

# Gospel Reductionism Redux

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The confessional/conservative element of the Missouri Synod won the battle against liberalism, right? Sort of. Perhaps the proponents of the historical-critical (or higher critical) method of biblical interpretation (or criticism) are largely gone (at least from our seminaries). But some of the harmful theological currents from the 1960s and 1970s remain. The following is offered as an attempt to draw some lines between what affected our synod in the 1960s and 1970s and what is going on today as unresolved issues. Clearly time does not heal all wounds. Like the nostalgic and political proclivities of the baby boomer generation in society, we seem to be revisiting the issues of the baby boomer generation of our synod or reviving them in a more middle-aged veneer.

One of the most injurious theologies to arise in the LCMS during that chaotic era was called "Law-Gospel reductionism," as named by Dr. John Warwick Montgomery, and was later shortened to "Gospel reductionism." Gospel reductionists declared that the Gospel rather than Scripture was the standard for doctrine and practice in the Church. Scott R. Murray comments:

**In the 1960s some theologians began to invoke Law-Gospel as the ruling or the only hermeneutical presupposition in Lutheran theology. They adopted this hermeneutic as a replacement for the old inspiration [of Scripture] doctrine, which they had decisively abandoned in this period [Scott R. Murray. *Law, Life, and the Living God: The Third Use of the Law in Modern American Lutheranism*. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002; p.103].**

Part of the slippery nature of this controversy was that on the surface it sounded Lutheran --- "Law and Gospel." It also seemed to have a strong mission emphasis. That's good Lutheran terminology. But that's how it often happens when an error comes into the Church - use the standard terminology in a twisted sense [like Rome and the LWF did in the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*]. This is called equivocation. Murray also explains:

**The simplicity of the principle of Gospel reductionism leads to abuse. Because of its simplicity, theologians can easily use it to criticize central Christian teachings, such as the validity of the Law in the life of the Christian. There is a serious threat of a severe reduction of Christian doctrine to a bare Gospel, which is no Gospel at all. A further difficulty implied by the simplicity of the principle is that it can be radically interpreted so as to rule out significant and central Christian doctrines. One person's Law might be another person's Gospel. The lack of anchoring certainty troubled the critics of these Gospel reductionistic techniques [Murray, pp.106, 107].**

The uses of the law are God's uses, not the preacher's uses. The law does not have a kill/stun/instruct switch on it (for our usage). The preacher might hope the law is heard one way or another when he writes the sermon, but he cannot control which function of the law comes across to the hearer. Again, the uses of the law are God's uses, not ours. The Holy Spirit works the uses of the law as it is spoken. But in the preaching of the law God's law functions towards us in three ways: the curb, the mirror, and the guide/rule. But some have suggested that for Christians there is no proper use of the law. But this is not the teaching of Scripture or our Lutheran Confessions. To be sure, one does not get more apples from an apple tree by shouting law at it. However, the Ten

Commandments do provide answer to the question, "What shall I render to the Lord for all His benefits to me?" (Psalm 116)

The 1972 document of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Gospel and Scripture: The Interrelationship of the Material and Formal Principles in Lutheran Theology* states:

**Whatever is truly Biblical does not negate the Gospel. The true and genuine Gospel does not negate whatever is truly Biblical. [] When one's "gospel" is such that it makes void the Lord's directives for his children's individual and community life, it would seem that his "gospel" is different from the one taught by Paul and the Lutheran Symbols. It is easy to see why such directives are incompatible with a "gospel" that speaks of redemption in terms of what God is doing now in the socio-political structures, instead of inviting us to trust in what He did once for all on Calvary. When such a "gospel" supplants the Scriptures as norm of doctrine and life, then it is awkward to call anything wrong, since whatever is going on is somehow what God is doing now. But it is not a denial of the *Scriptural* Gospel to teach that men ought to obey God and to hold that expressions of His will in the Sacred Scriptures are still normative for the behavior of His children and church [Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod. *Gospel and Scripture*. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972; pp7,8].**

It is further stated by this CTCR document: "The Gospel is not normative for theology in the sense that beginning with it as a fundamental premise, other items of the Christian system of doctrine are developed as provisional, historically conditioned responses to a given situation which will need to be revised for another situation" [p.9]. In other words theology is not reduced to Gospel plus pragmatism equals practice. The other articles of the faith are not merely appendages to the Gospel. The body of doctrine is a whole, permeated by the Gospel. In this sense "all theology is Christology" as David Scaer puts it. We should properly speak of articles of the faith or articles of doctrine rather than disconnected or compartmentalized "doctrines."

The good news (justification by grace through faith) is the standard in the Scriptures in terms of being exclusive of salvation by our works or good intentions. However, the Gospel cannot be said to be the standard if this means that the Gospel is used as a rationale to sanction a way of using the Bible to develop doctrine and practice which denies the inspiration, unity, authority, or clarity of the Scriptures. As the CTCR document points out, it is an abuse of the Scriptures to argue that as long as the Law and Gospel are proclaimed the Bible may be used in such a way as to treat its doctrine merely as historically conditioned "from which no absolutely reliable historical information or permanently valid doctrine can be derived" [p.13].

And so we want to avoid confusing the function of the Gospel with the functions of the Scriptures. We also want to avoid confusing the power or effectiveness of the Gospel for salvation with the authority of the Bible, as Robert Preus points out in his book, *Getting Into the Theology of Concord* (Concordia, 1977). David Kuske points out regarding the Gospel reductionists in his book on biblical interpretation:

**Many of the men who were the leaders of this movement later left the Missouri Synod to join the ELCA. However, the great majority of the students whom they trained over several decades and who became pastors and teachers remained. They continue to**

**form a rather large and influential group within this church body at this time" [David Kuske. *Biblical Interpretation: The Only Right Way*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1995; pp.195, 196].**

So while sounding "conservative" on the Bible, the way that the theological descendants use the Bible for doctrine and practice is derived from the liberal theology of the higher critics. The Bible is taken to be a mix of human and divine. But the divine and human are separate in the Gospel reductionist view (akin to the heresy of Nestorianism or philosophical Platonism). The unfinished business of the 1960s and 1970s has come to fruition today in the Missouri Synod. This is why some sad cases those who were known to be "conservative" in times past are no longer regarded as such – mostly not because their positions on the older issues have changed, but because new issues have illuminated the consequences of their compromised theology.

Gospel reductionism places the interpretation and use of the Bible into the purely subjective, even when done by a board or commission. (In this respect there is a certain commonality with Pietism.) While today we might officially teach the inerrancy and inspiration of Scripture, among us it takes a commission or board to determine Scripture's meaning and application (by a politically constituted assembly). So until we have a "ruling" or the latest "study document" we only have "exegetical agnosticism" and then only until the next study document or political majority. What is placed on the table with the right hand is taken away with the left. In controversies, we treat boards as if they are the "Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith" (in Rome, formerly known as the "Inquisition") and in the meantime implicitly adopt the "doctrinal development" view of John Henry Cardinal Newman and Rome in endless study documents on the same subjects that arrive at different results. On the one hand we say "St. Louis has spoken" and at other times we say "synod is just advisory." Rome continues to find new things in the Bible and Christian tradition that weren't there before. Are we going down the same path – walking together with Rome's hermeneutic?

In such a context, on the parish ministry level, ascertaining biblical doctrine and practice becomes a matter of finding what works in getting the "basic Gospel" to others. In practice "pastoral discretion" (exceptions) would be the norm (rule). Everything becomes a matter of casuistry or a series of "once in a life time events". Again, on the surface this sounds very "evangelical" and "pastoral" (two words that have changed in meaning in recent decades). But the end result is the total wasting-away of Christian doctrine. This is really the reason and origin of the style versus substance debate in regard to liturgy – a debate that can only occur when a Platonic mindset of dualism prevails. (So long as the basic Gospel is "there" what does the "style" matter?) It is also the reason for the move against the pastoral office in the so-called lay-ministry movement. (So long as someone is "doing" the Gospel of Word and Sacrament ministry, what does call and ordination matter?) It is also the force behind ecumenism and open communion among us. (Those other Christians believe in the Gospel, so why not give them more Gospel in the sacrament – assuming an *ex opere operato* view of the Eucharist and denying the possibility of *communicatio indignorum*.) In some respects it also forms part of the rationale for the ordination of female pastors and feminist theology (along with a neo-gnosticism). (Laws, order of creation, cannot apply to someone who feels called or qualified.) Perhaps those who espouse such things do not understand the connection, since it was likely taken in subconsciously.

Thus we see in those who espouse this position a rejection of the order of creation in regard to men and women, a rejection of God's third way of using the law (the guide), and the assertion that all matters of worship are simply indifferent (adiaphora), a view that can hardly be maintained in view of Augustana and Apology XXIV's definition of "liturgy." So in the end, so long as one's subjective

intention is somehow "Gospel" or "mission" or "evangelism" then the method, means, context, or form are indifferent matters, adiaphora (*mitteldinge*), and fair game for the imagination and creativity of the person involved. For those seeking the ordination of women or giving women pastoral duties/functions, the matter is simply having the abilities and "feeling called" (a *schwaermerei* notion). In such cases the order of creation or ontological considerations are casually dismissed as "legalism" or "old fashioned." And yet we are taught and confess in the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration VI:

**For this reason, too, believers require the teaching of the law: so that they do not fall back on their own holiness and piety and under the appearance of God's Spirit establish their own service to God on the basis of their own choice, without God's Word or command. As it is written in Deuteronomy 12[:8,28,32], "You shall not act all of us according to our own desires," but "listen to the commands and laws which I command you," and "you shall not add to them nor take anything from them." Furthermore believers also require the teaching of the law regarding their good works, for otherwise people can easily imagine that their works and life are completely pure and perfect [FC-SD VI, 20,21].**

Consider this: to legitimize such Gospel reductionistic methods on an official level one might purpose in one's mind what method is envisioned and then enlist a commission or board to develop a theology using the right jargon to justify the desired program, emphasis, or change in practice. This way, one can give seeming legitimacy to the newly established tolerance level. In this way, changes will be imposed incrementally and thus nearly imperceptibly to most minimally catechized people. This appeals to the emotional side of human beings very effectively. Again, here is where Gospel reductionism in synod leadership meets latent Pietism in the parish. The link is the subjective and emotion. One might be reminded of the strong statement of Luther in the Smalcald Articles:

**In a word, enthusiasm inheres in Adam and his children from the beginning [from the first fall] to the end of the world, [its poison] having been implanted and infused into them by the old dragon, and is the origin, power [life], and strength of all heresy, especially of that of the Papacy and Mohammed. 10] Therefore we ought and must constantly maintain this point, that God does not wish to deal with us otherwise than through the spoken Word and the Sacraments. 11] It is the devil himself whatsoever is extolled as Spirit without the Word and Sacraments. [Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article VIII]**

One cannot really question the motive or intention of the newly revamped Gospel reductionism, but one must question its methods and consequences. The consequences are the same as in the first encounter with Gospel reductionism. Clearly today, there are groups in the Missouri Synod with very pious-sounding names that are operating on the basis of well-intentioned, but errant Gospel reductionism. Their arguments and publicity are very sugary indeed. They sound very "nice." Doctrine and mission are pitted against one another in a false dichotomy, even in apologetic tones. *"I'm all for good doctrine, but we gotta get busy with the gospel."* Those who do not hold to Gospel reductionism may be accused falsely of not being in favor of missions or not holding it as a high enough priority. While we can always have more zeal and resources and energy for the task (since we are all sinners in need of God's grace), those who are concerned over this Gospel reductionism are doing so because of the Gospel mission, the Church, and out of faithfulness to Christ to whom they are pledged in confirmation and/or their ordination vows, but most of all in faith, suffering under the cross. While no one can believe for you and your salvation personally, what we are given to

teach and confess is the same faith. That which we receive from the Lord is what we seek to deliver faithfully.

Concern for sound doctrine is not merely a matter of being “conservative” or “liberal” (as if doctrine is on a sliding scale) or about the purity of a political ideology. It is about truth versus falsehood, orthodoxy vs. heterodoxy, what creates and nurtures faith versus what destroys false and grounds it in a false object. It is about nutritional food for the soul vs. no nutrition or even poison. Jesus warned about the leaven of the Scribes and Pharisees? How little leaven (yeast) can radically change a lump of dough? A rifle fired a small degree off target over a long distance can dramatically miss the target with enough time and distance. Even the Great Commission instructs us to teach “all things” Jesus has commanded – no quickie catechesis.

The gates of hell will not prevail against the church that confesses purely that Jesus is the Christ the Son of the living God, but that which does not so confess is not church. The marks of the church are the purely preached Word of God and the rightly administered sacraments (Augustana VII). The marks of the church are the way the article of justification by grace is manifested locally.

It is my hope that this short summary has been helpful in illuminating the issues involved and exposing the harmful presuppositions of new directions being proposed for our synod and its congregations. What comes in the newest version of Gospel reductionism is evangelism at the expense of the Gospel. We who gladly hold to a *quia* subscription to the Lutheran Confessions are called to continually confess the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. When theological unity is established in reality (not merely on paper in the abstract) and recognized then trust will without compulsion or gimmicks be re-established. It will not come the other way around, nor by “reconciled diversity.” May God in His mercy grant us what we need and not what we deserve. Let us pray for the whole people of God in Christ Jesus and for all people according to their needs...

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