



The Extravagant Gospel¹

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The gospel is not something that Christians “live out.” The gospel is neither the means nor the goal of our work to improve the things of this old world, such as politics, our own status in this life, or our churches. All of these matters are under the jurisdiction of the law and the realm of the old kingdom. The gospel is, however, this one man, Jesus Christ, who is God, who was crucified for our sins and raised for our justification (Rom 4:25). Therefore, the gospel is not our work. Christ is not our deed. Rather, the gospel is the work of God in Christ crucified for the sake of sinners, given and imputed to the ungodly. God does everything; we do nothing. This is what we mean by the gospel, after all.

The tsunami of the blood of Christ covers not just the coastline of the fruit of sin, such as adultery, murder, gossip, stealing, or drunkenness, but comes all the way inland to the depth of the heart that does not want to be made righteous, to be justified, or to receive salvation by anything external to the thing the heart loves most: the “free will,” autonomy, or nowadays the claim of “standing in one’s own truth.” The extravagant tsunami of the blood of Christ in the waters of one’s baptism to save unrepentant, self-righteous sinners is what the world, the devil, and the old sinful self believed, and continues to believe, was defeated by the seawall of

¹ Martin Luther, *Smalcald Articles* III.4, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 319.

Christians have a bad habit of trying to mold the gospel into something that fits them, their lives, and their ideals. But the gospel of Christ Jesus is a “tide wave” that buries the old and promises new life for all Christians.

our denial and crucifixion of the one who came to actually save us from our sins. In God's extravagant gospel of the unconditional forgiveness of sin, Christ is not merely forgiving our obvious sinful fruit but actually strikes at the root of the evil tree of our hyper-spiritual, hyper-religious, decadent piety through the bombshell proclamation of the cross of Christ alone.

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THE TSUNAMI OF THE GOSPEL

In his *Smalcald Articles*, Luther catalogs the tsunami of Christ's extravagant gospel with which he is bringing the eschatological end and new beginning to real, live, present sinners who are within earshot of his promises.

We now want to return to the gospel, which gives guidance and help against sin in more than one way, because God is *extravagantly* rich in his grace: *first*, through the spoken word, in which the forgiveness of sins is preached to the whole world (which is the proper function of the gospel); *second*, through baptism; *third*, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar; *fourth*, through the power of the keys and also through the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters. Matthew 18:20: "Where two or three are gathered . . ."²

In the extravagance of his grace, Christ leaves no room for the strivings of the sinner—no room for a moral reformation, no room for the free will to improve according to the law, even and especially some special Christian use the law, no room for preparation of the heart before he arrives, no room for identifying with any political party, no room for solidarity with the poor, the widow, the orphan, or the outcast of society. Into all this worldly striving by the will, Jesus Christ inserts himself, whole and complete, withholding nothing, true God and true man, to justify and make new life through the unconditional, reckless, and extravagant forgiveness of sins, without the law to help him. Such an interruption, a cutting off at the knees of human efforts, happens when Jesus Christ arrives through the simplest of things: the external word.

² Luther, *Smalcald Articles*, 319, italics mine.

This external proclamation of the word of Christ has both the law, which kills, and the gospel, which alone creates anew. This law, which kills, and the *particula exclusiva* (the exclusive particle) of *sola gratia* (grace alone) is why, at first, Christ and his work on the cross are experienced as the exact opposite of extravagance to the old Adam who loves the *homo religiosis* (religion of the old Adam) of the journey of the soul. For the old Adam, this Christ and his excessive forgiveness is not extravagant grace but theft and the intolerable denigration of the first article of the Creed. Thus, the rebellion between God and those who fashion themselves as *creatrix divinitatis* (creator of divinity) ensues. The hatred of God's terrible grace (*charophobia*) is revealed.

The rebellion takes this particular form: the Lord of life came into the world to save us from sin and eternal death, and we murdered him. This poses a predicament for our supposed self-empowered ascension into the divine realm. The cross of Christ, however, is not just this one word of the law that accuses the sinner unto death for the sin of deicide (the killing of God), but it also is the word of the gospel that raises the dead, entirely without the law. The *creatrix divinitatis* masquerades as the giver of new life, hope, and a future. As the wisdom of the old Adam goes, you only need to take the time to look deep within your heart and there you will find your true self, your purpose in life. Is this what Adam and Eve should have done? Is that what Israel should have done? Would the disciples have been better off if the message wasn't "This is my Son in whom I am well pleased, listen to *Him*" but instead "Listen to what pleases *your own heart*"? If what is deep in the human heart is good, then why in world did Christ die on the cross?

TWO ABSOLUTES: YOUR TRUTH AND CHRIST THE TRUTH

The cross reveals that the work of Christ to save is not your own. You are not Christ; your truth cannot justify and save you. In our day, we have equated being right before humanity (*coram hominibus*) or being declared innocent in a court of law, even and especially the Supreme Court, with being righteous before God (*coram deo*) or being declared innocent in the heavenly courts by your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We are concerned not so much with God being angry with us but that our next-door neighbor, our employer, our family member, or our spouse would not hold our sins against us. This is none other than to exchange the truth about God for a lie and to fear and worship the creature and not the Creator. Moreover, we pray for our neighbors that they will evolve to no longer see and reveal our sins, but rather, affirm them as who "I" am. We want them to affirm and accept the "truth" that I have found while I was off dumpster diving in my heart. But "the heart is deceitful above all things, and cannot be cured" (Jer 17:9).

In Luther's *The Bondage of the Will*, he observes that one of Erasmus's errors is that he believes the free will and the Holy Spirit are identical.³ The same error

³ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (London: J. Clarke, 1957), 257.

in our day is repeated. The current popular belief is that in order to find one's true identity, one ought to embrace one's own truth. This, then, is to look deep within the self long enough to discover, presumably, a pearl in the vein of Anselm or a divine spark in the manner of Origen of Alexandria, or perhaps you will find the "indwelling" of the divinity of Christ in the mode of Andreas Osiander, so as not to be pulled down into indignity, shame, and dishonor posed by the bloody death of Christ's body. Such inward gazing upon your truth and the embracing of it will, presumably, empower you to wash the muck and mud off the pearl, fan the flame of the divine spark, or bring you into "union with Christ" through uniting your human truth with Christ's divinity that dwells within you.

We are concerned not so much with God being angry with us but that our next-door neighbor, our employer, our family member, or our spouse would not hold our sins against us. This is none other than to exchange the truth about God for a lie and to fear and worship the creature and not the Creator.

The delusion in this line of thinking is that the preservation of the "true you" shall be united with Christ so as to escape death. The Old Adam in us is so terrified of total and complete death that we have gone to great lengths to construct whole theologies to deny it. Whether it is Anselm's muddy pearl that just needs a bath, Origen's divine inner spark that just needs a little fanning, Osiander's indwelling that just needs one small part of Jesus Christ, or more current theologians advocating the truth within, they are all, finally, theologies of glory with no extravagant gospel to be found.

This sort of long inward gaze into the depths of the soul for your "God-piece" is the theological definition of *incurvatus in se* (to be curved in on the self). "Standing in your truth" is not Christ, nor is it a universal Christ principle identified in political action of the left-hand kingdom, though this often masquerades as being quite religious and highly spiritual. Jesus Christ is the truth (John 14:6) who came into the world and the world did not know him (John 1:10). When Christ came among us, the truth was revealed that while we loved darkness and relished our sins, we despised the light and rejected Christ. The truth is that we are dead in our sins (Col 2:13). *Coram deo*, to stand in one's own truth is to be condemned.

When Luther comes to Galatians 2:16, he rightly divides law and gospel in Paul's preaching. He calls this law and gospel distinction that presupposes true preaching the "two absolutes": (1) the preaching of repentance and the knowledge of the self, and (2) the preaching of the saving word of the gospel. First:

That a man first acknowledge, through the Law, that he is a sinner, for whom it is impossible to perform any good work. For the Law says, "you are an evil tree. Therefore everything you think, speak, or do is opposed

to God. Hence you cannot deserve grace by your works. . . . ‘For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin’ (Romans 14:23).” . . . When a man is taught this way by the Law, he is frightened and humbled. Then he really sees the greatness of his sin and finds in himself not one *spark* of the love of God; thus he justifies God in His Word and confesses that he deserves death and eternal damnation. Thus the first step in Christianity is preaching of repentance and the knowledge of oneself.⁴

This is the first absolute, and it is the most offensive word to the old Adam who clings to the “knowledge of oneself” as the discovery of the pure and immortal soul that shall remain unscathed by all such accusations of the law and death itself. The old Adam presumes to be righteous in the self, by the self, opposing the external word. The knowledge of one’s self does not overthrow the first absolute of the cross of Christ, it confirms it. The law reveals, accuses, and kills, and it is right and salutary to do so.

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The second absolute for preaching is this:

Then there comes, at the appropriate time, the saving Word of the Gospel, which says, “Take heart, my son, your sins are forgiven” (Matt. 9:2). Believe in Jesus Christ, who was crucified for your sins. If you feel your sins, do not consider them in yourself but remember that they have been transferred to Christ, “with whose stripes you are healed” (Is. 53:3).⁵

There are five points in this passage that reveal the extravagance and the excessive lengths with which we are healed.

First, we are bid, “take heart.” When proclamation imparts Jesus Christ, human and divine, crucified and risen, to those who hear it, the Holy Spirit is giving you the very heart of the Father, his only begotten Son, with whom he is well pleased. You are not given Jesus Christ as moral example. You are given Jesus Christ who is the Gospel, without the law. You are given the Father’s heart, because what the Father loves is not his law but his Son, “This is my Son whom I love; with whom I am well pleased” (Matt 3:17). The Father and the Holy Spirit give us his heart, because, as we have seen, our hearts are deceitful. We have loved the song of

⁴ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols. (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress Press, 1958–86), 26:126, italics mine. Hereafter cited as LW.

⁵ LW 26:131–32.

the self and not the Son. When we are given his heart, he makes us into his beloved children in whom he cannot but see his Son. He is pleased with us for he is pleased with his Son. He has given you a new heart, replacing the evil tree with a good tree. As Luther writes in his *Heidelberg Disputations*, “The Love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it.”⁶ This leads us to the next point.

Second, “your sins are forgiven.” This is proclaimed without condition. He requires no penance, no extra pound of flesh. This is the primary problem with Anselm of Canterbury’s *Cur Deus Homo?* (Why did God become man?). He cannot see and will not accept that Jesus simply up and forgives. This is unregulated mercy that God goes about doing in the cross of Jesus Christ. Anselm cannot accept this work of Christ on the cross as unregulated for two reasons. First, unconditional mercy brings imbalance to a system that requires equal parts justice according to the law to balance the scales. To simply forgive, without punishment, with compassion, would, according to Anselm, be unbecoming of God. This is because the law of retributive justice requires payment of debt (punishment), and God cannot break his own law. He is obligated by the law to exact a pound of flesh. The second reason Anselm cannot accept remission of sins without punishment is because it levels the playing field, making all sinners equal in the sight of God.

The truth is that Christ makes no distinctions: he came to save sinners (Mark 2:17). Period. He repeatedly forgives sins in unregulated, extravagant mercy even before he is crucified (e.g., the healing of the paralytic Matt 9:2). Moreover, Christ’s absolution from the cross, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do,” is made without requirement of penance. This absolution was for those who, while crucifying him, believed themselves to be righteous. The unrepentant cry “Crucify him” was repeatedly shouted. Therefore, it must be more honestly stated that we committed the act of deicide because we did not want to have our righteousness declared to be outside of us, in this one man, Jesus Christ. It is impossible in a system of retributive justice that one person can be the righteousness of another person, much less of the entire world. The heart desires the affirmation of righteousness apart from this one man. We do not want to be forgiven but want to have the deceit of our heart affirmed as righteous. Into this evil age, Christ arrives while we are yet sinners to unbind the captives and create in us an entirely new heart.

Third, Jesus Christ was “crucified for your sins.” Christ is crucified not just for the whole world in general but specifically “for you.” He was crucified for our specific, historical, and bodily sins. This reveals that “you” are not outside of his saving work on the cross long ago but located in the world where God works to save sinners.

Pay careful attention to Paul’s every word, and note particularly this pronoun “our.” For we find very often in the Scriptures that their significance consists in the proper application of the pronoun, which also conveys with vigor and force. It is very easy for you to say and believe

⁶ LW 31:41 (Thesis 28).

that Christ, the Son of God, was given for the sins of Peter, Paul and the other saints, who seem to us to have been worthy of this grace. But it is very hard *for you*, who regard yourself as unworthy of this grace, to say and believe from your heart that Christ was given *for your* many great sins.⁷

Moreover, the proper application of the pronoun “for you” in the external preaching of the word removes Gotthold Lessing’s “big ugly ditch” between the cross of history and current, present sinners. In order that the benefits that Christ won on the cross are received by actual live sinners in the present, God instituted the office of ministry. Through the administration of the word and sacraments, handing over Christ and his promises “for you,” faith is made where there was none.

Fourth, our sins “have been transferred to Christ.” Luther writes this in the past perfect tense and in the passive voice. In other words, the work of transferring our sins to Christ has already been completed. Every last sin was already crucified in Christ, even before we were born! It is finished. Still. Forever. Additionally, God was the active one transferring sins from us to Christ, while we were completely passive, unable to do anything. We are the clay, he is the potter (Isa 64:8). He molds and shapes; we are molded and shaped. He molds and shapes us, not into our new, better selves that we discover deep within, but into the form of Christ. He is not found deep within but is forever coming in from the outside “for you.” This brings us to the last point made by Luther’s excessive proclamation: imputation.

Fifth, no longer do sins belong to the sinner, but to Christ, by imputation, such that “with his stripes we are healed.” Although all our senses point to the fact that sins are still in our bodies, our sinful self is drowned daily so that we are raised in faith and life in Christ. We are given the comfort of Christ’s victory not by the feeling of our bodies or what we see with our eyes but by the promises that are bestowed. In the promises, God does not impute our sins to us; God does not accept our sin as belonging to us. He overcomes them by the blood of the Son. In this, he does not impute our sins to us, but to Christ. In exchange, we are imputed with the righteousness of Christ to whom we now belong. This means our sins are covered; God does not hold us accountable. They are ignored. They are hidden. They are forgiven.

PREACHING CHRIST APOCALYPTICALLY AND ESCHATOLOGICALLY

Our human tendency is to agree with Anselm’s rationale to regulate mercy: it is not becoming of God nor is it wise to simply up and forgive. The fear of unregulated compassion in the unconditional forgiveness of sins is that people will sin all the more! To stem the tsunami of the gospel and its presumed problem of the flood of sin, we try to establish a seawall of regulations to protect people from Jesus on the loose! We cannot risk having him make us into recidivists! By this protest

⁷ LW 26:33–34, italics mine.

we simply show that we have not progressed beyond the churches in Galatia. Paul writes, “But if, while we seek to be justified in Christ, we ourselves are found to be sinners, does that make Christ a minister of sin?” (Gal 2:17). He replies by saying no, of course not. When we sin, it does not prove Christ was wrong in his haphazard economy of mercy, but proves that we are utterly sinners in ourselves. Humanists question, “If God up and forgives the unrepentant, without punishment, then who will repent and believe?” God responds, “No one. No one ever has, no one ever will. But I repent them to myself and I create a good tree where before there was an evil tree. I forgive them and remember their sin no more, for they know not what they do.”

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In order for this extravagant gospel to be good news to sinners in our day, both the full weight of the law and the gospel *without* the law must be preached. The law is to be preached such that it accomplishes its proper work: killing (2 Cor 3:6). The problem comes when the law is preached as life support. This false preaching attempts to bring us to the brink of death, only to then try to pull us back by encouraging the “free will” to properly use the law. The proclamation of God’s law from the cross of Christ, however, declares the apocalyptic “No” to the theologian of glory who confuses the “still small voice within” as the voice of Christ, and the “free will” with the Holy Spirit. There is no going to the brink, no life support, because we are found to be already dead in our sins. As for the law and its proper use to accuse and kill: “It is finished.”

When Christ uttered from the cross, “It is finished,” specifically it was the law that was finished. When Christ, who knew no sin but was made to be sin, was hung on the cross, the law accused Christ of sin and no one else. The iniquities of us all, of the entire world, were laid upon *his* shoulders and not ours. Once Christ died for the sins of the whole world, the law had reached its goal (*telos*): it was fulfilled. It is finished (*finis*). Jesus is the apocalyptic “No” to the law.

In contrast, the proclamation of the extravagant gospel of the cross of Christ pronounces the eschatological “Yes”⁸ in Jesus Christ, who alone raises the dead outside the law, with the law in their past. Christ alone creates a new heart and gives us the only purpose and future that will never disappoint. The *lex semper accusat* (the law always accuses) is finally quieted in the conscience when you hear that this has been accomplished “for you.” The law has nothing more to say against the conscience in faith, for “Christ is the end of the law for righteousness

⁸ Gerhard O. Forde, “The Apocalyptic No and the Eschatological Yes,” in *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism*, ed. Mark Mattes and Steven Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2004), 19.

to everyone who believes" (Rom 10:4). In relation to God (*coram deo*) and the saint in the new kingdom, the law is dead, the law is empty (*lex vacua*)⁹ and silenced. In relation to man (*coram hominibus*) and the sinner in the old kingdom, it remains.

The *law always accuses* the sinner who is in the old kingdom. The *law is empty* and quiet for the saint in the new kingdom. The difficulty or the wretchedness that Paul confesses in Romans 7 has to do with the reality that Christians are still walking around this old world as *simul justus et peccator* (simultaneously justified and a sinner), which makes us walk through life in this world with a limp, having had our hip knocked out of joint like Jacob at the Jabbok. But Christ interrupts our death by descending into the depths of our grave (the heart) with his extravagant, unregulated absolution. Now, the Christian's limp has been made into leaping, by faith in this world, and in the body in the world to come. 

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⁹ LW 26:158.