

The Function of Doctrine ¹⁴and Theology in Light of the Unity of the Church

A Report
Plus 15 Papers From an Official Study
Conducted by the Division of Theological Studies,
Lutheran Council in the USA,
During 1972-77

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Quotations from **The Book of Concord**, unless otherwise noted, are from: Theodore G. Tappert, ed., **The Book of Concord** (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959). Abbreviations used with the quotations, following the first reference in each paper, are: AC—The Augsburg Confession, Ap—Apology of the Augsburg Confession, SA—The Smalcald Articles, Tr—Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, SC—The Small Catechism, LC—The Large Catechism, and FC—Formula of Concord.

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Part 4

The Interrelatedness of the Gospel

Gospel and Scripture

By Charles S. Anderson

"GOSPEL," "SCRIPTURE" IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The background usage of the word "gospel" in contemporary secular literature is not crucial to our discussion. The general idea was of "good tidings." Whether the situation was the birth of a son to the emperor, the winning of an athletic contest by Nero, or eventually the person of the emperor himself, all were thought of as belonging to the category of "gospel," good news, and glad tidings. The identification of good news with the emperor caused considerable conflict in the empire for, as we will see, the Christians came to identify the gospel not with the emperor but with the Christ.

Development is apparent in the use of the word in the New Testament. Jesus' preaching, for example, centered on the announcement of the good news, the "gospel," that the kingdom (the kingly rule of God promised by the prophets and longed for as a time of restoration and fulfillment of God's plan) was being ushered in (Mark 1.15). The disciples were sent out with instructions to preach this good news (Matthew 10.7).¹

Later, in the light of the passion, death, and resurrection, the word came to have new content in the apostolic community. The "gospel" now referred to Christ himself, the risen Lord. It was the "gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1.1). The whole of the Christ event was seen as being the saving message of God addressed to the world. This message, anticipated in the Scripture (Romans

1.1, Galatians 3.8), was now fulfilled in the Son's life, death, and resurrection. This was the "good news."

Beginning with Justin Martyr (Apology I, Section 66, ca. 150 A.D.) the word was attached to particular writings, the "Gospels," in which the apostolic testimony to Jesus was recorded. The "gospel" is described in the New Testament as having certain characteristics. For example, it is powerful unto salvation, it is the power of God himself (Romans 1.16, 1 Corinthians 1.24). It is unitive; i.e., there is only one gospel, that of Jesus Christ, even though there may be claims for other sorts of "good

news" (Galatians 1.6-9). It is an eternal gospel, having been decreed from eternity (Revelation 14.6).

This powerful, unitive, and eternal good news of God in Jesus is to be received by faith (Romans 1.16), or it remains a mystery (Ephesians 6.19), a stumbling block, or foolishness (1 Corinthians 1.23,24). The promises become effective only to those who believe in him (John 3.16).

The effects of the act of God in Christ, announced in the good news and received in faith, are described in a variety of ways. Through the gospel the believer receives salvation (Ephesians 1.13), peace (Ephesians 6.15), the grace of God (Acts 20.24), and the glory of God (2 Corinthians 4.4). Faith is given (Philippians 1.27) in this announcement; hope awakened and strengthened (Colossians 1.23); and the community of believers, the church, is constituted or formed (Philippians 1.5).

With only one exception the word "scripture" is used in the New Testament to refer to the sacred books of the Old Testament in which God's action and words are recorded. The assertion is that all Scripture is inspired by God (2 Timothy 3.16), and by metonymy the word is also used to designate God's speaking (Romans 9.17, Galatians 4.30, and Ephesians 4.8,

"the scripture says . . ."; Hebrews 3.7, citing Psalm 95, "as the Holy Spirit says . . ."). Special reference to the prophetic writings as "scripture" is often made; e.g., Romans 1.2 and 16.26.

Just as "gospel" assumed additional meaning as the years passed, so also "scripture," in one instance, has a broader reference than simply the Old Testament. In 2 Peter 3.16 the word is applied to the writings of the New Testament that were already circulating and in process of collection.

If we take the texts as they stand without entering into the problems of the possible differentiation between the witness of the early community of faith and the words of Jesus, we note that our Lord clearly connected the Scripture (Old Testament) with his own ministry and person. He announced the beginning of his public ministry by reading from a messianic portion of the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 61.1) and then identified his work with that described in the Scripture. "Today," he said, "this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4.21). In another instance he stressed his role as fulfillment of the Scriptures when he said, "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).

The apostolic church stressed this same note of fulfillment. St. Paul argued that the Scripture "preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham" (Galatians 3.8) and that people of faith are blessed along with the faithful patriarch. Their preaching attempted always to

show that Jesus was the Christ promised in the Scriptures (Acts 18.28) and that his life, death, and resurrection were all in fulfillment of the promises made before (1 Corinthians 15.3,4).

The center of the affirmation of the early church was the gospel of God's action in Christ, and all of Scripture found its meaning in relation to this focal point. This understanding is summarized by the incident on the Emmaus road in which Jesus "interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24.27). The response to the self-disclosure of Christ in the Word and in the eating was the burning hearts that characterized Christians at their best since that time. This happened to them while he opened to them the Scriptures (Luke 24.32), which in turn were related to "the things concerning himself."

The gospel in New Testament usage is the fulfillment of the Scripture and also its central point and focus, without which it is clouded and not properly understood. Even the disciples were in the dark until the central light became clear. Then their hearts burned within them.

"GOSPEL," "SCRIPTURE" IN THE CONFESSIONS

The Lutheran Confessions spend a great deal of time describing what the gospel is, for it was at this precise point that a great part of their disagreement with some

of their contemporaries centered. The confusion of law and gospel was the cause of much of what they perceived to be amiss within the church.

Three illustrations will be sufficient to give us their view of the gospel, strictly defined:

—“ . . . they teach the Gospel of the blessings of Christ, and they show that the forgiveness of sins comes freely for Christ's sake. This teaching really consoles consciences” (Apology, XXIV, 48).

—“This is the very voice of the Gospel, that by faith we obtain the forgiveness of sins” (Ap, XII, 2).

—“The content of the Gospel is this, that the Son of God, Christ our Lord, himself assumed and bore the curse of the law and expiated and paid for all our sins, that through him alone we re-enter the good graces of God, obtain forgiveness of sins through faith, are freed from death and all the punishments of sin, and are saved eternally. For everything which comforts and which offers the mercy and grace of God to transgressors of the law strictly speaking is, and is called, the Gospel, a good and joyful message that God wills not to punish sins but to forgive them for Christ's sake” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article VI, 20-21).

God's message to the world is not all gospel, however. One must also consider the law and its relation to the promises. “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. By 'law' in this discussion we mean the commandments of the Decalogue, wherever they appear in the Scriptures” (Ap, IV, 5-6).

The importance of recognizing both teachings, and being sure to differentiate between them, is stressed in many passages. This is clear in the following: “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. We must therefore observe this distinction 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, for by it Christians can support themselves in their greatest temptations against the terrors of the law” (FC, SD, V, 1).

Another way of speaking of the same matter is to do so in terms of God's activity or work. One of his two chief works is to terrify, and the other is to justify or quicken. “One or the other of these works is spoken of throughout Scripture. One part is the law, which reveals, denounces, and condemns sin. The other part is the Gospel, that is, the promise of grace granted in Christ. This promise is repeated continually throughout Scripture; first it was given to Adam, later to the patriarchs, then illumined by the prophets, and finally proclaimed and revealed by Christ among the Jews, and spread by the apostles throughout the world. For all the saints were justified by faith in this promise, not by their own attrition or contrition” (Ap, XII, 53).

A lack of agreement on the specific reference of the word “gospel” led to a distinction between its broad and narrow or strict sense. “In the one case the word is used in such a way that we understand by it the entire teaching of Christ, our Lord, which in his public ministry on earth and in the New Testament he ordered to be observed. Here the term includes both the exposition of the law and the proclamation of the mercy and grace of God, his heavenly Father, as it is written in Mark 1.1, ‘The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.’ Shortly thereafter the chief parts are announced, namely, repentance and forgiveness of sins. . . . Likewise, Paul calls his entire teaching the ‘Gospel’ (Acts 20.24) and summarizes

it under these heads: repentance to God and faith in Christ" (FC, SD, V, 4). In this usage there is no distinction between law and gospel, and a correct definition is "the proclamation of both repentance and the forgiveness of sins" (FC, SD, V, 5). In the strict sense, however, the word "does not include the proclamation of repentance but solely the preaching of God's grace" (FC, SD, V, 6).

The Lutheran Confessions teach that the Scriptures are the Word or address of God to sinful man for the purpose of revealing his grace to his son, Jesus Christ.² Both the origin of the Scriptures in the good and gracious will of God, and the purpose for which they are given—the revelation of his grace—are emphasized in this statement.

The Confessions teach that the Scriptures as the Word of God are the sole authority in the church, both as the source and the norm of the church's message. While the confessors had a high regard for the tradition of the church especially as found in the early creeds and in the writings of the fathers, they did not allow tradition a place equal to the Scriptures. "Other writings of ancient and modern teachers, whatever their names, should not be put on a par with Holy Scripture. Every single one of them should be subordinated to the Scriptures and should be received in no other way and no

further than as witness . . ." (FC, Rule and Norm, 2). ". . . it is only from the Word of God that judgments on articles of faith are to be pronounced" (FC, SD, II, 8).

The Confessions teach that the Scriptures as the Word of God provide the church with the adequate, reliable, and efficacious means for her work among her members and for their mission to the world.

The confessors had no difficulty calling the Scripture the Word of God, just as they had no difficulty calling Christ the Word (Augsburg Confession, III, 1) or proclamation of the gospel the Word of God (Large Catechism, Second Part, 38, 52; Fifth Part, 31). It is taken for granted that the Scriptures are the Word of God in the many passages where the terms are used interchangeably (e.g., Ap, XII, 122-23). They are accepted as divinely inspired, although there is no specific article on the Scripture nor any reference to a limitation of the biblical canon beyond reference to the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments.

The emphasis is consistently on the God who speaks now in and through the Scriptures rather than on the fact that God has spoken in the past, and this speaking is recorded for us in the books of the Bible.

This brings us to the question of the relationship between the gospel and Scripture. God's intention as revealed in Jesus Christ is to bring people into relationship with himself. The Word of God, seen as Jesus Christ himself, as proclama-

tion of the Christ event, and as Scripture the written record, is means to end in this great plan of restoration. Through the work of the Holy Spirit sinful men are called, enlightened, sanctified, and preserved (Small Catechism, II, 6), but not apart from the Word, seen in its threefold dimension (AC, V, 2; LC, Second Part, 62; FC, SD, XI, 33, 40, 44, 76, 77; Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article VIII, 3).

The Scripture in this context contains, points to, and bears the gospel, the good news of God. The gospel is the fulfillment of all of the promises of God found in the Scripture. The Scripture is means to an end and in this work is totally, completely reliable. Questions of infallibility must be raised in the context of the purpose of Scripture, i.e., in the context of its gospel-bearing function. This is precisely the way in which the Confessions themselves deal with this matter. "Whatever the Scriptures are and effect, they are what they are and do what they do because of God's presence in and operation through them." Both of these aspects are frequently reflected in the Confessions, as, for example, in the following citations, in which the equation, "God is completely reliable—the Scriptures are completely reliable," is carried through:

—" . . . we know that God does not lie. My neighbor and I—in short, all men—may err and deceive, but God's Word cannot err" (LC, Fourth Part, 57).

—The Scriptures “will not lie to you” (LC, Fifth Part, 76).

—“The third ground is that God’s Word is not false nor does it lie” (FC, Ep, VII, 13).

—“The Sacraments are signs of the promises . . . the communicant should . . . **accept this by faith**, comfort his troubled conscience, and believe that the testimonies are not false but as certain as though God, by a new miracle, promised His will to forgive” (Ap, XIII, 20).

—“Especially are we to abide by the revealed Word which cannot and will not deceive us” (FC, Ep, XI, 14).

—“And we should not regard this call of God which takes place through the preaching of the Word as a deception, but should know certainly that God reveals his will in this way, and that in those whom he thus calls he will be efficaciously active through the Word so that they may be illuminated, converted, and saved” (FC, SD, XI, 29.)

—The Scriptures are the “pure, infallible, and unalterable Word of God” (Preface to the Book of Concord).

While the Confessions do not deny the infallibility of the Scriptures as a whole, they make explicit reference to this attribute in contexts that are associated specifically with the gospel, as all citations above but the last indicate. Also

the statement from the preface to the Book of Concord is involved with the evangelical perspective of the Augsburg Confession.³

The question of purpose, of the intention of Scripture as centered in the gospel, is also determinative in the interpretation of the written Word. **The gospel center (the forgiveness of sins)** “. . . leads in a preeminent way to the clear and proper understanding of all Scripture, it alone points the way to the inexpressible treasure and right knowledge of Christ, and it alone opens the door into the whole Bible. Without this article no poor conscience can have a proper, constant and certain comfort or discern the riches of Christ’s grace” (Ap, IV, 2, German; cf., also Ap, XII, 2ff.).

1 Raising the question of Jesus’ messianic consciousness and how this is related to his use of the word “gospel” would lead us away from our main objective at this time (cf., Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., **Theological Dictionary of the New Testament** (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), Vol. 2, pp. 721ff.)

2 The substance of the paragraphs on “scripture” in the Lutheran Confessions is taken from the essay, “The Lutheran Confessions and Sola Scriptura,” adopted by representatives of the American Lutheran Church and Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, April 1965.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.