

# THE LEGALISATION OF THE GOSPEL (Part II)

Colleagues,

Here is Part II of Joe Strelan's article. Strelan is a retired theology professor who taught many years at the seminary of the Lutheran Church in Australia. He wrote this article for the "Vic Pfitzner Festschrift" honoring the principal of the seminary, now recently retired as well. It will appear downunder in the Lutheran Theological Journal later this year. The LTJ has granted permission for Thursday Theology readers to get "a sneak preview." Last week's Part I (ThTh 362) presented Strelan's basic argument for the deadly consequences when the Gospel is "legalized." In this second half Strelan examines Rick Warren's recent best-seller, "The Purpose Driven Life" as a theological proposal that does just that. The final paragraph of last week's posting is repeated below to provide continuity for the Rick Warren case study.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## ***THE LEGALISATION OF THE GOSPEL (Part II)***

*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).

### **‘The Purpose Driven Life’**

I want to demonstrate that in this discussion I am not just resurrecting an ancient straw man, by referring to a book which is widely read and used in the English-speaking Lutheran church: Rick Warren’s *The Purpose Driven Life* ( Zondervan, 2002). The title of the opening chapter of this book is ‘It All Starts with God’. Warren writes: ‘If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God. You were born by his purpose and for his purpose’ (17). And again: ‘It is only in God that we discover our origin, our identity, our meaning, our purpose, our significance, and our destiny. Every other path leads to a dead end’ (18).

Warren emphasises the importance of knowing God’s purpose for our lives and of living ‘purpose-driven’ lives. Living such lives has five great benefits, he says: Knowing your purpose

gives meaning to your life  
simplifies your life  
focuses your life  
motivates your life  
prepares you for eternity (30-32)

It all begins with God, and it’s all for God, we are told (53).

*Who is this God with whom it all begins and exists? According to Warren, it is the God who created us for himself and for his glory. The God who saves sinners, not for their own sake, but for his own sake, so that he might be glorified and praised by the creatures he made and saved. God saves people to serve him: that is the purpose and goal of their existence. This God commands us 'to recognize his glory, honour his glory, declare his glory, praise his glory, reflect his glory, and live for his glory' (54; italics in original). And why should we do this? 'Because God deserves it! We owe him every honour we can possibly give... [L]iving for God's glory is the greatest achievement we can accomplish with our lives' (54,55).*

*This God who creates us for his own sake, saves us for his own sake, and demands impossible things of us is an awesome God, one to be feared, even to flee from. This God is not the God-for-us and the God-in-Christ of the gospel. This God is the God who dwells in glory, unapproachable, hidden from our view. The God who must be obeyed. The God who seems to value our obedience more than he values us. In his reading of God, Rick Warren owes much to Calvin and little to Luther.*

### **'Surrender'**

*We must 'surrender' to this God, Warren writes. Indeed, 'the heart of worship is surrender' to God (77). Surrender is not an odd word for Warren to use, given his image of God. Surrender speaks of submission and obedience. Not surprisingly, Warren writes that 'surrendering is best demonstrated in obedience...Surrendered people obey God's word, even if it doesn't make sense' (80). It is true, Warren goes on to say that '[a]nother aspect of a fully surrendered life is trust' (80). But he is not talking about faith or trust in God's promise of mercy and forgiveness in the crucified and risen Christ. He is talking about relying 'on God to work things out instead of trying to manipulate others, force your own agenda,*

and control the situation. You let go and let God work' (80,81).

The result of using 'surrender' language is that the relationship between us and God, between our actions and God's actions, is disturbingly distorted. To give two examples from *The Purpose Driven Life*: Warren insists that 'God chose Mary to be the mother of Jesus, not because she was talented and wealthy or beautiful, but because she was totally surrendered to him' (82). As evidence he quotes Mary's wondrous response to the angel's words: 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word' (Luke 1: 38). But these words bespeak Mary's trusting response to God's word, not God's motivation for choosing Mary. God chose Mary, not because of her surrendered life but because God in his mercy chooses earthen vessels, unworthy though they be, to be his instruments in the economy of salvation.

The second example: Warren relates that he asked Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ: 'Why did God use and bless your life so much?' Bright's answer:

When I was a young man, I made a contract with God. I literally wrote it out and signed my name at the bottom. It said, 'From this day forward, I am a slave of Jesus Christ' (84).

This again is an inversion of how things are in the Kingdom. Jesus says to all disciples: 'You didn't choose me. I chose you and sent you out to produce fruit, the kind of fruit that will last' (John 15:16). And the apostle Paul confessed: 'By the grace of God I am what I am' (1 Cor 15:10). Peter said: 'Lord don't come near me! I'm a sinner' (Luke 5:8). Yet Jesus pronounced the great 'Fear not'! and out of sheer grace called Peter to follow as a disciple. God blessed Bill Bright's work, not because Bright made a contract with God or 'surrendered' to

*God, but because God in his grace and mercy calls and uses the Bill Brights of this world to get the gospel of Jesus Christ out into the world, the gospel which is 'the power of God unto salvation to all who believe' (Rom 1:16).*

*Surrender is a 'law' word and it fosters 'law' thinking (I surrender and obey, and God chooses me or uses me). Surrender is not the language of the gospel. The gospel is promise or offer or invitation. You accept or trust a promise; you hold on to it or embrace it. You don't capitulate or surrender to a promise. The notion of surrender confuses law and gospel; it legalises the gospel.*

### **Making God Smile**

*Cut from the same legalistic cloth is Warren's discussion in the chapter entitled 'What Makes God Smile?' He writes:*

*The smile of God is the goal of your life. Since pleasing God is the first purpose of your life, your most important task is to discover how to do that (69).*

*>From the example of Noah, Warren deduces 'the five acts of worship that make God smile'. God smiles when we love him supremely, trust him completely, obey him wholeheartedly, praise and thank him continually, and when we use our abilities. Warren concludes: 'What God looks at is the attitude of your heart...Will you make pleasing God the goal of your life? There is nothing that God won't do for the person totally absorbed with this goal' (76).*

*Gerhard Forde, who abhors 'adverbial theology', would shudder at the adverbs (supremely, completely, wholeheartedly, continually, totally). By their adverbs ye shall know them. It is not enough to love God; it must be done supremely; it is not enough to trust God; it must be done completely, and so forth. Troubled sinners are driven to analyse and evaluate their love*

and trust and obedience and praise and commitment. What lack I yet? Where am I falling short? My love and trust is not what it should be. Conclusion: God does not and will not smile on me.

Once again, the distortion is deadly for the troubled conscience. The gospel announces: for Christ's sake, because of Christ, God forgives us, is merciful to us, smiles on us. Christians pray with the psalmist: 'Smile on us and save us' (Psalm 80:19). When God looks at us, he sees Christ and his righteousness – and he smiles on us. God's smile is the sun which brings to life in us the love and trust and obedience and praise and service of God which pleases him so. God sees what he has wrought in us, and pronounces it good, very good – and we continue to blossom in the warmth of his smile. The 'pure' gospel says: God smiles on us, and that smile enables us to love and trust and obey and serve him. The legalised 'gospel' says: when/if we do these things, then God smiles on us. This is a saddening exchange of law for gospel. It fails to magnify Christ and it fails to comfort troubled conscience.

### **Heavenly Rewards**

In the faith+obedience model, rewards are important. Given the law hermeneutic which is at work in Warren's book, it is not unexpected that he uses the promise of heavenly rewards as a motivation for living the 'purpose-driven life'. Jesus stood at a fork in the road. Would he fulfill his purpose and bring glory to God, or would he shrink back and live a comfortable, self-centred life? You face the same choice. Will you live for your own goals, comfort, and pleasure, or will you live the rest of your life for God's glory, knowing that he has promised eternal rewards? (57; cf 39,44,57).

The New Testament does speak of 'rewards' in heaven; so do the Lutheran Confessions. But three things need to be borne in mind: first, despite the word suggesting something earned, the

*New Testament insists that 'rewards' are gifts of God's grace. They are undeserved. Jesus said: 'When you have done all you should, then say, "We are merely servants, and we've simply done our duty"' (Luke 17:10) .*

*Secondly, motivating Christians to act appropriately towards the neighbour with an eye to rewards in heaven, is an affront to Christ. Is the heaven which Christ won for us not good enough? Is something lacking in Christ's work for us? Thirdly, a reward mentality puts the neighbour second in our concern. Our first question will be: which action will score the most brownie points before God? A healthy attitude to rewards is not to think of rewards at all, but to get on with loving the neighbour. Knowing that eternal life in its richness is ours, we can relax and focus on loving the neighbour. What we do for our neighbours is determined by their needs, not by what actions might score greater reward points.*

### ***The Neuralgic Point***

*Where has Warren gone wrong? What is the theological misstep at the heart of his unhappy book? I suggest that his problem is caused by his failure to understand and teach the centrality of the gospel, of Christ, of justification, not only at the start of the Christian walk, but during every moment and every step of that walk. We cannot live without forgiveness, without the imputed righteousness of Christ. The extent to which we think we can escape that necessity is the extent to which we make room for our righteousness before God instead of Christ's righteousness.*

*The skeleton of the model with which Warren operates is this: my life as a Christian begins with God; I am responsible, with the help of the Holy Spirit, for continuing it and for bringing it to a successful conclusion. Faith is necessary to begin my Christian life; obedience is required if I am to continue it*

and complete it. The gospel converts me and brings me into a relationship with God; the law drives how I live and what I do in the new life. First the gospel, then the law. Justification is the beginning of my life before God, after that it ceases to be relevant for all practical purposes. It has no real dynamic in my life.

The skeleton of the model with which Lutherans operate (or should operate) is this: my life began in solidarity with Adam. I was 'dead in trespasses and sins', condemned under the law. My life as a Christian, however, begins in solidarity with Christ. Through him I have access in the Spirit to the Father (Eph 2:18). So my life begins, continues, and ends with and in the Triune God. 'Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.' (Rom 14:8). Trust in the promise of God's mercy and forgiveness makes my life as a Christian possible, and sustains my life as a Christian, even in the face of my many failures and acts of disobedience. 'The life I now live I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal 2:20). Through the gospel, signed and spoken, the Holy Spirit brings me to faith and keeps me in the faith.

The law, however, is not a matter of faith (Gal 3:12). The law has to do with works. The law and my works have their proper place, namely, in the world of my neighbour. But not before God. Never before God. Before God what matters, solely and exclusively, is Christ's work for me and my grasping him in faith. Justification is the beginning of my life before God, and an ongoing reality throughout my life; I cannot live without it. 'Those who through faith are righteous shall live' (Rom 1:17).

I take up just one of these statements, by way of elucidation of the Lutheran position. Justification is not merely a past event in the life of a Christian; justification is our



*continued relationship with God-in-Christ. Jesus Christ is always my mediator in the presence of the law, which always accuses me. Perhaps the place of justification in the life of a Christian is more clearly seen if we use its synonym: the forgiveness of sins. I live in forgiveness, just as I live in Christ and in the gospel (cf John 15:4,5). Without the daily assurance of forgiveness for Christ's sake my life in Christ would wither and die. Through the life-giving word and sacraments, God nourishes and sustains the reality and relationship expressed by the word 'justification'. Every moment my life is 'hidden with Christ in God' (Col 3:3).*

*What then of sanctification or the new obedience? The temptation to introduce at this point the law, or a legalised gospel, as a dynamic must be resisted at all costs. It is not the law but the 'pure' gospel which empowers and drives my life of love for my neighbour. It is not my knowledge of my purpose in life which drives my life (pace Warren), but my faith-knowledge of Christ crucified (Phil 3:7-11). When the old self dies to sin and the new is made alive to God in Christ (Rom 6:11), sanctification results.*

*Thus the ongoing dynamic of sanctification is justification by faith in Christ. The object of the sanctified life, this new obedience, is not God but my neighbour. Both justification and sanctification are the Holy Spirit's work in me, from beginning to end of my life. Hence the same means by which God nourishes and sustains the reality of my justification also nourish and sustain my sanctification: the gospel in its various forms and modes (cf Smalcald Articles Part III, Art IV).*

### **III**

*This essay is an appeal to Lutheran pastors, first, to be on their guard against turning the gospel into law; secondly, to strive to weed out of the church every vestige of a legalised*

*gospel. And thirdly, to make preaching the pure, unmixed gospel their constant delight. At stake is the honour of Christ and the comfort of troubled sinners.*