

THE GOSPEL AND THE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE

1. The Lutheran Confessions insist that **all** of Scripture is understood correctly only when it is read through the lens of the doctrine of justification.

[This article on justification,] the chief topic of the Christian doctrine, ... is of special service for the clear, correct understanding of the **entire** Holy Scriptures, and alone shows the way to the unspeakable treasure and right knowledge of Christ, and alone opens the door to the **entire** Bible (*Apology* IV.2, quoted in TA VIII.5).

2. Justification or the forgiveness of sins (the radical gospel) is the core content of Scripture and the true key for understanding and interpreting Scripture correctly. The hermeneutical instrument which Lutherans use for keeping the core biblical content in proper focus is not the gospel but the distinction between law and gospel. '**All** Scripture should be divided into these two chief doctrines, the law and the promises' (*Apology* IV.5).

The distinction between law and gospel is an especially brilliant light which serves the purpose that the word of God may be rightly divided and the writings of the holy prophets and apostles may be explained and understood correctly (*FC SD* V.1).

3. Lutheran insistence on maintaining the distinction between law and gospel is driven by twin imperatives: (1) Christological. We want to honour Christ by proclaiming Christ and his righteousness alone, that is, without any human righteousness ('law') mixed in. (2) Pastoral. We want to give true comfort and consolation to the troubled sinner.

[The doctrine of justification] illumines and magnifies the honour of Christ and brings to pious consciences the abundant consolation that they need (*Apology* IV.2).

We must therefore observe this distinction [between law and gospel] with particular diligence lest we confuse the two doctrines and change the gospel into law. This would darken the merit of Christ and rob disturbed consciences of the comfort which they would otherwise have in the holy gospel when it is preached purely and without admixture ... (*FC SD* V.1)

...any interpretation of the Scriptures which weakens or even removes this comfort and hope is contrary to the Holy Spirit's will and intent (*FC SC* XI.92).

4. The distinction between law and gospel (promise) permits the word of God to do its Spirit-driven work. The law is God's *alien* work; the gospel is God's *proper* work. God breaks down in order to build up; God kills in order to make alive. The gospel is superior to the law in that the law functions to serve the gospel.

[Isaiah] calls it God's alien work to terrify because God's own proper work is to quicken and console. But God terrifies, he says, to make room for consolation and quickening because hearts that do not feel God's wrath in their smugness spurn consolation (*Apology* XII.51,52).

5. The law serves the gospel. This is true also for dominical and apostolic commands ('mandates') concerning baptism, the Lord's supper, absolution and church order. When these commands are obeyed by God's people, then the gospel gets done, proclaimed and publicised, as it is enacted and spoken with visible or audible words.
6. When interpreting a biblical passage which contains a dominical mandate, it is necessary to ask: 'Does our interpretation of a command or law of the Lord mean that the law serves the gospel, or does it contradict or undermine the gospel?' The answer to this question cannot, however, be the decisive criterion for establishing a doctrine.
7. Doctrine is to be drawn from clear statements of Scripture, and from clear inferences from Scripture. Doctrine is not drawn from the gospel as such.
8. The gospel does have an authoritative and dynamic teaching function (Titus 2:11-14). It teaches, for example, about God's grace, God's love for the world, the merits of Christ, forgiveness of sins, and salvation. These things the gospel actually gives even as it teaches about them.
9. In view of the pervasive and dynamic character of the gospel in Lutheran theology, it is legitimate to ask: 'How does the gospel speak to this or that matter of faith and life'? Sometimes it's not easy to find a consensual answer. What is 'worthy of the gospel'? Christian judgment is required, and not all judge in the same way. Hence we heed the apostolic injunction to welcome and accept both the weak and the strong into the worshipping community, as Christ has welcomed us (Rom 15:7), and to 'pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding', so that together we 'may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Romans 14:1,19; 15:6).

Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations
December 2002