

# What Is The Gospel?

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It has been asserted since Martin Luther that the gospel is singularly the message of the cross. He distinguished between a “theology of glory” and a “theology of the cross.” A theology of glory is one that teaches man “to do” or obey commands in order to be accepted by God. It is a theology of glory because “to do” glorifies man before God as being worthy of meriting salvation on the basis of obedience. Luther understood Roman Catholicism and certain reformers as well to be putting forth a “theology of glory” which can only lead to judgment and condemnation.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, Luther understood the biblical gospel to be not about our “doing” at all, but totally about God’s doing for us. The gospel, for Luther, was a message that was not to be obeyed, it was a message to be believed. The gospel is a message of God’s saving action at the cross. It is a message of the penal substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ. Jesus died *in behalf of* our sins and we benefit from His death by faith in His sacrifice for us and in His resurrection from that death on the third day. This, for Luther, is a scandal to man’s pride who wants to achieve his own redemption. The scandal of the cross is that there is nothing at all for us to do, but believe. We are saved by “faith alone.”

This view of Luther’s is elucidated clearly in his writings. In his short treatise, *A Brief Instruction on What to Look for in the Gospels*, Luther writes, “So you see that the gospel is really not a book of laws and commands which require deeds of us, but a book of divine promises in which God promises, offers, and gives all his possessions and benefits in Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

In his polemic work, *Answer to the Hyperchristian, Hyperspiritual, and Hyperlearned Book by Goat Emser in Leipzig - Including Some Thoughts Regarding his Companion, the Fool Murner*, Luther writes,

Thus we see in a masterful way St. Paul teaches us how to understand Christ, God’s grace, and the New Testament correctly - namely, that it is *nothing but*<sup>3</sup> [the story] of how Christ stepped into our sins, carried them on the cross in his flesh, and destroyed them, so that all who believe in him are set free from sin through him and receive the grace to enable them from now on to satisfy the law of God and the letter that kills, and to live in eternity....Now we see that all commandments are deadly, since divine commandments are also deadly.<sup>4</sup>

In Luther’s *Preface to the New Testament* he writes,

The gospel, then, is *nothing but* the preaching about Christ, Son of God and of David, true God and man, who by his death and resurrection has overcome for us the sin, death,

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1. Luther rejected Zwingli because the Swiss reformer’s understanding of the Lord’s Supper involved notions of covenantal fidelity to Jesus. This, for Luther, compromised the purity of the gospel as God’s action for us and nothing else. The Supper is the Gospel made visible. This was why breaking fellowship with Zwingli over the Supper was not understood as trifling over details, but about the gospel itself.

2. Ed. Timothy Lull, *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*. p.107

3. Italics are mine

4. Ibid. p.84

and hell of all men who believe in him....See to it, therefore, that you do not make a Moses out of Christ, or a book of laws and doctrines out of the gospel...”<sup>5</sup>

For Luther, the gospel is *nothing but* grace understood as unconditional promise. Requirements and demands are not and cannot be part of the gospel message. Luther scholar Paul Althaus describes Luther’s perspective,

Law and gospel have completely different and even opposite functions. The law demands that something be done or not be done; it accuses and condemns us because we have acted or failed to act in a way contrary to its demands. The gospel contains God’s promise in Christ. It proclaims that all the law’s demands have been met in Jesus Christ, that is, it preaches the forgiveness of sins.<sup>6</sup>

It is this understanding of the gospel that shapes contemporary evangelicalism. Our evangelistic efforts reflect Luther’s understanding of the gospel. When the gospel is preached, sin is presented as the real problem we all possess and the solution to that problem is faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ on our behalf. The good news is that Jesus died for our sins, God is offering us the free gift of salvation and all we have to do is believe. God has done it all in Christ, we just have to receive the free gift. Once we believe, we then receive God’s gift of forgiveness and we have assurance of our salvation. We are saved and assured of heaven in a moment. On this understanding, the gospel is good news because there is nothing we have “to do” but believe in what God has done. Typically, a person is then strongly encouraged to read the Bible and attend a Bible-believing church. However, they are not to do these things in order to be saved because, according to this version of the gospel, reading the Bible and belonging to a church are activities that are not necessary for salvation. To say that would be a denial of the gospel. Historically, this is where evangelicalism finds its unifying center.

However, on the point of the importance of obedience, fellowship, and the spiritual disciplines such as prayer and Bible reading following salvation, evangelicalism splinters off into different viewpoints. For those most concerned with protecting the purity of the *freedom* of the gospel, the word *necessity* is never used. For them, nothing is needful but faith in Jesus’ death in resurrection. Anything we do beyond that is pursuing “God’s best” for us in this life and rewards in the next, but salvation itself is no longer a concern. For this group it is possible to be a “carnal Christian,” that is, to be held captive by sin and still be considered a Christian, because after all, being a Christian is fundamentally not about doing anything, but believing. For them, to talk of the need for obedience, prayer, church attendance and Bible reading is to compromise the purity of the gospel. For others, there is a desire to honor the parts of the Bible that seem to place obedience, fellowship, prayer and Bible reading in very high regard. This group teaches that, while these things are not necessary for salvation, they are necessary to prove that you are, in fact, saved. So the emphasis is more pronounced on the necessity of discipleship, not in order to be accepted, but to show that you have been accepted. For a person to lack in obedience, Bible reading, prayer and church attendance calls into question the validity of their faith.

The presentation of the gospel for both groups would be very similar and reflects our

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5. Ibid. p.115

6. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*. p.256

Reformation heritage from Martin Luther. The gospel is the message of God's gift of forgiveness in Christ to be received by faith alone. The good news is not about Bible reading, obedience or church attendance, because these are things we do. This conception of the gospel is what unifies all branches of evangelicalism. Evangelicalism has been faithful to Luther's conception of the gospel. But was Luther correct about the gospel as it is biblically defined? Is it true that the gospel is about, as he says, "nothing but" God's promise in Christ? To answer this question, we must go to the Scriptures. What follows is a survey of key texts that employ the term "gospel."<sup>7</sup> What we must evaluate is how the biblical writers used the term and what they meant by it. This is the surest way for us to determine if we are using it in a way that corresponds to their understanding of the gospel message. The first concern cannot be whether we are faithful to Luther or our reformation heritage, as important as that may be, but whether we are faithful to God in following Luther's understanding, as our Lord reveals His will in the Scriptures.

### *The Gospel According to Isaiah*

We first see the use of the word "gospel" or "good news" in the Old Testament. Isaiah 40:10 is part of a prophetic announcement concerning a person who would come in the future and announce the gospel. What would that good news be? It would be the announcement of the coming of the Lord and all that the coming of the Lord would mean, "...say to the towns of Judah, 'Here is your God!' See the Lord comes with power and his arm rules for him. See his reward is with him..." Here we read that the good news is the message of God's future rule and the blessings that come with it.

The next place we read of the gospel is in Isaiah 52:7, "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, 'Your God reigns!' The future prophet will bring the good news that "Your God reigns." Once again we see that the lordship of God as the One who reigns is synonymous with the good news. We also see that God's rule will result in peace and salvation.

The next place we read of the gospel is in Isaiah 61:1, "The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor." Once again, the future reign of God is in view and this time the future blessings of God's reign is emphasized. This future reign will set captives free and punish the wicked with vengeance. The good news is the glad tidings of God's lordship and all the benefits His lordship brings to His people.

What we have seen thus far is that the gospel as understood by Isaiah consisted in the proclamation of God's lordship. "Your God reigns!" is the gospel according to Isaiah, because it is God's future rule that will bring with it the blessings of salvation for His people and the punishment of all the wicked. Of course this message of good news is elaborated on throughout Isaiah. Isaiah's prophecy is full of descriptions regarding what this future rule would entail.

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7. This is not an exhaustive survey analyzing every occurrence of the word, though that would be a fascinating study. This is not necessary to get at the intended meaning. I have chosen important passages in Isaiah, the Gospels, and from Paul's letter to the Romans. These passages are important because in each instance the word "gospel" is used to describe God's covenantal relationship to His people.

Following Isaiah 52's explicit mention of the gospel you have Isaiah 53 which prophesies a future suffering servant who would take upon himself the sins of God's people. Nowhere in Isaiah's description of the "suffering servant" is the word gospel used. However, it is clear that what we have in Isaiah 53 is greater detail of how God's future reign would bring forgiveness of sins. So we can understand Isaiah 53 to be describing how it is that God's coming to His people is, in fact, good news. It is good news because the Lord will reveal Himself as a gracious, merciful and forgiving God who will be able to pass over the sins of His people because of His sacrificial atonement.

But that is not all. The gospel or good news of God's future reign also entails the giving of commands, of righteous laws given anew. This we see in Isaiah 51:4, "Listen to me, my people; hear me, my nation: The law will go out from me; my justice will become a light to the nations." In this passage we read that the law is understood to work "salvation" for God's people. "My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way, and my arm will bring justice to the nations." In Isaiah 51:4 "the law" is announced as God's justice. The law is depicted as "going out" from God. The very next verse follows this flow of thought and describes God's righteousness as drawing near speedily. So the law, or God's justice goes out from God, which is God's righteousness drawing near to men and bringing salvation. As with Isaiah 53, we do not see the word "gospel" used. But just as with Isaiah 53, there is no reason to not see that Isaiah 51 is the unpacking of what the gospel is. So from Isaiah, we see that the gospel or "good news" is the message of God's lordship which brings with it salvation for God's people. This salvation is accomplished through the forgiveness of sins *and* the giving of God's law as a light to the nations. The important point for our consideration here, is that the giving of commands as a light to the nations is to be understood as part of the gospel, or good news, of God's future reign announced by Isaiah.

### *The Gospel According to John, Jesus and the Disciples*

In the Gospels we read of John the Baptist's proclamation of the good news. His preaching is described as a proclamation of the gospel in Luke 3:18, "And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them." We read that John's preaching consisted in "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Lk.3:3). In Matthew's Gospel, John's proclamation is described as commanding repentance on the basis of the fact that the kingdom of heaven is drawing near to them. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Mt.3:2). John himself describes his own ministry in which he "baptizes with water for repentance" (Mt.3:11). We get a sense of how this was happening from Matthew 3:6, "Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan river." So John was proclaiming the good news of the coming kingdom and this proclamation demanded repentance from God's people. A public confession of sins and water baptism was the public recognition of their need for forgiveness. This coincides with the promised blessing announced by Isaiah in Isaiah 53. However, repentance also includes a resolve to turn from sinful rebellion to doing God's will. The Old Testament backdrop, which prophesied this preaching of repentance is found in Deuteronomy 30:1-3. "...and when you return to the Lord your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all

the nations where he scattered you.” Notice “returning to the Lord” means a new resolve to obey him, to reject idolatry and sinful ways and to turn again to God’s ways, then and only then will they find God’s compassion. This is fleshed out in John’s ministry. John came preaching “repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” For John, and consistent with Deuteronomy, a renewed resolve to obey God preceded the assurance of sins forgiven.

With Jesus we see this even more clearly laid out. The proclamation of the Lord’s coming rule and reign, or the Kingdom, is equated with “the good news.” “After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ‘The time has come,’ he said, ‘The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!’”(Mk.1:14,15)! Here we see the similarity with John’s preaching. The gospel or the good news *is* the message of God’s coming rule or reign, or in short, his kingdom. Part of the good news is the granting of the opportunity for repentance. Both John and Jesus represent the gospel as consisting in the promise of compassion and the demand for repentance, and it is equally clear that compassion would not be found where repentance did not exist. The consistency with Isaiah’s message is obvious and Jesus explicitly aligns himself as the subject of Isaiah’s message (Lk.4:14-21). Isaiah’s prophecy of the future proclamation of good news included forgiveness of sins (Isaiah 53), but also with it is the proclamation of God’s law being proclaimed as a “light to the nations” (Isaiah 51). John and Jesus’ good news of the kingdom included the promise of the forgiveness of sins, but also required repentance and the production of the fruit of obedience to God’s commands in keeping with it. The blessings of peace with God would not be found apart from the demand to repent.

Jesus commissions the disciples to preach this good news of God as well. He told them, “As you go, preach this message: the kingdom of heaven is near!” (Mt.10:7). Luke adds, “So they set out and went from village to village, preaching the gospel and healing people everywhere” (Lk.9:6). What is remarkable in these passages is that the gospel is being proclaimed prior to there being any knowledge of Jesus’ death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins. The way of God’s forgiveness had yet to be revealed. This is clearly the case, as Luke describes the same gospel preaching disciples being totally mystified by what Jesus meant concerning the prediction of his coming death in Luke 18:31-34. “The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about.” How could they preach the gospel when they had no conception of what Jesus’ impending death and resurrection was all about? How could Jesus and John preach the gospel when Jesus’ substitutionary atonement was not at all present in the message? They could if the good news is not limited to a message about Jesus’ death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins but also includes a more expansive proclamation of God’s rule or reign in Christ, or in other words, about the Kingdom of God.

The post-resurrection preaching of the disciples is remarkably, but not surprisingly, consistent with John and Jesus before them. We find this, among other places, in Acts 2:38. Peter indicts his fellow Jews of being guilty of killing the Messiah himself and they are “cut to the heart.” They plead with Peter for a solution in light of this tragic situation. As Luke describes it, “Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.’” Once again, Peter commands repentance, which is a turning from sinful rebellion and to allegiance to the Lord “for the forgiveness of sins.” From these events,

and in Peter's preaching, we are able to discern the major elements of Deuteronomy 30:1-3. The comparison below makes this clear:

**Deut.30:1**, "When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart....."

**Acts 2:37**, "And when the people heard this, they were cut to the heart..."

**Deut.30:2**, ".....and when you and your children return to the Lord your God and obey him with all your heart.."

**Acts 2:38**, "repent, and be baptized..."

**Deut.30:3**, ".....then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you from all the nations where he scattered you. Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather you and bring you back."

**Acts 2:38,39**, "...for the forgiveness of sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off- for all whom the Lord our God will call."

Through the post-resurrection preaching of the apostles, it becomes clear *how* God can forgive our rebellion. He is able through the cross of Christ. But it is equally clear that repentance, or renewed resolve to live by God's ways, is the means by which we gain from Christ's substitutionary atonement. In other words, the gospel proclaimed by Jesus, John and the apostles included the demand for repentance, which means turning from sin to God's ways as expressed by His commands. This was the way God's people could be assured of receiving the blessings of God's forgiveness.

So far, we can discern a consistent biblical witness that the good news consists in the promise of the forgiveness of sins to be sure, but it also consists in the "granting of" the demand for a whole hearted turning to the Lord's ways.<sup>8</sup>

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8. The reformed tradition has wrestled with how to think about repentance given their commitment to "faith alone." One of the first confessions, the Lutheran Augsburg Confession of 1530, understands repentance to consist in contrition and faith as follows, "*Now repentance consisteth properly of two parts: One is contrition, or terrors stricken into the conscience through the acknowledgment of sin; the other is faith, which is conceived by the Gospel, or absolution, and doth believe that for Christ's sake sins be forgiven, and comforteth the conscience, and freeth it from terrors. Then should follow good works, which are fruits of repentance.*" Here repentance is understood as a product of faith, just as it is a product of fear. This seems to be an accurate representation of the biblical testimony. However, Lutheran tradition, presumably recognizing the danger this understanding poses to "faith alone," begins to state its case differently with the Formula of Concord of 1576 as follows: "*We believe, teach, and confess that, although antecedent contrition and subsequent new obedience do not appertain to the article of justification before God, yet we are not to imagine any such justifying faith as can exist and abide with a purpose of evil, to wit; of sinning and acting contrary to conscience.*" (Article 3 part 8) With this understanding, faith no longer comes under the heading of repentance (antecedent contrition) as with Augsburg, but stands apart from faith as a separate entity which coincides with the "new obedience." In other words, here, "antecedent contrition" does not "consist in" faith as with Augsburg, but is a necessary appendage to it. The reformed Westminster Confession of 1647 uses very similar language as follows: "*Repentance unto life is an evangelical grace, the doctrine whereof is to be preached by every minister of the gospel, as well as that of faith in Christ.*" (Ch.15 part 1) "*Although repentance be not rested in as any satisfaction for sin, or any cause of this pardon thereof, which is the act of God's free grace in Christ, yet is it of such necessity to all sinners that none may expect pardon without it.*" (Ch.15 part3) Once again, repentance is

## *The Gospel According to Paul*

The first words of the first chapter of Paul's magnum opus, the letter to the church in Rome, Paul describes his purpose as an apostle of Jesus Christ. The proclamation of the gospel is his purpose. Paul begins this letter introducing himself as "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures..."(Rom.1:1,2). Paul sees himself as continuing where Isaiah and others had left off. Or maybe it is better to say, that Paul saw himself as one of those Isaiah was talking about who would come in the future and proclaim, "Your God reigns!" Paul has been "set apart *for the gospel*." He goes on to say in verse three that this gospel is "concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord." In this shorthand description of Jesus as the focus of the gospel the crucifixion is passed over and he goes right to the resurrection as the crucial element which "designates" Jesus as the Son of God. His final description reveals the reason why, as Paul describes Jesus as "Jesus Christ our Lord." He is presently our Lord, and it is the resurrection which uniquely makes this possible. Crucifixion alone cannot make this possible. At best crucifixion without resurrection makes Jesus a martyr for God, but in no way could he be considered as Lord. Resurrection, however, establishes the fact of Christ's present and very real lordship. This connects Paul very nicely with Isaiah's foretelling of the announcement, "Your God reigns," but now filling it out with specific content with the risen Christ. Paul now goes further and describes this risen Christ as the one through whom the apostles have received their commission, "through whom we have received grace and apostleship for the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all nations" (v.5). A mutually interpreting parallel statements become evident as can be seen below:

**Romans 1:1**, "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ set apart *for the gospel of God*..."

**Romans 1:5**, through whom we have received grace and apostleship *for the obedience of faith*..."<sup>9</sup>

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partitioned from justification as it is deemed an "evangelical grace" (a post-conversion grace) and asserted as not "any cause of this pardon thereof." The important point for this paper, is that Peter's statement, "Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins" is rendered confessionally inaccurate because "antecedent contrition....does not appertain to the article of justification before God" and the Formula of Concord in its rejection of false dogma makes the assertion that justification appertains to "nothing but" the forgiveness of sins!(Article 3 part 3 under antithesis) So Peter's statement, "Repent (have antecedent contrition) "for the forgiveness of sins"(justification) is confessionally wrong. This progressive move to isolate faith in Christ's satisfaction of God's justice at the cross, and not in a change of life(repentance) for the forgiveness of sins (justification) would appear to have moved us confessionally away from apostolic preaching of the gospel.

9. How this phrase is to be taken is greatly contested. It could be understood either as "the obedience *which is* faith" or as "the obedience *which derives from* faith." The first identifies faith as the obedience required(a genitive of apposition), the second understands faith to be the source of consequent obedience. (a genitive of source) As always, we must suppress the urge to quickly choose the option that best supports our theology and let context lead us to the best option. I prefer the second option due to Paul's very similar statement in Romans 15:18. "For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience - by word and deed..." Prior to this statement, Paul describes this as "the priestly service of the gospel."(v.16) After this statement Paul states that this "fulfills the ministry of the gospel."(v.19) Paul describes bringing the Gentiles to obedience as making the Gentiles an "acceptable offering, sanctified by the Holy Spirit."(v.16) Paul then concludes

This helps us to discern what Paul understood to be the task and goal of gospel proclamation. It is to bring the nations into obedience to the risen Christ who is in fact Lord. The good news is that God himself, the risen Lord, is calling all nations to Himself. As we saw in Isaiah 53, this good news includes how it is God can receive rebels and enemies without destroying them. It is because He Himself becomes the “once for all” sacrifice of atonement (Rom.6:10; Heb.7:27; 1 Pet.3:18). But this good news also includes obedience to God’s law as a light to the nations. God provides the way back, but He also provides a way of being in coming back or “returning” as Deuteronomy describes it. This *way of being* is also good news as it is a call of grace and freedom from sin’s power and a call to righteousness.

This makes sense of Paul’s desire to preach the gospel to the believers in Rome. Paul is not saying he plans on preaching Christ’s substitutionary atonement over and over and nothing else, as crucial and central as this part of the gospel is. This makes Paul’s letter as a whole a gospel letter. It is the gospel according to Paul, just as Mark’s record of Christ’s life and teaching is a gospel book. (see Mark 1:1, “The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ...” ) He wants to preach the gospel to believers, not just to remind them of the necessity of Christ’s death, although surely he did that, but also preach the commands of God that brings about the obedience of faith as a “light to the nations” for the glory of God.(Isaiah 51:4)

### *The Deficiency of Luther’s Understanding*

From this survey of biblical texts having to do with “the good news of the kingdom,” it becomes clear that Luther’s view is deficient at key points. Luther failed to grasp the biblical fact that the good news of the kingdom included the commands of God that were to be done by faith (Rom.1:5;16:25,26). Luther’s failure to see this led him to make the false claim that the gospel is “nothing but” a message of promise in Christ. He failed to appreciate the fact that the gospel of the kingdom is a “light to the nations” not only in what it provides by way of promise(Isaiah 53), but also what it requires by way of commands (Isaiah 51/ Mt.5-7). These commands in Christ are just as much “the righteousness of God in the gospel”(Rom.1:16/ Isaiah 51) as the promised provision of Christ’s atonement. This biblical reality has been appreciated more recently by such writers as Herman Ridderbos who can say,

In Jesus’ commandments, also, it is God himself who sanctifies his name and saves his people. Good works issue from his sovereign fatherly decree and from his powerfully effective fatherly communion. The radical demand, the positing of conditions, the promise of reward, proceed from the Father’s will of salvation and are borne by it. In the form which these things are *included in the gospel* they belong to the new covenant that has begun with the coming of Christ, to the gift of sonship in the kingdom of heaven.<sup>10</sup>

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his letter by stating, “but now has been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations (Gentiles), according to the command of the eternal God, *to bring about the obedience of faith*”- (Rom.16:26). When all the evidence is gathered, the most likely conclusion is that Paul sees the gospel as that which “sanctifies” the nations (Gentiles), or leads them to be obedient to God- an obedience *derived from* faith. This aligns with Paul’s similar, yet more obvious, use of the genitive of source elsewhere.( 1 Thess. 1:2 - “work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope..”)

10. Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*. p.252



Likewise, Dietrich Bonhoeffer breaks with his Lutheran tradition with these assertions:

Costly grace is the gospel which must be *sought* again and again, the gift which we must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives man a man his only true life. When we are called to follow Christ, we are summoned to an exclusive attachment to his person. The grace of his call bursts all bonds of legalism. It is a gracious call, a gracious commandment. It transcends the difference between law and the gospel. Christ calls, the disciple follows: that is grace and commandment in one. 'I will walk in liberty, for I seek thy commandments' (Ps.119:45).

Bonhoeffer asserts that the gospel is "costly grace", a grace that calls us to follow Jesus Christ. The grace of the gospel is, in fact, the commandment of Jesus to follow in his ways. From the above statements, it seems quite clear, that both Ridderbos and Bonhoeffer make decisive breaks with their own reformation heritage from Luther, who taught that the grace of the gospel can be "nothing but" the promise of God held out at the cross. From the biblical evidence it seems equally clear that both of these men have views that more accurately reflect the biblical view of the gospel.

Of course, the ramifications of this observation is both striking and far-reaching for evangelical theology and in consequence, for it's evangelistic proclamation of the gospel. If this view of the gospel is correct, then it must be concluded that evangelical proclamation of the gospel which understands faithful gospel preaching to be "nothing but" a message of God's promised mercy at the cross is a serious distortion of the truth. What has been characterized as "faithful preaching" has been a tragic misrepresentation of God's will in the proclamation of His gospel. The great fear in evangelicalism since Luther is that we add to the gospel. This, of course, we must never do. However, it must be considered with sober biblical reflection whether evangelicalism in its zeal to not add to the message, has in fact suppressed crucial elements of it. This was the claim of Dr. C van der Waal,

To say that the new covenant knows no conditions, is to rob the gospel of its obligatory character. In the established churches as well as on the mission field, this antinomianism has caused great harm. An easygoing Christianity has evolved, which has never learned to come to terms with life, since salvation is a fact anyway. The indicative has become vague and therefore there no ears are left to hear the imperative.<sup>11</sup>

It is certain that we must fear adding to what God has said. This cannot be disputed and must be a constant warning to the church. It is also easy to show, though beyond the purpose of this paper, that Roman Catholicism is guilty of this charge in quite radical ways. Clearly, however, this is not the only danger to the church. The apostle John's warning to his readers reflects this reality;

"I warn everyone who hears the words of prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything

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<sup>11</sup>C van der Waal, *The Covenantal Gospel*. p.103

to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And of anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book”(Rev.22:18,19)

John’s immediate concern is for his composition, the book of Revelation, as it has been given by God. But if John was instructed to issue this warning concerning one book in the canon, is it not reasonable to conclude that the warning extends to the gospel message as it is revealed through the entire canonical witness? From Paul, this seems very reasonable, who states, “...even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned”(Gal.1:8)!

If this view is correct, that the gospel consists in the giving of commands as well as the promise of forgiveness, then we must reconsider what it is we present to the world as the gospel. We must follow faithfully in the footsteps of Isaiah, John, the apostles and Jesus Christ Himself. It is safe to say, that if we cannot bring ourselves to say what they said then in our “gospel preaching” now, then we may be in step with contemporary evangelicalism, but we are out of step with the Spirit and the very Scriptures we claim to be faithful to. This is relatively easy to show. In contemporary preaching it is common-place to offer the forgiveness of God won by Jesus at the cross by believing “Jesus died for you on the cross.” The good news is presented as consisting in the freeness of the gift, as understood to be that all you have to do is believe you are sinner and Jesus died for you. Some traditions have you come forward to the front of the “gospel meeting” and others see themselves as trusting the Spirit to work as they let you go your way to deal with God in your own way and “as He leads.” But the unifying center in both traditions considers it central to the gospel that the offer is free of all conditions but believing. It is by “faith alone” that the benefits of Christ’s atonement are gained.

But what would it sound like to stand in front of our gospel meetings and preach like the apostle Peter? We certainly need to do what he did, and chronicle the guilt of mankind against God. Sin is the issue, we have indeed gone our own way. God’s judgment is certain and He has resolved to wipe from the face of the earth all those who continue to rebel against Him in sin. Hell is the future for all those who continue to go their own way. Everyone stands in agreement here. Let’s imagine that people, by the grace of God are “cut to the heart” and afraid for their lives. Now comes the crucial moment of presenting God’s solution. We now stand as the people Isaiah prophesied about who would announce “good news” to the world. Here is the crucial question that determines our faithfulness. Would we be able to say with Peter, “Repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins!” In other words, would we be able to say what follows? -

“Turn now from your rebellious ways and to the ways of God. Take yourself off the throne of your life, and recognize Jesus as your one and only Lord. Show your resolve through baptism, enter the waters of baptism to show your need for God and His ways. This is what God Himself commands for the forgiveness of your sins. If you do this, if you resolve to leave the ways of sin and rebellion, and follow the ways of the Lord all the days of your life, then and only then will you be freed from the destructive tyranny of sin which promises only death, and then and only then will you stand forgiven of your rebellion and sin, you will be showered with the blessing of God’s mercy. Jesus’ own blood will cover you from His sacrificial death at the cross. No longer will God find you guilty of your sins, but innocent because of His death for you. Not only will you find forgiveness today, but you will find His mercy new everyday as you continue

to turn from sin to His gracious ways- this promise is for you and your children and all whom the Lord our God will call. Will you serve the ways of sin that lead to death and eternal destruction, or the ways of life, the way of the Lord that leads to life? Jesus Himself said, 'I am the way and the truth and life, no one comes to the Father but by me.' Decide now who it is you will serve!"

My hunch is that contemporary evangelicals would take offense at many aspects of the above presentation of the gospel. But the objections would not be because the above statement is out of step with Peter, or Jesus, or John, or Isaiah. What is written above is simply an unpacking of what Peter himself preached. It is an exposition of what Peter meant by "repent" and "baptism" as the means by which the benefits of Christ's cross for the "forgiveness of sins" is obtained. Of course, someone can object that this is simply my interpretation of what Peter meant. This objection can be tested biblically by simply asking what the biblical writers meant by "repent." If it is shown that "repent" means turning from our sinful ways to God's righteous ways, then the above statement is shown to be quite accurate in its exposition of Peter's preaching. The fact is, "repent" is commonly recognized by evangelicals themselves as meaning precisely that. The biblical witness is quite explicit in the regard and only a desire to escape this predicament can lead to any other conclusion. This of course paints them into a corner. If this is what repentance means, then objections to the above interpretation evaporate. The question now becomes one of humility. Are we willing to question the way things have been done in the past? Do we fear the Lord more than the difficulties to be faced as a result of embracing the biblical understanding of the gospel? It seems that this has always been the crucial question for God's people. It becomes a question of repentance and the willingness to do so. Will we leave our own ways in order to follow His in the proclamation of His truth?

May our Lord bless His church and His gospel through serious, earnest and sober reflection on His truth as revealed by His Word. May God humble His servants and give eyes to see and ears to hear His Word in all its clarity and truth.