

The Gospel

Strictly speaking there is really only one Means of Grace, and that is the Gospel (or Good News). This Gospel then takes different forms. It comes to us as the spoken and written Word, and in a different form, as the signed or sealed Word in the Sacraments. The Gospel itself remains primary. It is, as Luther often points out, the Word which gives substance and meaning to the Sacraments.

This Word of the Gospel, however, alone and of itself, that is, apart from any Sacraments, carries all spiritual power, and imparts the Holy Spirit, forgiveness, and all other blessings. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians that he had been sent to them not to baptise, but to preach the Gospel (his assistants no doubt performed the Baptisms), and that he had personally baptised no one but Crispus and Gaius, and the household of Stephanus (1 Corinthians 1:14-17). Yet the same Apostle calls himself the spiritual father of the Corinthians when he writes, "*I have become your father through the Gospel*" (4:15). That Gospel "*is the power of God to save everyone who believes it*" (Romans 1:16).

This Gospel must be clearly distinguished from the Law. Both Law and Gospel must be constantly applied to us, lest we sink either into smug pride and presumption or into despair and hopelessness. Anyone who has studied Dr. C.F.W. Walther's great classic *Law and Gospel* (ask pastor for a copy!) - which cannot be recommended highly enough - will know that the proper distinction and application of Law and Gospel is not something which is easily mastered in five minutes. It is a Spirit-taught art, learnt in the hard school of prayer, study, and spiritual afflictions, and requires a lifelong application.

If we start neglecting the Law, the Gospel soon disappears too! Where the dreadful diagnosis is forgotten, even the sweetest medicine soon falls into disuse. And the Gospel, so precious to tortured consciences, parched for the waters of divine mercy and forgiveness, must ever be used to comfort the penitent - but never to make the impenitent comfortable in their impenitence! That would be casting pearls before swine (Matthew 7:6). Those who walk proudly and securely, satisfied with themselves and their spiritual condition, and do not with fear and trembling seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matthew 6:33), must be clearly told that they are not Christians but unbelievers and hypocrites, who have no part in the Kingdom of Christ. "Salvation by grace alone through faith alone" must never become a lazy man's pillow, upon which to sit and relax in false comfort and security! Faith alone saves, indeed, *but saving faith is never alone!* Even the thief on the cross, though converted only moments before his death, was full of holy zeal, confession, and thus good works, from the moment of his conversion! It is unfortunate today that too many Lutherans show by their lukewarm, spiritually sloppy and careless way of life that they have a false and twisted trust in "salvation by grace alone," thus turning God's gracious life-giving offer into a "*an aroma from death leading to death*" (2 Corinthians 2:16) for themselves! "*Whoever does not carry his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple*" (Luke 14:27) Jesus says.

The Gospel is doctrine. This may seem terribly obvious to us, but sadly, it is almost universally denied today. While orthodox, Biblical theology, together with our Lutheran Confessions, freely speaks of the "doctrine of the Gospel," modern Liberal theology, having rejected the authority of Holy Scripture, knows no such things as definite, God-given doctrine, but only human "interpretations," opinions, and the like. The "Gospel" therefore is regarded as somehow floating above and beyond all these more or less mistaken and sinful "interpretations." This irrational mysticism, (though it is really the unbelief and scepticism of Satan who asked, "*Has God really said?*" (Genesis 3:1) and Pontius Pilate, who asked "*What is truth?*" (John 18:38)), often likes to cover its nakedness with Biblical-sounding expressions and phrases. But it is all sham and hypocrisy. The fact is that the Saviour commanded His Church to teach *definite* doctrine, namely, "*Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations by baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and by teaching them to keep all that I have commanded you!*" (Matthew 28:19-20), not to fuss endlessly about human "insights," and the like. And He promised His truth to His Church, "*If you remain in My Word, you are truly My disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free*" (John 8:31-32). Theology is supposed to be men of God speaking to His people about Him. Sadly, today it appears more and more that it has become a matter of learned gentlemen writing for learned gentlemen about learned gentlemen! "*For a time will come when people will not endure sound doctrine. Instead, they will follow their own desires and, because they have itching ears, they will surround themselves more and more with teachers. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths*" (2 Timothy 4:3-4).