

Law Orientation

Getting Things out of Perspective.

Three blind men were asked to say what they thought an elephant was like. One groped for its tail, and said, “An elephant is like a rope.” Another put his arms around a leg and said, “An elephant is like a tree-trunk.” Another felt its ear and said, “An elephant is like a canvas sail.”

That kind of thing happens in theology. A chaplain was giving a sermon on 1 Peter 2:24, “He Himself carried our sins in His body to the cross, so that we might die to sins and live to righteousness.” His theme was: “Why did Jesus carry our sins in His body to the cross? That we should be let off? No, but that we should live to righteousness.” That put the whole of the Gospel out of perspective.

The trouble is that human beings are by nature skewed to the Law instead of to the Gospel. Another evidence of that is a section in Nicky Gumbel’s *Challenging Lifestyle*. He asserts that the Golden Rule is the summit of Jesus’ teaching. Certainly, Jesus said that, “Do to others everything that you want people to do to you” is “the Law and the Prophets.” However, is that the summit of His teaching? What about the first table of the Law? Besides, that is Law. The Law was an important part of Jesus’ teaching, but it was not His essential work. Surely the summit of Jesus’ teaching was the Gospel, and we have it in such statements as “The Son of Man has not come to be served but to serve and give His life as a ransom for many (Mt 20:28, Mk 10:45). That is getting His teaching in proper perspective.

The true perspective in Christian theology is that forgiveness, justification, and the salvation of sinners is the heart of the Scriptures. After Paul set out the Gospel, he said, “Therefore do we make the Law invalid through faith? Certainly not! Rather, we establish the Law.” Sadly, many Christians do not understand in which ways the Gospel establishes the Law. It is the answer to the Law’s condemnation of all people as sinners. Christ’s obedience removes completely our obligation to fulfil the Law to obtain God’s favour, because the gracious Gospel is free. The Gospel becomes the motive and the power for the Christian to respond in love to God and the neighbour under the guidance of the Ten Commandments, and as his willing and proper response.

However, many Christians do not understand faith as pure reception of Jesus Christ’s work as Saviour. The *Westminster Confession* of 1647 defines “saving faith” in such a way that it includes, first, the acceptance of “whatsoever is revealed in the Word,” and, secondly, a conduct that conforms with “each particular passage of it”, “yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God” (XIV). This defines saving faith differently from trust in God’s gracious promise for Christ’s sake. If proclamation of the Law had been part of the real work of Christ, then obedience to God’s commands would have been the necessary counterpart of trust in God’s gracious promise. Although the *Westminster Confession* teaches grace alone and faith alone, the perspective of faith is wrong. The Law stands beside the Gospel, on the same footing, as a part of the same eternal treasure.

The Pharisees of Jesus’ day got things out of perspective, too. They said that it was only by God’s grace that they were able to live inside the Law. The Pharisee whom Jesus described praying in the temple began his prayer with an acknowledgement of God’s grace alone: “God, I thank You.” Jewish prayers regularly began by blessing God. However, he thanked God that he was “not like other people.” The rest of his prayer was boasting about what he was able to achieve by God’s grace. The point is that people can say “by grace alone” when they do not include “faith alone.”

The same lack of perspective is what we pointed out in the bulletin last week. The Joint Declaration on Justification between the Roman Catholics and the churches of the Lutheran World Federation talks about grace alone. However, it nowhere affirms faith alone, and almost invariably couples faith with renewal and works of love. .

What are we to make of the assertion that God’s purposes are fulfilled in us when we obey His commandments joyfully and willingly? The right perspective is that God’s purposes are fulfilled in us poor sinners when we receive His free gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation. Our lives continue to be far from what they ought to be, and, because of our sinful natures, our response to God’s commandments is not as willing or as joyful as it should be. Sanctified lives are our proper response, but the achievement is far from the ideal (Rm 7:14-24; I Jn 1:8-10). In proper perspective, obedience has its place as response. It is not part of faith itself.

It is easy to ridicule “cheap grace,” as Bonhoeffer did. However, God’s grace really is free, and saving faith really is alone, because the Law and our works have been excluded. The odd thing is that, when people get these things out perspective, other things also go wrong. At the time of the Reformation, the “Enthusiasts” insisted on obedience. They criticised the “placid flesh” of Wittenberg, where people “chalked up their carousing

to Christ's charge." They were not satisfied with putting all their trust in the forgiving grace of God, but also wished to do something. This kind of lack of perspective eventuated in the carnage of the Peasants' War, and Thomas Müntzer's attempt to establish the kingdom of God at ù. Obedience to moral law, which the German Rationalists put on the same footing alongside their faith in God, ended in atheism and collapse of all morality.

It is the same kind of lack of perspective that changes the Gospel into a social Gospel, in an attempt to make this world a better place. It is the pursuit of "green", political, and social causes in the name of the Gospel. These are all products of a view that saving faith includes obedience as an essential part. The Golden Rule is not the summit of Jesus teaching, although He certainly taught it. The Golden Rule does not constitute the essential Gospel. If keeping the Golden Rule is Christianity, there is no longer any need for the Lamb of God, who has borne the sin of the world. If that were so, we would not even need Christ even as a Lawgiver. For pagans, all the way from Confucius, the Stoics, and Epictetus to everybody's common sense is able to state the Golden Rule, at least in its negative form.

Dr H Sasse wrote: "The tragic experience of modern Christianity, which has turned the Gospel into a system of morality, should influence all of us - both Lutherans and Reformed - to heed the admonition of the *Formula of Concord*, which warns against a false conception of the Gospel, whereby 'the Gospel is again converted into a law, the merit of Christ and the Holy Scripture obscured, Christians robbed of true consolation, and the door opened again to the papacy.' It must be conceded here that the old Confession of our church indicated here, with prophetic insight, the symptoms of the grave disease that was later to afflict evangelical Christianity. It would pay to investigate carefully and discover whether it did not also point correctly to the cause of this disease. The cause would ultimately be found, not in the errors of Pietism and the Enlightenment, but in the fact that Luther's understanding of the Gospel and of faith was obscured as early as the sixteenth century, by a new confusion of Law and Gospel (*Here We Stand*, page 124).