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How the Gospel Works

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How the Gospel Works

Richard R. Caemmerer Sr.

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Can anything good come out of debate and controversy in the church?

Our adversaries . . . rejoice over the the schisms which have occurred among us, in the unchristian but futile hope that these disagreements will ultimately lead to the ruin of the pure doctrine. The weak in faith, on the other hand, will be scandalized; some will doubt if the pure doctrine can coexist among us with such divisions, while others will not know which of the contending parties they should support.¹

In the long plan of God we can imagine one good issue emerging from this debate. That is that the meaning of the Gospel becomes clearer and its preaching to the church and the world more apt and timely.

Partisans are apt to assert that their opponents are misrepresenting or damaging the Gospel. It is important to trace the process by which differences in accent and point of view may arise. It may serve Christian harmony to help them realize that they are closer to each other than they know.

Traditionally, Lutheran dogmatics has operated with the subject of the Gospel in two separate locations. One is in the Prolegomena, the study of the Bible as the source of basic materials.² The other is in the applying

of the saving work of Christ, the Means of Grace.³

I. THE GOSPEL AS AN ELEMENT OF SCRIPTURE

When the Scriptures refer to themselves, they are remarkably explicit in their references to the Gospel.

From childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:15-17)

You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to Me. (John 5:39)

Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. (Rom. 15:4)

In the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Melancthon views the Gospel as an element of Scripture:

All Scripture should be divided into these two chief doctrines, the law and the promises. In some places it presents the law. In others it presents the promise of Christ; this it does either when it promises that the Messiah will come and promises forgiveness of sins, justification, and eternal life for his sake, or when, in the New Testament, the Christ who came promises forgiveness of sins, justification, and eternal life.⁴

¹ Formula of Concord, Sol. Decl., Intro. 7-8 (*Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert and others [Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959], p. 502).

² For example, Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950 [translation of *Christliche Dogmatik*, 1924]), pp. 313-16.

³ For example, Pieper, III (1953/1920), pp. 104-252.

⁴ Article IV, 5, p. 108.

As the theologian identifies and organizes the components of Scripture as Law or Gospel, he performs, literally, a "prior" task. The pastor analyzes his text and supporting passages to detect their contributions for next Sunday's sermon. The dogmatician explores Biblical references to align them under the headings of his theological *loci* for the sake of analysis, articulation, and teaching.

These operations are important and should be derogated in no way. We observe them at this point to note that this process, so far, associates "Gospel" in the user's mind with passages of Scripture.

The "Gospel passages" will be chiefly Christology. The user will esteem these passages as more important than the ones reflecting the Law, because they describe the way to salvation. But the passages concerning the Law will also be important, because they are given by God.

If there is a pitfall in this procedure—and there need not be—it is that the "truth," or the vitality and significance, of the Gospel derives from its being verifiable by quotations from Scripture. This appears to be the point at which antagonists in the current discussion understand each other with most difficulty.

The process of abstracting and classifying Biblical truth is a respectable and helpful one. It remains for the user to be realistic as to the goals for which he pursues the process: to confront, systematize, and teach Biblical truth, the truth of Law and Gospel. In that process he may indeed be facilitating use for the profit and edification that the Scriptures offer. But a primary question remains: how does that edification, that contribution to faith and life, take place?

If the user of the Scriptures is viewing them as the source of his insight and his teaching, splendid. If the user now assumes that his faith derives

from the divine origin and inspiration of his Biblical data, he is in trouble. He is apt to permit that deduction, since he is engaged in the process of assembling and interpreting passages from the Scriptures. As a Christian man and servant of the church, he is imbued with personal faith and with respect for the Biblical word that he handles. He is apt, however, to identify "faith" with acceptance of truth, and to advocate acceptance of his teaching because it is Biblical. In that process "faith" has become *fides quae creditur*, the subject-matter of believing. But *fides qua creditur*, the faith which takes hold of God as Father for the sake of the redeeming work of His Son, is worked by God as a gift of the Gospel. Instructive is Franz Pieper's skirting of this issue by distinguishing "authority" and "efficacy" of the Scriptures, and assigning their power for faith to Law and Gospel.⁵

Also the Law, as assembled from relevant Scripture passages, has authority; it is the revelation of God through inspired writers. In the Lutheran context there appears to be no temptation to assume that, therefore, the law has the power to achieve conformity to its statutes and obedience to God in the way that God desires. One handicap under which the passages of the Law operate may be that they are simply being viewed as an exercise in Biblical theology. But the major one is that, in the plan of God, the purpose of the Law is to show the need and make way for the power of the Gospel.

Primary, therefore, in any operation with the Bible or with Biblical data is the intention with which the theologian works for himself and for the users of his material. If his intention is to organize and set forth Biblical material, that is a useful "prior" objective. If his intention and objective is to bring the life of God in Christ

⁵ Cf. 2 above.

into the heart and mind of his user and himself, then he had better be sure what he is handling. For the Gospel is indeed the word of Christ; but it is by that account not simply the place where Christ is found.

II. THE GOSPEL THE MESSAGE FOR SALVATION

Very well, what is more to the Gospel than the *locus de Christo*? Why argue about it, since you can't even discuss the subject without the resources of Scripture?

Instructive is Melancthon's use of *promissio* where we might have expected *evangelium*.⁶ He was arguing justification as the act of God on the basis of the Gospel rather than the Law. *Promissio* helps him to include the promise of both Old and New Testaments. But more: it describes a proffering, handing from one person and from Christ to other persons. The Scriptures are concerned that the reader not simply be reminded of a series of abstractions but that he reach out and take the gift of salvation from Jesus Christ. The words for Gospel are not words about writing, but about speech—good news, proclamation. (1 Cor. 15:1; Luke 24:47)

Even the reader of Scripture is to be thinking not just of type or the method of analysis and synthesis of his teacher; but as he reads the Law he is to be thinking of God the law-giver; as he reads the Gospel, he is to be thinking of the Father who has redeemed the world through His Son Jesus Christ. Luther would say about faith that it is not simply the action of believing that is important, but He whom the action of believing grasps. So the words of Law or Gospel in themselves are not the whole significance, but He who is speaking through them—God demanding or judging, God saving and forgiving.

Likewise the term *promissio* reminds us that the Gospel is not simply an aggregate of facts about the redemptive activity of God in Christ, which has achieved its goal when the reader is able to remember it. But the Gospel is a reaching out to people with the help of God in Christ. This reaching out transcends time and space. It began in the era of the Old Testament and bade people look for the coming of the Promised One. It reaches out to the reader today and bids him continue in faith until the final consummation of his hope at the coming of Christ to judgment. The objective of the Gospel is that the reader accept the love of God for Christ's sake. The reader is not asked, or the listener is not simply invited, to believe that the Gospel is true. But the word of the Gospel moves the heart to come to faith and continue in faith, to stir in love for God and for fellowman.

But that means that the Gospel is not only for readers, and the Gospel reaches men not only through type. The Scriptures describe the Gospel as a thing that is constantly being spoken, not simply in contradiction to reading, but with the accent on applying, conveying. Franz Pieper⁷ quotes 1 Cor. 2:6 ff.:

Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who

⁷ III, 232. Cf. also Luke 24:47, the verbal action "preach through all the world." Pieper on the many ways by which the Gospel is mediated: III, 106.

⁶ Cf. 4 above.

love him," God has revealed to us through the Spirit. . . . No one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. . . . We impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit.

The insertion of the concept of the Holy Spirit may at first sight seem to be a plea for subjectivity. But it is important not to be lost in labels. If by subjectivity we imply that there is no certain foundation for knowledge and faith in the Holy Spirit, we obviously err. The eternal God and the atoning Christ to whom the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts (John 14:26; 16:13) are the foundation of our faith. But if by subjectivity we mean that the message and fact of the Gospel is altogether for the person, we are right. "I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith" (Rom. 1:16). Just as God's redeeming the world to Himself through Jesus Christ is altogether for people, so the Word by which this fact arrives at people is altogether for people.

The means through which the Spirit conveys the Gospel to individuals are manifold. But basically they are handled by people, the members of the holy Christian church.

If any one is in Christ, he is a new creature, the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor. 5:17-21)

God puts His regenerated human beings into the process of transmitting the saving Word by witness.

Thus it is written that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and [more properly: to] forgiveness of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I send the promise of the Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high. (Luke 24:46-49)

The Gospel can be read in a book that was printed by godless craftsmen or washed up on the shore after a shipwreck. It can be mouthed by a hypocritical preacher. But in the exact intention of Jesus Christ Himself it is the testimony of faith and love of a Christian who knows that he has been redeemed by Christ the crucified and wants the next man to share in his life.

The label for the agencies that God's people employ for conveying the Gospel is the Means of Grace.

To obtain such [justifying] faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel. And the Gospel teaches that we have a gracious God, not by our own merits but by the merit of Christ, when we believe this.⁸

The efficacious or operative power of the means of grace consists in this that through them the Holy Spirit works and strengthens faith, faith in the very forgiveness, God's love and grace, which these means declare and reveal.⁹

The means of grace are therefore not only the channel for supplying the information or doctrine of grace,

⁸ Augsburg Confession, Article V, 1-3 (German text), p. 31.

⁹ Pieper, III, 103.

propaganda for Christology, but they also transmit the grace itself. The Bible is certainly one of the many devices by which grace arrives at the client. But the users have to be open to that purpose as they assign it for reading or listening and as they hear, or as they employ, any other vehicle of grace.

Part of the procedure by which the listener looks to the message of the Gospel for its purpose not simply of information but of forgiveness and rescue is that he has been hearing the judgment of God's law upon himself.

Believers, furthermore, require the teaching of the law so that they will not be thrown back on their own holiness and piety and under the pretext of the Holy Spirit's guidance set up a self-elected service of God without his Word and command (Deut. 12:18, 28, 32). . . Otherwise they can easily imagine that their works and life are perfectly pure and holy. But the law of God prescribes good works for faith in such a way that, as in a mirror, it shows and indicates to them that in this life our good works are imperfect and impure, so that we must say with St. Paul, "I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted" (1 Cor. 4:4).¹⁰

As the Christian, whether as a layman or a professional preacher, witnesses the Gospel to another person, the effect on the other person of his service is not to be, "Look how I can recite, preach, read, discuss," nor, "Look how effectively, succinctly, ably, I can put together Biblical teaching." But the effect is to be, "Look what has happened to me through the grace of God in Jesus Christ. This is what I hope will happen to you, let me help you think about Him."

The Bible is one of the ways by which the Gospel can arrive at its

destination. But the user has to be helped properly to distinguish Law from Gospel, as we Lutherans use these terms. By itself the Law kills; but the Spirit gives life through the word of Christ's redeeming work. The Bible is a record of how the Gospel arrived at its destination in the past. But it is also a record of the intention of God that it be for all men. Therefore the Gospel is always good news, not in the sense that it is happening or being heard for the first time, but in the sense that it is the proclamation that in the mind of God has to be made to men now.

The Bible has itself to be understood in the light of this intention of God, in the light of the Gospel.

To this day, when they [the Israelites] read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ it is taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their minds; but when a man turns to the Lord the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. (2 Cor. 3:14-17)

Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear My word. (John 8:43)

The Gospel is the message of the goodness of God, His grace, forgiveness, kindness. This kindness is that God gives an insight into Himself by holding before mankind, and before a reader or a hearer at this moment, His action to the world in Jesus Christ. He holds before us an action that is complete, wholly accomplished on the cross, and attested by His raising Christ from the dead.

[Abraham's] faith was "reckoned to him as righteousness." But the words "it was reckoned to him" were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him that raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification. (Rom. 4:22-25)

¹⁰ Solid Declaration, VI, 20-21, p. 567.

III. THE GOSPEL IN SCRIPTURE—THE GOSPEL AS GOSPEL

Not only—

1. A doctrine assembled from the Bible for teaching.
2. What the Gospel is.
3. One locus of doctrine among many.
4. The chief Scripture among other inspired ones.
5. A description of past fact assembled from the Bible.
6. A datum of Scripture to be interpreted by Biblical exegesis.
7. A teaching of Jesus.
8. One *differentia* of which Scripture is the *genus*.
9. That which the believer should accept by faith.
10. One of the means of grace.

But particularly—

- The message conveyed by many means for saving mankind from ultimate death.
- The Gospel at work.
- The central Word of God for faith.
- The grace of God in Christ directed to the individual.
- The application of the saving work of Christ to the hearer now.
- The gift of God to the interpreter by which he understands all the Bible.
- The redeeming Jesus reaching the world.
- The *genus* of the grace of God in Christ transmitted through many means.
- That which moves the hearer to grasp God's mercy by faith.
- The grace of God in Christ coming to man through various means.

How important that theologians and Christians everywhere bring the Gospel all the way home to each other, and to themselves first of all.

The law indeed tells us that it is God's will and command that we should walk in the new life, but it does not give the power and ability to begin it or to do it. It is the Holy Spirit, who is not given and received through the law but through the preaching of the Gospel (Gal. 3:2, 14), who renews the heart. . . . As often as Christians trip, they are rebuked through the Spirit of God out of the law. But the same Spirit raises them up again and comforts them with the preaching of the holy Gospel.¹¹

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¹¹ *Ibid.*, pars. 11, 14, pp. 565, 566.