From both historical and theological perspectives, preaching was central to the Lutheran Reformation and the churches that followed Luther’s call for reform. To be sure, Mark Edwards correctly observes that print enabled Luther’s message to command attention across Germany and Europe more quickly than anyone’s ideas had been propagated previously. \(^1\) Preachers and many lay people often got knowledge of that message through books and tracts. However, Edwards also calls the Reformation “an oral event”. \(^2\) Robert Scribner labeled the sermon “the formal means of communication” of Reformation thought and practice and the Reformation itself “first and foremost a powerful preaching revival”. \(^3\) Often (in German lands, at least) a preacher introduced his reformatory insights in some form or other before Luther’s writings arrived in a place. \(^4\)

Throughout the 17th-century German culture remained primarily oral even though the printing press altered public life, particularly intellectual discourse, profoundly. This fact alone makes the study of preaching critical for a proper assessment of Lutheran ecclesiastical culture not only in the earliest years of Luther’s reform but throughout the entire early modern period. The dogmatic works of the 17th century have commanded disproportionate attention from nineteenth and twentieth scholars of the period; preaching, however, stood at the heart of Lutheran parish practice. The culture of Lutheran lands and

\(^1\) Mark U. Edwards, Jr., Printing, Propaganda, and Martin Luther (Berkeley, 1994), pp. 172, 7.
\(^2\) Ibid., pp. 37, 11.
\(^4\) This was not everywhere the case; see David P. Daniel, “Publishing the Reformation in Habsburg Hungary,” in Habent sua fata libelli. Books Have their Own Destiny. Essays in honor of Robert V. Schnucker, ed. Robin B. Barnes et al. (Kirksville MO, 1998), pp. 47–60.
particularly their ecclesiastical sub-culture in wake of the Wittenberg Reformation cannot be understood apart from the sermon, one of the chief media that addressed the consciousness of the common people and their leaders. Study of sermons and preaching provides critical insight into how the teachings of the Lutheran reformation were transmitted to all social classes and how the faith of the people, as the heart of their understanding of reality, took form in this period. Therefore, proper estimate of post-Reformation Lutheran church life depends on more research into Lutheran preaching between 1550 and 1675, a field that only recently has elicited more intensive and extensive study.

At the heart of Luther’s reordering of ecclesiastical life and his perception of how God works in his world stood the “living voice of the gospel,” the orally-transmitted word. Theologically, Luther believed, in the words of the apostle Paul, that “faith comes from hearing” God’s Word, specifically the gospel that bestows forgiveness of sins, life and salvation on its hearers (Rom. 10:17). For Luther, God the Holy Spirit used the sermon to convict the hearer of sin through the preaching of God’s requirements for human performance and the human being’s relationship with him (labeled “law” in Luther’s hermeneutic); the Holy Spirit then gives the hearer faith in the promise of forgiveness and confers a new identity upon the sinner, child of God (“gospel” in Luther’s technical terms). This takes place through the presentation of God’s message in oral, written, and sacramental forms of his Word. Preaching did not simply describe God’s will or exhort; rather, the preacher’s voice conveyed the voice of God, calling to the sinner, admonishing her to lead a God-pleasing life, chastening her and granting her forgiveness and new life.

Lecturing to his students on Genesis 1 in 1535, Luther drew a parallel between God’s creative Word in that chapter and his speaking through his people in the everyday life of the Christian congregation. Sin had brought chaos and emptiness, corresponding to what Genesis 1:2 describes, into human life. Out of that “nothingness” God spoke at the beginning, bringing all reality into being. In the “nothingness of sin” God speaks his word, based on Christ’s death and resurrection, and through it accomplishes a new creation (2 Cor. 4:6). Turning wicked