

The Second Use of the Gospel in Lutheran Reformation Theology – Part I

Colleagues,

This week's ThTh posting, and next week's as well, are a two-part essay by Timothy J. Hoyer, Pastor of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Lakewood, New York. Peace and Joy!

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THE SECOND USE OF THE GOSPEL – IN LUTHERAN REFORMATION THEOLOGY

By Timothy J. Hoyer

Witnesses testify that the man they knew as Jesus of Nazareth was the son of God and that he died on a cross and was raised from the dead, in order that those who believe that he suffered for them and that for his sake they are forgiven by God, made righteous by God, and given eternal life by God, actually do receive forgiveness, are righteous, and have eternal life. For God regards and reckons that faith in Christ as righteousness (Augsburg Confession, Article 4).

To ensure that all teaching of Christ proclaims that good news, two questions are asked of all that is taught. The first question is: Does it “use” the merits and benefits of the death and rising of Christ? The second question is: Does it “use”

them to comfort consciences (give the benefits of Christ to those who need them)? Christians teach “in order to proclaim the glory of Christ and to present firm consolation to consciences” (172). (All page references are from *The Book of Concord*, Kolb/Wengert edition.) All that is taught as Christian must answer those two questions positively in order for it to be Gospel. Why? For it is Christ who died and rose for all people. And his purpose for doing so was to give all people faith and peace with God. “But these things are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (John 20.31). “Only that which brings peace to consciences justifies before God” (146.179). Thus, when Christians discuss how they can best proclaim Christ, they help each other make sure that their teaching glorifies Christ by using him and thereby comforts consciences.

There is debate about how to proclaim Christ when teaching Christians how they are guided in their new life of faith. This is the topic called Christian ethics. How do Christians live a life pleasing to God? How do Christians know what is the right action before God that they should do?

The most widespread teaching of Christian ethics is called –in Lutheran confessional language–“The Third Use of the Law.” It is to use God’s law to guide the Christian. Notice again the importance of the word “use.” [For the first and second uses of the law, see below.]

However, the Lutheran Reformers claimed that the Gospel was to be used both for salvation and for Christian ethics. Using the Gospel for ethics can thus be called “The Second Use of the Gospel.” Which use-the Third Use of the Law or the Second Use of the Gospel-proclaims Christ and comforts consciences? I will seek to show how the Gospel is used to guide the Christian, and

thereby expose The Third Use of the Law as a widely-sown weed in the field of Christian ethics.

When choosing between The Second Use of the Gospel and the Third Use of the Law, "We are not engaging in a mere war over words. We are arguing about an important matter. From where should godly minds receive a sure hope of salvation? Are good works able to bring peace to consciences? Should they hold that eternal life takes place when good works are set over against the judgment of God? Or, on the contrary, should they uphold that on account of Christ through mercy they are regarded as righteous and consequently obtain eternal life? These things arise in a controversy such that, unless a conscience sorts this out, it cannot have firm and certain consolation" (170.358).

How do Christians know that what they do is right to God? How do they know that their action is pleasing to God?

Too often people will answer those questions with the law, that is, without using Christ. Some will say that an action is wrong to God because Scripture says so. Christians are not to go against Scripture. They will say Scripture must be obeyed because Scripture is the word of God. Scripture is the source and norm of a Christian's faith and life. The law is the immutable will of God and so must be obeyed especially by Christians. Christian teaching on moral issues has the authority of having been around two thousand years. To be Christian one must do what the Bible says. And they will say that to change any law that's in the Bible is to go against the Gospel because it denies that the action the law prohibits is a sin and so takes away the need for repentance and the need for Christ.

They will say that because Christians are sinner and saint at

the same time, the Third Use of the Law is needed to guide the Christian in the life God wants Christians to live or else people will do whatever they want to do.

The Second Use of the Gospel gives the Christian the new benefits of Christ as the Christian's guide in the new life of faith. The new benefits of Christ are the indwelling of Christ, the mind of Christ, the Spirit of Christ, the love of Christ given to Christians to give to others, and the fruits of the Spirit.

The Gospel bases the definition of sin, of what is not pleasing or what is wrong to God, as not having faith in Christ (John 16.8-11). "For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (Romans 14.23). Sin means "that from birth they are full of evil desires and inclination and cannot by nature possess true fear of God and true faith in God" (38.1).

Sin cannot be defined only as the breaking of commandments, for then the fear of God and faith in Christ are lost. "They fail to mention the more serious defects of human nature like being ignorant of God, despising God, lacking fear and confidence in God, hating the judgment of God, fleeing this judging God, being angry with God, despairing of his grace, and placing confidence in temporal things" (113.8). The Third Use of the Law does "not even notice these maladies, which are completely opposed to the law of God" (113.8). If sin is only the breaking of the commandments, then all that is needed to please God and gain eternal life is civil righteousness. But that leaves Christ out and so does not positively answer the first test question.

The need for civil righteousness is too often the deepest diagnosis of the problem, for human reason thinks civil righteousness is all that is needed to please God. However,

that leads people to think that as long as the law is mostly kept then a person is right with God and pleasing to God. The need for Christ is lost. People also think that the law may be broken once in a while but we trust Jesus to pay for that mistake and then help us keep the law. Never is the law seen as accusing us and condemning us and killing us. Rather, the law is used as a guide by everyone and those who trust Jesus get a little extra help keeping the law in order to please God, do what is right, and so get to heaven. Jesus is thus no longer the mediator between God and us. Jesus is made into the reason people should live according to the law of God, which is the life pleasing to God. But that makes the promise null and void, the teaching of faith is lost, and consciences are constantly troubled by the fact that they keep making mistakes. God is seen as always loving, never condemning, and God helps people to do better and helps people see death as natural and that all people go to heaven as long as they were good enough because God loves everybody. Thus, without Jesus as the mediator between God and us, the Third Use of the Law is needed to guide us to live right.

The Gospel defines the law very strongly as all that is not based on Christ and does not give comfort to consciences. "And when the Advocate comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment; about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned" (John 16:8-11). Judgment is the law. According to the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the law is what demands certain behavior and attitudes of the heart from people. "But the Decalogue requires not only outward civil works that reason can produce to some extent; it also requires other works that are placed far beyond the reach of reason, such as, truly to fear God,

truly to love God, truly to call upon God, truly to be convinced that he hears us, and to expect help from God in death and all afflictions. Finally, it requires obedience to God in death and all afflictions so that we do not flee or avoid these things when God imposes them" (121.8).

The First Use of the Law is that "God wants those who live according to the flesh to be restrained by such civil discipline, and to preserve it he has given laws, learning, teaching, governments, and penalties" (124.22). The Second Use of the Law is that "the law always accuses and terrifies consciences. Therefore the law does not justify [please God] since the conscience that is terrified by the law flees the judgment of God" (126.38). The properly identified "Third" Use of the Law in Lutheran confessional theology is to bring God's wrath. "Sin even now damns and brings eternal death to those who are not born again through baptism and the Holy Spirit" (39.2). "The law brings wrath" (Romans 4.15). Thus, this Third Use is not law as a moral guide for the Christian life. It is the third, final, and lethal event of life under the law. In the law's first use it preserves and restrains; in the second it accuses; in the third it executes.

Thus, "because people cannot by their own powers live according to the law of God and because all are under sin and guilty of eternal wrath and death, we cannot be set free from sin and be justified through the law. Instead, what has been given to us is the promise of the forgiveness of sins and justification on account of Christ, who was given for us in order to make satisfaction for the sins of the world, and who has been appointed as the mediator and propitiator" (126.40). "The promise freely offers to us, who are oppressed by sin and death, reconciliation on account of Christ, which is received not by works, but by faith alone. This faith does not bring to God trust in our own merits, but only trust in the promise or

the mercy promised in Christ" (127.44). "Therefore it follows that personal faith-by which an individual believes that their sins are remitted on account of Christ and that God is reconciled and gracious on account of Christ-receives the forgiveness of sins and justifies us" (127.45). Christians now live according to faith in Christ, which is not the keeping of the commandments, but to "love God, truly to fear God, truly to assert that God hears prayer, to obey God in all afflictions, and to mortify concupiscence, etc. Thus because faith, which freely receives the forgiveness of sins, sets against the wrath of God Christ as the mediator and propitiator, it does not offer up our merits or our love. This faith is the true knowledge of Christ; it uses the benefits of Christ, it renews hearts, and it precedes our fulfillment of the law" (127.45-56).

The Gospel makes what Christians do acceptable and right to God only because of their faith in Christ. The basis of the acceptability of what Christians do by faith in Christ is Christ. That is a real comfort to consciences because they now trust Christ to make what they do right to God. God will accept what Christians do as right for the sake of Christ because God raised Christ from the dead. Consciences are no longer troubled by the anxiousness of whether what is done is right or wrong to God, as do debates about what is right according to the Law. "Nor can godly minds be fortified against despair unless they think that through mercy on account of Christ and not on account of the law they with certainty have both righteousness and eternal life. This conviction consoles, uplifts, and saves godly minds. Therefore when our adversaries speak about condign merit, they cast aside the teaching about faith and the mediator Christ and drive consciences to despair" (166-167). "Therefore the fulfillment of the law is not accepted on its own account but on account of faith" (145.259). "Good works do

not bring peace to the conscience" (170.358). "It is necessary to maintain that faith justifies [pleases God]. For how will Christ be the mediator if we do not use him as a mediator in justification [pleasing God] and if we do not realize that on his account we are regarded as righteous?" (131.69) "The forgiveness of sin [pleasing God] is something promised on account of Christ. Therefore it cannot be received in any other way than by faith alone, since a promise cannot be received in any other way than by faith alone" (134.84). "By faith alone we receive the benefits of Christ" (139.118). One of those benefits is pleasing God.

The Gospel of Christ frees Christians to "Live by the Spirit" (Galatians 5.16). This is The Second Use of the Gospel. Now, instead of the law restraining people, the Spirit restrains the sinner, which St. Paul called the flesh. "For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want" (Galatians 5.17). The Holy Spirit is now what restrains the sinner from doing whatever is wanted.

Faith in Christ frees us from the law in all its uses, even the false use called The Third Use of the Law, which is the law as a guide for the Christian life. "But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law" (Galatians 5.18). "My point is this: the law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God so as to nullify the promise. For if the inheritance [pleasing God] comes from the law, it no longer comes from the promise" (Galatians 3.17-18). That is how Paul bases his teaching on using the glory of Christ, answering positively the first question used to test all Christian teaching.

Faith in Christ frees us from the law in all its uses. "Now

before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith” (Galatians 3.23-26). Christians no longer look to the law to hold their hand and guide them. Christians follow Jesus. Jesus also lived by faith. Examples of Jesus living by faith instead of by the law are in all the Gospels.

Some examples are: Jesus heals on the Sabbath even though it was against the law (Luke 6.6-11). Jesus forgives sin, which is against the law. “After all, the law does not teach the free forgiveness of sins” (131.70). Jesus forgave the paralytic, whom friends let down through the roof (Luke 5.17). Jesus broke the law when he touched a leper and healed him (Luke 5.12-16). His example of living by faith is best illustrated by a woman in the city, who was a sinner. She bathed Jesus’ feet with her tears, dried them with her hair, kissed his feet, and anointed them with ointment. Jesus tells Simon the Pharisee that the woman did all that because she loved him a lot because she had been forgiven. “‘Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.’ Then Jesus said to her, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’ But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, ‘Who is this who even forgives sins?’ And Jesus said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace’” (Luke 7.36-50). The woman’s actions were pleasing to Jesus, not because they were according to the law, which they weren’t, but because they were done by faith working through love. She needed no law to tell her what to do to please God, that is Jesus. She was guided by the love of Christ.

The Second Use of the Gospel uses the fruits of the Spirit to

support the Christian's life of faith. When working in love to care for the neighbor, the best fruits to have are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, truthfulness, and self-control. Against such, and for them, there is no law (Galatians 5.22-23).

The Second Use of the Gospel uses the mind of Christ to guide the life of the Christian. The good works that follow faith are to "truly fear God, truly to love God, truly to call upon God, truly to be convinced that God hears us, and to expect help from God in death and all afflictions...and obedience to God in death and all afflictions so that we do not flee or avoid these things when God imposes them" (121.8). Christ exemplified such good works in his death on the cross.

The Second Use of the Gospel has Christians guided by Christ's new commandment that Christians love with the love Christ gives them. A Christian does not ask, "Is my act according to The Third Use of the Law?" A Christian is called to make people good to God through faith in Christ. So a Christian asks, "How can I give Christ's mercy and forgiveness to this person in this situation? How can I give Christ's goodness and benefits to this person? What do I do at this moment to care, serve, and support my neighbors so they see that Christ's mercy and forgiveness is for them?" Then the Christian trusts that for Christ's sake their way of giving Christ's mercy and serving their neighbor is acceptable to God for Christ's sake. Remember, the Spirit restrains the Christian from doing whatever they want.

The Second Use of the Gospel uses good works, not to please God, but to be a sign to the Christian of the Gospel and be a means to show others the mercy of Christ for them. "Indeed, our forgiving is not a good work, except when it is done by those already reconciled. Accordingly, our forgiving, which indeed

pleases God, follows divine forgiveness. However, Christ normally connects law and Gospel in this way so that he might convey both the teaching of faith and that of good works; so that we might also have many external signs of the Gospel and the forgiveness of sins, which remind and console us; and that we might be able to exercise faith in a variety of ways" (162).

Now the two questions used to test all Christian teaching will be applied to what "some say," as was listed earlier.

[Second and final section to come in next week's posting.]