Kellner, *Charisma* (s. Anm. 4), 9.15.

⁴⁰ Eiffler, *Kirche* (s. Anm. 25), 298-299.306; Heinzpeter Hempelmann, *Missionarische Verkündigung als Weg-Weisung. 27 Thesen zur Frage: Was heißt "missionarische Verkündigung"*, in: *Theologische Beiträge* 29 (1998), 126.

⁴¹ Wilfried Härle, *Dogmatik*. 5. Aufl., Berlin 2018, 496-507.

⁴² Stadelmann, *Rezension* (s. Anm. 4), 119.

2. Two proposals for improving the “communication of the gospel”

As we have seen, Grethlein’s valid desire to consider the contextual-dependency of gospel communication has led to a very vague definition of what this gospel communication actually entails and hopes to accomplish. Furthermore, due to the “*offenbarungstheologisches Defizit*” of his work he fails to include God as communicator in the communication of the gospel. However, this divine activity is not only portrayed in the Bible but may also provide a solution to the tension between the contextual-dependency of the gospel and its context transcending distinctiveness. Additionally, a crucial aim of gospel communication in the Bible is the reconciliation between humanity and God in Christ. In Lutheran theology this dimension is taken up in the combination of gospel communication and the communication of the law. If properly contextualized, this concept might provide the “communication of the gospel” with a specific intent and content and thus serve as a distinctively Lutheran specification of Grethlein’s approach.

2.1 Encountering God in the communication of the gospel

Contextualization of the gospel necessarily occurs in the tension between context-sensitivity and content-distinctiveness. While the gospel is indeed only experienced as good news if it answers the specific questions of specific people at a specific time and therefore takes on ever new contextualized forms, it also needs to be characterized by elements that surpass context to still be recognizable as gospel in these diverse forms.⁴³ However, the question of what these distinctive traits are is a subject for debate. As mentioned above, Grethlein’s attempt to locate them in his reference to the Christian “*Grundimpuls*” in the life of Christ was found to be wanting, for it could not sufficiently establish the distinguishable content or intent of gospel communication. Still, his emphasis on not hindering the process of communication by too strict preliminary fixations needs to be taken seriously. How then is it possible on the one hand to consider the situational nature of gospel communication and on the other hand offer a more substantial definition that is able to determine its message and its goal?

⁴³ Jürgen Schuster, *Kontextualisierung des Evangeliums. Grundzüge eines an der Inkarnation Christi orientierten Verständnisses*, in: Hempelmann et al. (Hg.), *Handbuch* (s. Anm. 32), 41–44.46; Engemann, *Kommunikation* (s. Anm. 4), 27.

In my opinion, a possible solution lies in considering the divine self-communication in Jesus Christ and thus in any instance of gospel communication. What transcends cultures and contexts is not a specific set of propositions or formulations, but the personal encounter with the risen Jesus Christ through the gospel.⁴⁴ Thus, understanding Christ as communicating himself in the process of communicating the gospel allows one to do justice to the limitations of culture and context, while at the same time transcending them. Ward describes this "paradox":

Paradox in ecclesiology acknowledges that the gospel the Church is called to proclaim cannot simply be a message or information. The gospel is Jesus Christ, the Light of the World. The message of the Church therefore does not exist separately from the one who is proclaimed. The message is always, and is already, embodied, embodied in the incarnation, but also embodied as Jesus is made present in the life of the Church, through the Holy Spirit. [...] This correspondence to Jesus Christ structures the content of the gospel message, but it is also a continual reminder that ideas alone, whether understood as doctrine or as theology, do not in themselves guarantee "truth," because Jesus is the truth.⁴⁵

Therefore, while Christ transcends the cultural expressions of the gospel, he uses these to convey his presence.⁴⁶ This is actually very close to Grethlein when he says that the "*Zuwendung Gottes zum Menschen [...] bedarf der menschlichen Vermittlung.*"⁴⁷ However, much to my regret he does not further explore this revelatory dimension, possibly because he wants to distance himself from the revelation-centered *Wort-Gottes-Theologie*. But if the "correspondence to Jesus Christ" thus "structures the content of the gospel message", what does this look like?

Ward deals with this issue at length and makes an excellent conversation partner. Just like Grethlein he also tries to refute the notion that the gospel can be defined independently from its culture or context.⁴⁸ According to him this is "illusory", as it would mean "to place doctrine outside of history

⁴⁴ Pete Ward, *Liquid Ecclesiology. The Gospel and the Church*, Leiden 2017, 58.

⁴⁵ Ward, *Liquid* (s. Anm. 41), 56–57.

⁴⁶ Ward, *Liquid* (s. Anm. 41), 42.

⁴⁷ Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie* (s. Anm. 2), 568.

⁴⁸ Ward, *Liquid* (s. Anm. 41), 103.

and its embodiment in the church” and therefore ignore “the role that the Church and tradition have played in the discussion of the reliability of the gospel.”⁴⁹ At the same time, these circumstances do not negate the possibility of there being a core message identifiable as the gospel, for despite the contextual-dependency of gospel communication “Christ comes to the Church and the world in and through cultural forms of expression.”⁵⁰ Therefore, despite the vast differences of these throughout church history and even the world today, crucial aspects of the Christian faith consistently remain in all these contexts.⁵¹

Following the late Andrew Walker, Ward argues that the content of the gospel can be understood across space and time as a “grand narrative”, “expressed in different ways and at different times” but with a common recognizable pattern. This can be summarized under nine headings, which include the eternal triune God’s creation of the world and humanity in his image, the willful rebellion of humanity against God resulting in estrangement of creation from its creator, God’s initiative to overcome this estrangement first through Israel and then through the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, the testimony to Jesus by his church through the Holy Spirit in the communication of the gospel, and the everlasting communion with God when Christ returns in glory.⁵² This grand narrative is not meant to be exhaustive, but to serve as a guideline for gospel-communication in diverse contexts today, for its elements are observable across space and time as “the same story of Jesus Christ.”⁵³ Nevertheless, Walker does not claim “any particular doctrinal precedence” for his grand narrative or that these nine headings are to be featured in every instance of gospel communication. Instead, its point is to highlight the enduring content of the story of Jesus Christ across centuries. As such, it does not have a supra-cultural core, but a recognizable message embedded in its many cultural expressions. Therefore, even today the stories of Christ recorded in Scripture must be retold in context-appropriate forms, in which people encounter God through the work of the Holy Spirit so that they may believe.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Ward, *Liquid* (s. Anm. 41), 86.

⁵⁰ Ward, *Liquid* (s. Anm. 41), 81.

⁵¹ Ward, *Liquid* (s. Anm. 41), 90.

⁵² Ward, *Liquid* (s. Anm. 41), 91–92.

⁵³ Ward, *Liquid* (s. Anm. 41), 92–93.

⁵⁴ Ward, *Liquid* (s. Anm. 41), 93.186; Schuster, *Kontextualisierung* (s. Anm. 40), 50.

However, in my opinion Ward's remarks are ultimately still not able to serve as an adequate criterion for gospel communication. While they certainly orientate gospel communication far more specifically than Grethlein's limited "christlicher Grundimpuls" and counter the "offenbarungstheologisches Defizit" by emphasizing the personal encounter with the risen Christ within finite cultural expressions, they still fail to provide it with sufficient direction of content. For if the grand narrative cannot "claim any doctrinal precedence"⁵⁵ according to what criteria can gospel communication be distinguished from other forms of communication? If Grethlein's approach could not sufficiently answer the question "was überhaupt kommuniziert werden soll"⁵⁶, does that critique not also apply to Walkers grand narrative? For the latter only presents "a roughly consistent Christian narrative"⁵⁷ across space and time but cannot offer a more concrete criterion for gospel communication. This becomes even more obvious when Ward correctly states that "the dynamic that operates between culture and gospel leads to an inevitable problem with appropriate and inappropriate expression. [...] The gospel can be mis-spoken."⁵⁸ However, what exactly is the standard that allows us to determine which instances of gospel communication are well-spoken and which are mis-spoken? How might we assess whether individual retellings of the stories of Christ in context-appropriate forms are valid?

Ward does not offer any more specifications regarding the enduring content of gospel communication because he wants to avoid impoverishing the richness of the gospel by reducing and simplifying it to communicable forms. Instead, he repeatedly remarks "that the 'gospel' is Jesus Christ in all his mystery and visibility."⁵⁹ However, while we certainly need to be aware that attempts to communicate the gospel may impoverish its message, that does not necessarily follow from providing gospel communication with a more detailed direction of content. In my opinion, the key is again found in focusing on God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ.

God revealed himself first and foremost in Jesus Christ and subsequently in the witness to him by the apostles, as recorded for us in scripture (Joh 17,6–8). Therefore, it is not a grand narrative observable in church practice across

⁵⁵ Ward, *Liquid* (s. Anm. 41), 93.

⁵⁶ Eißler, *Kirche* (s. Anm. 25), 295.

⁵⁷ Ward, *Liquid* (s. Anm. 41), 93.

⁵⁸ Ward, *Liquid* (s. Anm. 41), 93.

⁵⁹ Ward, *Liquid* (s. Anm. 41), 192.

space and time as a “roughly consistent Christian narrative” that provides the standard for any contextualized form of gospel communication, but the gospel revealed and proclaimed by Jesus Christ and subsequently by his apostles in their testimony about him. According to the apostle Paul, this “gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you” includes in shortened form “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve” (1 Kor 15,1–4). As early as in the epistle to the Galatians this gospel provides the standard for distinguishing the “gospel of Christ” from “a different gospel” (Gal 1,6–7). Thus, as Grethlein places himself and his practical theology in the German Lutheran tradition, it seems only fitting to draw on the Lutheran principle of “*sola scriptura*” and establish this primary biblical gospel of Christ as the measuring stick for any present form of gospel communication.⁶⁰ In doing so, this gospel must always be contextualized in culturally appropriate forms as it is already evident in the apostolic ministry (1 Kor 9,20–23) but in its richness must not be confused with these simplified communicable forms. However, as the gospel is communicated in accordance with the apostolic gospel of Christ in contextually appropriate ways, practical theology must reckon that God himself communicates himself within and through these human efforts.

Recently, Kellner elaborated this crucial perspective in his discussion of the charismas. He argues that practical theology must always integrate human and divine praxis but mourns that this dimension is severely underdeveloped in many current practical theological proposals, including Grethlein’s.⁶¹ As we have seen, Grethlein conceives gospel communication in three modes: (1) teaching and learning, (2) communal celebrations and (3) helping for living, which respectively constitute communication about, with and from God.⁶² However, Kellner considers these “christologisch und pneumatologisch unterbestimmt.”⁶³ Neither the risen Christ nor the Holy Spirit play

⁶⁰ Again, this is especially the case, as Grethlein bemoans the fact that the role of scripture has been neglected in current practical theology and seeks to inquire after biblical insights, Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie* (s. Anm. 2), 160.

⁶¹ Kellner, *Charisma* (s. Anm. 4), 9–15.

⁶² Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie* (s. Anm. 2), 528–586.

⁶³ Kellner, *Charisma* (s. Anm. 4), 15.

any significant role in the communication of the gospel. Thus, the emphasis lies almost exclusively on the human agents of communication. I have argued that this one-sided perspective marks one of the biggest weaknesses of Grethlein's proposal and must be supplemented by a discussion of God as self-revealingly communicating himself through human communication of the gospel. To that end, human and divine praxis need to be integrated in Grethlein's three modes of gospel communication.

Firstly, teaching and learning could be understood as communication about God, *in which God himself speaks*. Grethlein's insights about the human side of narrating, talking and preaching must be supplemented by a theological discussion of how God reveals himself through his Holy Spirit in human speech. For the Bible defines human communication of the gospel as "the word of God, which is at work in you believers" (1 Thess 2,13).⁶⁴ Secondly, communal celebrations might be understood as communication with God, *in which God himself is encountered*. Again, Grethlein's remarks on the human side of prayer, singing and communion in and outside of the worship service are helpful but not sufficient.⁶⁵ After all, church services are celebrated in the expectance that the risen Christ is present (Mt 18,20) and that they constitute a dialogue between the divine katabasis and the human anabasis, through which God in the Holy Spirit is "building up the church" (1 Kor 12,6; 14,12). Thirdly, helping for living must be understood as communication from God, *in which God himself acts*. It is here that Grethlein is most aware of the necessity of integrating human and divine praxis when he states that "die Zuwendung Gottes zum Menschen [...] bedarf der menschlichen Vermittlung."⁶⁶ This perspective is vital but must be enriched by a reflection on the biblical testimony that God not only calls the church to live a life of love and service, but also actively empowers us to do so by equipping us "with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight" (Hebr 13,21).

Naturally, these short remarks are not comprehensive. My intent is to merely show how Grethlein's three modes of gospel communication might be

⁶⁴ See also Joh 14,26; 16,13; 1 Kor 2,4.13; 12,4–11; Kol 1,28–29; 1 Petr 4,11.

⁶⁵ Although Grethlein repeatedly refers to "Gemeinschaft mit Gott" as the goal of this mode of gospel communication, he still mostly focuses on human forms of communication. The Holy Spirit, who enables this communion with God, is not considered. Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie* (s. Anm. 2), 544.546.550.552.555.556.565

⁶⁶ Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie* (s. Anm. 2), 568.

supplemented with a divine communicative dimension, in which human and divine communication praxis are integrated. Thereunto, a deepening practical theological discussion of the charisms seems promising as it is presented by Kellner in his article.⁶⁷

2.2 Orienting the communication of the gospel with the communication of the law

As the gospel of Christ is communicated in contexts that are constantly changing, some of its crucial elements must not be left out. These include an account of the rebellion of humanity against God and God's overcoming of the subsequent estrangement through Christ's saving work, to which the church bears witness in order to bring people into communion with God. In Lutheran theology, in whose tradition Grethlein aims to locate his "Praktische Theologie", this testimony always includes the communication of the law as well as the communication of the gospel, both being intricately interwoven. In so doing, the law marks the background against which the liberating power of the gospel takes shape and thus clarifies the intent of its communication.⁶⁸ Therefore, the communication of the law may pose a distinctively Lutheran correction to Grethlein, who omits this topic altogether and leaves the question unanswered "worauf Kommunikation des Evangeliums eigentlich hinauslaufen sollte."⁶⁹

In the understanding of the reformation, the main purpose of the law is to expose the estrangement of humankind from God, which manifests itself in the unconquerable power of sin in one's life, in order to open that person up to the divine reconciliation freely offered in the gospel of Christ.⁷⁰ As such, the intention of gospel communication aided by the communication of the law may be stated more precisely as overcoming the estrangement and separation of humanity from God, individually appropriated by a response of faith to the

⁶⁷ Kellner, *Charisma* (s. Anm. 4).

⁶⁸ Irene Dingel (Hg.), *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche*, Göttingen 2014, 1248–1250; Härle, *Dogmatik* (s. Anm. 39), 505–507; Reiner Preul, "Du sollst Evangelium predigen" / "nihil nisi Christus praedicandus" – Gesetz und Evangelium in der Predigt, in: Ulrich Heckel et al. (Hg.), *Luther heute. Ausstrahlungen der Wittenberger Reformation*, Tübingen 2017, 216–217.

⁶⁹ Domsgen, *Kommunikation* (s. Anm. 25), 80.

⁷⁰ Dingel, *Bekenntnisschriften* (s. Anm. 53), 1248–1250; Härle, *Dogmatik* (s. Anm. 39), 159.

testimony of the gospel.⁷¹ This perspective is missing entirely in Grethlein's work. Although he considers the forgiveness of sins as a vital element of Christ's ministry and the praxis of the early church, one looks in vain for a discussion of how this dimension might be included in current Christian practice.⁷² At the same time, he holds that gospel communication is characterized by an "inklusive, grundsätzlich alle Menschen in die Gemeinschaft mit Gott integrierenden Impuls."⁷³ It is certainly true that in the communication of the gospel all are invited into communion with God. However, communion with God cannot be offered without discussing the necessity for repentance. After all, the elementary message of Christ's gospel communication was "repent and believe in the gospel" (Mk 1,15). Because Grethlein's communication of the gospel lacks the vital connection of law and gospel, he offers gospel without law, communion with God without repentance, Christ's earthly ministry without his atoning death and conquering resurrection. Therefore, this dialectical perspective of law and gospel has to be integrated into his approach.⁷⁴

Naturally, the Lutheran understanding of law and gospel also stems from a specific context and thus has to be contextualized. However, as already established, any such attempt has to consider both the situatedness of gospel-communication as well as its divine self-communicative aspect within its cultural expressions. Although Engemann employs the communication of the law as indispensable in his homiletics, his purely anthropological interpretation therefore falls short, as he denies any theological understanding of sin as estrangement from God and reduces it to human experiences of bondage.⁷⁵ Instead, gospel communication must retain a theological understanding of God's self-revelation in Christ with the goal to bring about reconciliation. Accordingly, its intent must be formulated much more specifically than sim-

⁷¹ Härle, *Dogmatik* (s. Anm. 39), 499.512–517; Hempelmann, *Missionarische Verkündigung* (s. Anm. 38), 126–128.137; Preul, *Evangelium predigen* (s. Anm. 53), 217–220.

⁷² Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie* (s. Anm. 2), 167–169.287.304.310.312.

⁷³ Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie* (s. Anm. 2), 171–172.

⁷⁴ A promising attempt to do so is made by Meyer-Blanck regarding gospel communication in pastoral care. He remarks that the dialectic relationship of law and gospel must be included in the communication of the gospel in pastoral care to do justice both to God's love of humanity and his judgement of sin and evil. Michael Meyer-Blanck, *Theologische Implikationen der Seelsorge*, in: Wilfried Engemann (Hg.), *Handbuch der Seelsorge. Grundlagen und Profile*, 3. Aufl. Leipzig 2016, 40–55.

⁷⁵ Wilfried Engemann, *Einführung in die Homiletik*. 3. Aufl., Tübingen 2020, 526.540.562–563.

ply as “neues Verständnis des alltäglichen Lebens”⁷⁶ oder “dass Menschen als Menschen zum Vorschein kommen.”⁷⁷ Rather it has to be understood as a new perspective on one’s life resulting from a restored relationship to God due to the reconciling work of Christ personally received through faith.

While in Lutheran theology this was traditionally communicated by the promise of grace against the backdrop of the unfulfilled demands of the law, today this might not be the most context-sensitive approach, as in the Western European context the divine commandments no longer serve as authoritative standards for the conduct of life.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, the Lutheran combination of law and gospel serves as reminder that the gospel always serves as liberating answer to specific problems and further draws its liberating power from the reality of the restored community with God through Christ. In Western Europe, for example, this could be contextualized by offering the unconditional love of Christ as a solid foundation for identity in light of the pressure to achieve and to fulfil oneself.⁷⁹ As in any context, the goal has to be to communicate the gospel in such a way that it gives concrete and substantive answers to the deepest questions people have. At the same time, it cannot be ignored that the central theme is the reconciliation between God and mankind in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To that end, the concept of the dialectic relationship of law and gospel might be promising as in these categories

lassen sich nämlich einerseits alle Dimensionen menschlicher Existenz erfassen und homiletisch veranschaulichen, und zugleich kann das menschliche Leben in seiner spezifischen Dramatik [...] auf das ganze Wirken des dreieinigen Gottes bezogen werden.⁸⁰

Returning to Grethlein’s three modes of gospel communication we might then follow that the reconciliation of God and man in Christ’s life, death and

⁷⁶ Grethlein, *Praktische Theologie* (s. Anm. 2), 587.

⁷⁷ Engemann, *Kommunikation* (s. Anm. 4), 28.

⁷⁸ Hempelmann, *Missionarische Verkündigung* (s. Anm. 38), 136; Preul, *Evangelium predigen* (s. Anm. 53), 222–223.227.

⁷⁹ Clausen, *Das Evangelium* (s. Anm. 32), 82–83; Hempelmann, *Missionarische Verkündigung* (s. Anm. 38), 136; Preul, *Evangelium predigen* (s. Anm. 53), 229.

⁸⁰ Preul, *Evangelium predigen* (s. Anm. 53), 226.

resurrection should be incorporated into every mode of gospel communication. Firstly, teaching and learning might be understood as communication about God, in which God himself speaks *in order to call humanity away from sin and invite them to be reconciled to him through Christ*. Secondly, communal celebrations may be understood as communication with God, in which God himself is encountered *as both the holy and righteous judge and the humble and gracious savior*. Thirdly, helping for living could be understood as communication from God, in which God himself acts *to lovingly expose and transform the destructive effects of sin in our lives and in this world*. In doing so, the three modes of gospel communication overlap and complement each other and are used both individually and as a whole by God to communicate himself. Understood in that way, gospel communication provides a rich understanding of Christian evangelism that occurs in the interplay of “worship (leiturgia) [...] witness (martyria), service (diakonia), and fellowship (koinonia)” and “invite[s] others to share in the fullness of life Jesus came to bring.”⁸¹

While I believe that the communication of the law provides gospel communication with a much needed clarification of its intent and content, I also realize that my proposal might no longer be as broadly applicable as Grethlein’s concept that focuses exclusively on the communication of the gospel. This broad applicability is one of its major strengths and allows him to consider a wide variety of social forms, activities and methods in which gospel communication occurs. However, as we have seen this broad applicability to a certain degree stems from an insubstantial definition of content, which illegitimately allows a wide variety of communicative praxis to pass as communication of the gospel.⁸² I have proposed to counter this vagueness by suggesting that the gospel needs to be communicated in light of the law. Consequently, gospel communication is more clearly defined but may no longer be as broadly applicable. Does that constitute a weakness? Possibly. It might show that especially my second proposal is not comprehensive enough to in-

⁸¹ Jooseop Keum (Hg.), *Together Towards Life. Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes – with a Practical Guide*, Genf, 2013, §67.85.

⁸² Besides the already mentioned anthropocentric examples see also Schmidt-Leukel, who advocates for a pluralistic understanding of the gospel. Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Kommunikation des Evangeliums in der interreligiösen Begegnung. Anmerkungen zu Christian Grethleins kommunikationstheoretischer Theologie aus religionstheologisch pluralistischer Perspektive*, in: Domsen/Schröder (Hg.), *Kommunikation* (s. Anm. 1), 161–184.

clude all domains of gospel communication. However, it might also constitute a major strength, as it could help to identify some instances of gospel communication as inappropriate and misspoken expressions. This may be because of their disregard of the inherent divine self-communication or their insufficient consideration of the reconciliation between God and man through Christ's life, death and resurrection.

3. Conclusion

In this article I have discussed Christian Grethlein's "Praktische Theologie", in which he reframed the discipline as the theory of the communication of the gospel in the present. While his work offers many important insights for contemporary practical theology, a major weakness is his insufficient definition of the content and intent of gospel communication. This results from his emphasis on concrete contexts and situations in which the gospel is communicated. According to him this opposes substantial preliminary fixations. However, I have tried to show that a theological interpretation of communication, which incorporates God as self-revealingly communicating himself in Jesus Christ into all modes of gospel communication, might provide a remedy for this conflict between its context-dependency and content-distinctiveness. The main intent of this divine self-communication is the reconciliation between God and mankind, as is evident in the ministries of Christ and his apostles. Their teaching provides the standard for every subsequent form of gospel communication. Thus, as God communicates himself through culturally diverse human forms of gospel communication, the goal of reconciling God and world should define the process of communication. Moreover, since Grethlein understands his practical theology as distinctly Lutheran, I further discussed the concept of the dialectic relatedness of law and gospel to express this intent of gospel communication in a Lutheran way. When the gospel is communicated in combination with the law in contextually appropriate forms, people encounter God and experience the reconciling power of the gospel in their lives through a restored sense of community with him.

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Abstract

Recently, Christian Grethlein reimagined practical theology as a “theory of the communication of the gospel.” While his approach yields important insights, it also has several weaknesses. This article discusses two of them, namely his insufficient definition of the content and intent of gospel communication as well as his theological underestimation of the concept of communication. I suggest that considering God as communicator in gospel communication may aid in overcoming the tension between its context-dependency and content-distinctiveness. Moreover, I employ the Lutheran dialectic of law and gospel to specify gospel communication with regard to its intent.