

# THE LEGALISATION OF THE GOSPEL (Part I)

Colleagues,

Another unsolicited serendipity on legalism and the Gospel! This one, like last week's from Anton Lutz in Papua New Guinea, came my way as another pleasant surprise. Its author is John Strelan ["Joe" to all who know him], retired prof at Australian Lutheran College, the seminary of the Lutheran Church in Australia. Way back in 1992 Joe, together with wife Bronwyn, was in our St. Louis living room "recruiting" me for a year as guest lecturer at the seminary. For the academic year 1994 (downunder the term begins in January and concludes in November) we were doing just that in Adelaide. From the opening lines of his article you'll see why Strelan and Schroeder were mucho simpatico. Strelan has been a major voice for "the Augsburg Aha!" in Australia—both in the LCA and in ecumenical conversations. He's done extended service in Papua New Guinea, one product of which was his classic publication on the theology of the "Cargo Cults" in Melanesian culture. He's also had teaching stints in Germany (Erlangen and Neuendettelsau), and other venues (closer to home) in SE Asia. Strelan wrote this article for the "Vic Pfitzner Festschrift" honoring another dear friend, who was principal of the seminary in our time there. It will appear downunder in the "Lutheran Theological Journal" later this year. The LTJ editor, Peter Lockwood, has granted permission for Thursday Theology readers to get "a sneak preview."

It will come to you in two parts. Part I is the basic essay. Part II (next week) uses Rick Warren's THE PURPOSE DRIVEN LIFE as a case study of the Legalisation of the Gospel.

Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder

---

## **THE LEGALISATION OF THE GOSPEL**

**John G Strelan**

**ALC Faculty Emeritus**

*[For forty-five years Victor Carl Pfitzner, my long-time friend and colleague, has delighted in proclaiming the gospel without ration cards and without strings attached.]*

*Friedemann Hebart, a former colleague of Dr Pfitzner, writes in his popular commentary on the Formula of Concord of those who 'dare to state the gospel as though it were law'. They are preaching, he says, the 'legal gospel' (now there's an oxymoron if ever there was one!) Hebart cites several examples of this gospel-which-is-not-the-gospel, including: 'If you really have faith, God will care for you', and 'If you are sincere, God will be on your side', and 'If you trusted more in God your troubles/worries/sickness would be over'. Hebart notes:*

*Those ifs and others like them...are the greatest enemies of the gospel of God's grace in Christ, for what God does is made to depend on what we do (One in the Gospel, 66).*

*What Hebart calls the 'legal gospel', I used to call 'conditional theology'. Gerhard Forde calls it 'adverbial theology'. All three phrases point to the same false gospel: God is 'for us' and God accepts us provided that we do this or that, and do it sincerely, faithfully, fervently, truly, and whatever other adverbs the preacher cares to add. We act appropriately; God responds appropriately.*

*Carl Braaten's term for the phenomenon I have been describing is 'the legalization of the gospel'. Legalisers of the gospel infiltrate law into the gospel, and so 'legalise' the gospel to*

death. From a Lutheran point of view, the legalisation of the gospel is the worst of all failures in preaching and pastoral practice. Why this is so will, I hope, become clear as we review the Lutheran Confessions' response to the legalisation of the gospel, and then in the light of that response, critique Rick Warren's influential book, *The Purpose Driven Life*.

### **Justification and the law/gospel distinction**

The context in which Braaten speaks of the legalisation of the gospel is an essay on what he calls 'the law/gospel principle', specifically in a discussion of the paradox of justification. The paradox is this, that 'the verdict of justification is valid prior to the works of the regenerate heart and in spite of every human failure'. Braaten concludes: 'Any qualification of this priority and this paradox leads to synergistic heresy and the legalization of the gospel' ( *Principles of Lutheran Theology*, 109).

The legalisation of the gospel has three strikes against it: first, it is an attack on the doctrine of justification, the article upon which 'rests all that we teach and practice' (Smalcald Articles II, 1.5). Secondly, it is an attack on Christ: it buries him. Thirdly, it is an attack on terrified sinners: it leaves them helpless under the law with all its accusations, and it leaves their consciences uncomforted.

The theological and methodological issue here is the confusion of law and gospel. Law and gospel must be properly distinguished. 'We must...observe this distinction with particular diligence lest we confuse the two doctrines and change the gospel into law'. And why is that so bad? 'This would darken the merit of Christ and rob disturbed consciences of the comfort they would otherwise have in the holy gospel when it is preached purely and without admixture' ( *Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration*. V, 1).

*These twin concerns – that Christ is magnified and troubled consciences are comforted – are dear to the hearts of the Lutheran confessors. We should not be surprised to find, then, that these concerns recur as a kind of cantus firmus throughout the Confessions. What follows is only a sample.*

### ***The Formula of Concord***

*The Formula of Concord concludes its summary of the article on law and gospel with the words:*

*[W]e reject and deem it as false and detrimental when men teach that the Gospel strictly speaking, is a proclamation of conviction and reproof and not exclusively a proclamation of grace. Thereby the Gospel is again changed into a teaching of the law, the merit of Christ and the Holy Scriptures are obscured, Christians are robbed of their true comfort, and the doors are again opened to the papacy (Epitome V,11).*

*In its expansion of this summary statement, the Formula of Concord emphasises that every care should be taken ‘to avoid anything that might give occasion for a confusion between them [ie, law and gospel] by which the two doctrines would be tangled together and made into one doctrine’. It then warns against darkening ‘the merits and benefits of Christ’, and once more making ‘the gospel a teaching of the law’ (Solid Declaration V,27). Note the twin Christological and pastoral concerns expressed here, and the warning that confusing law and gospel turns the gospel into law.*

*The statement on ‘the righteousness of faith before God’ in the Formula of Concord takes pains to distinguish between justification and new obedience or good works. It argues that in Romans 3:28 Paul teaches that ‘neither the preceding contrition nor the subsequent works belong in the article or matter of justification by faith. For good works do not precede*

*justification; rather they follow it, since a person must first be righteous before he can do good works' ( Solid Declaration III,27). It then expresses its pastoral and Christological concerns also in connection with the central article of the faith:*

*[I]n order to afford saddened consciences dependable and reliable comfort and to give due honour to the merit of Christ and the grace of God, Scripture teaches that the righteousness of faith before God consists solely in a gracious reconciliation or the forgiveness of sins, which is bestowed upon us by pure grace because of the unique merit of Christ, the mediator, and which we receive only by faith in the promise of the Gospel (Solid Declaration III,30).*

*The Formula of Concord was simply repeating what the confessors at Augsburg had said fifty years earlier, that 'we obtain grace and are justified before God through faith in Christ and not through works'. In Article 20 of the Augsburg Confession the confessors point out that this teaching about faith 'which is the chief article in the Christian life' had been neglected and even held in contempt. But, Article 20 continues:*

*God-fearing and anxious consciences find that by experience it [ie, the article on justification by faith] offers the greatest consolation because the consciences of men cannot be pacified by any work but only by faith when they are sure that for Christ's sake they have a gracious God. It is as Paul teaches in Rom.5:1, 'Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God'. This whole teaching is to be referred to that conflict of the terrified conscience, nor can it be understood apart from that conflict...Consciences used to be plagued by the doctrine of works when consolation from the Gospel was not heard (15-17,19).*

## **The Apology of the Augsburg Confession**

Article 12 of the Apology ('Penitence'), again articulates the pastoral and Christological burden of the Confessions. Melanchthon writes, for example:

*Let pious consciences know, therefore, that God commands them to believe that they are freely forgiven because of Christ, not because of our works. Let them sustain themselves with this command of God against despair and against the terrors of sin and death... Truly, we insult Christ and abrogate the Gospel if we believe that we obtain the forgiveness of sins because of the law or in any other way except by faith in Christ (XII, 72, 77).*

*It is, however, in Article 4 ('Justification') that Melanchthon weaves together the major threads of confessional interest, that is:*

- a. the article of justification by faith [=the forgiveness of sins];*
- b. the importance of properly dividing law and gospel, and so not turning the gospel into law;*
- c. magnifying and honouring Christ (instead of 'burying Christ'); and*
- d. providing consolation for troubled consciences.*

*Melanchthon introduces his presentation on the doctrine of justification by stating what is at stake:*

*In this controversy the main doctrine of Christianity is involved; when it is properly understood, it illumines and magnifies the honour of Christ and brings pious consciences the abundant consolation that they need. ... Since our opponents understand neither the forgiveness of sins nor faith nor grace nor righteousness, they confuse this doctrine*

*miserably, obscure the glory and blessings of Christ, and rob pious consciences of the consolation offered them in Christ (IV,2,3).*

*'By way of preface', Melanchthon speaks of the two sources of doctrine which are in conflict here. Both sides appeal to Scripture. But Melanchthon's opponents read the texts using 'law' lenses. Hence their source is the law-read Scriptures. Lutherans read Scripture through 'law/promise' lenses. Hence the source of Lutheran doctrine is the law/promise-read Scriptures.*

*When reading the Scriptures through law/promise lenses, law and promise are to be carefully distinguished, for this distinction serves to ensure the proper proclamation of the gospel. If that distinction is not observed, then the gospel is legalised, and there is no good news for the sinner. The gospel promises and gives what it promises. The law demands, but does not give what it demands. It demands total obedience. Sinners cannot meet this demand, and they resent the divine law which makes such impossible demands. Thus their sin and guilt before God increase.*

*Whenever the law is mixed with, or preferred to, the gospel, the gospel does not just play second fiddle; it disappears and Christ is 'buried' (IV,18, 81). And if Christ is buried, then the poor troubled conscience has no comfort. Pastorally and theologically, this is serious stuff. It must not be taken lightly. Hence, at the end of his presentation of the doctrine of justification, and before taking up the objections of the opponents, Melanchthon repeats what is at stake in the controversy:*

*We are debating about an important issue, the honour of Christ and the source of sure and firm consolation for pious*

*minds -whether we should put our trust in Christ or in our own works. If we put it in our works, we rob Christ of his honour as mediator and propitiator. And in the judgment of God we shall learn that this trust was vain and our consciences will then plunge into despair. For if the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation do not come freely for Christ's sake, but for the sake of our love, nobody will have the forgiveness of sins unless he keeps the whole law, because the law does not justify so long as it can accuse us. Justification is reconciliation for Christ's sake. Therefore it is clear that we are justified by faith, for it is sure that we receive the forgiveness of sins by faith alone (IV, 156-158).*

## **II**

*Why the fuss? Why draw attention to sixteenth century debates? Today Lutheran pastors worth their salt share the Confessions' zeal for getting the doctrine of justification right, for not legalising the gospel, for magnifying Christ and comforting troubled consciences. However, old temptations linger in the 21st century church. They are being fed by the IT revolution, which channels a variety of theological streams into the pastor's office and into the homes of Lutheran people. The material available is attractive, well-written, popular – and it is widely used for study, devotional, and preaching purposes.*

*A reality check is in order.*

### **Faith and Obedience**

*What is the relationship between faith and obedience? For centuries Lutherans have been accused of separating faith from obedience, faith from love, justification from sanctification. And it has to be admitted that Lutherans have sometimes given*



*the impression that justification is everything and that the new obedience or good works or discipleship are optional extras in the lives of Christians.*

*The Lutheran Confessions are, of course, adamant that faith and obedience, faith and works, justification and sanctification, do indeed belong together. Let one example suffice:*

*Faith alone accepts the forgiveness of sins, justifies and regenerates. Then love and other good works follow...As we have already stated, we teach that a man is justified when, with his conscience terrified by the preaching of penitence, he takes heart and believes that he has a gracious God for Christ's sake. This faith is accounted for righteousness before God (Rom 4:3,5). When the heart is encouraged and quickened by faith in this way, it receives the Holy Spirit. Through his renewal we can keep the law, love God and his Word, obey God in the midst of afflictions, and practice chastity, love toward our neighbour, and so forth (Apology IV,292, 293).*

*The Confessions teach that sanctification flows from justification; love and good works follow faith; faith produces obedience. These things should not, indeed can not, be separated. Separating them means there is something wrong with our preaching of justification. If we have been guilty of separating them, the remedy is not to meld them, make them interchangeable or indistinguishable. Do that, and we come down on the side of the very theologies from which the Lutheran confessors wanted to distance themselves. The Confessions oppose the view that love 'informs' or 'completes' justifying faith (classical Roman Catholicism), or that obedience is an essential part of justifying faith (classical Reformed theology). When the Confessions teach 'faith alone' they mean*

*just that: justification is by faith in Jesus Christ, not faith plus love or faith plus works or faith plus obedience. The whole content of the gospel is the forgiveness of sins, justification by faith. This is the whole content of the gospel, not just the main content.*

*Hence, to proclaim the whole gospel, Lutherans carefully distinguish between faith on the one hand and obedience on the other. We strive not to mix the two. If that language sounds familiar, it is meant to. For the distinction we make between faith and obedience is of the same nature and the same order as that which we make between law and gospel.*

*If we mix justification by faith with love, good works, obedience, or discipleship, we are mixing law and gospel. We are legalising the gospel. And the results are predictable: Christ is not magnified and the troubled sinner is not comforted. When we oblige sinners to analyse their own love or lack of it, their own obedience or lack of it, their own good works or lack of them – and suggest that their continued blessed status before God depends on their imperfect performance, then we are pointing them to themselves, their own righteousness, and driving them back to the law. We are depriving them of the comfort they should have in the ‘pure’ gospel, that is, in the gospel which has not been legalised or mixed with law. As the Apology says: ‘If they are supposed to believe that they have a gracious God because they love and keep the law, they will have to doubt whether they have a gracious God’ (IV,301).*