

## CHAPTER 1

# THEOLOGY OF THE GOSPEL

In those rare moments when lectionaries and pericopes don't offer hermeneutical paths to thinking about situations that emerge in parish life, where do preachers of the gospel start? We start by thinking theologically about the gospel message. The next question, then, is, What is the gospel? Don't worry too much: the question of the gospel was as complex for our diverse biblical writers as it is for us. Take, for example, the opening of the Gospel of Mark: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1). And yet a few verses later Mark continues: "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news'" (vv. 1:14-15). Within a scant fifteen verses, Mark himself defines gospel "good news" in two ways: the gospel is "Jesus Christ, the Son of God" and yet also the message of the coming of God's kingdom! The gospel for Mark, therefore, is indeed about Christ and yet, together with Christ, points beyond Christ himself to God and the fulfillment of God's kingdom in this "time." Notice that even with Mark the gospel doesn't give us a simple content (the "kerygma," some atonement theory, or any other simple formula) but does invite us to think through a structure of thought (Christ, and yet Christ's pointing toward the kingdom) toward God's intentions for the world at this time.

We live in a culture that values pat formulae of problem and solution. Watch a typical television commercial and you see it clearly. There is a *serious* problem, such as “ring around the collar” that is caused by some sinner using Brand X. This problem threatens the peace and security of both the sinner and the sinner’s victim. A Voice from Above (often in the form of a nosy neighbor) reveals the solution: the transcendent truth of New, Improved Whatever. The solution is applied, and the former sinner and her target are transported to paradise (often Las Vegas or Hawaii).<sup>1</sup> Because this plot has proven so useful to advertisers, we preachers are tempted to use it, too. Our sermons can become overly long commercials for the new, improved Jesus, or for ourselves.

Preaching the gospel in the situations of life, community, and world is a bit more complex than the plot of a commercial. The gospel is not a problem/solution plotline. Because the gospel is God’s *promise*, it can never be the guarantee of a solution, nor can preaching tried and true formulae guarantee that the gospel will be communicated in the present. A promise from God always invites us into faithful hope that requires theological reflection. Because the gospel is a promise and not a guarantee, it leads us toward a way of thinking through situations, an unfolding of the meaning of hope and trust in God’s promise in Christ. That is why in what follows we will present *loci communes*, gospel commonplaces, which are signposts pointing to where the trail begins rather than static formulae that deny that walking the trail is necessary.<sup>2</sup> What you find in these pages does not give you the one, single, universally applicable solution to some problem. Instead, we invite you to join us in a reflective process. We see our role as helping you do your own work as a theologian of the gospel. While we cannot determine the “answer” or “solution” or the best way to communicate the gospel for you where you are, we can invite you into a process of theological reflection that enables you to structure your own thought, drawing on gospel commonplaces with a view toward your own situation. The question here in this chapter is not, What is the answer?—we’ll leave that to the

ad whizzes on Madison Avenue. Rather, the question here is, How do we start?

## **Justification by Grace through Faith as Gospel Starting Point**

Our starting point for thinking through the gospel situationally will be the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. While we have made the case in the introduction why this starting point might be useful for people from various theological traditions, we have not said anything about *how* this could be so. We see this starting point as being useful for both hermeneutical and heuristic reasons.

Hermeneutically the doctrine is significant because of its role in Christian interpretation of the Bible. Although the New Testament writers are not of one mind about the doctrine, there is a sense in which the doctrine is central to early Christian articulation of its gospel message. Thus, while Luke's understanding of justification in the parable of the Pharisee and tax collector (Luke 18:9-14) sounds little like Paul's elaborated views in Romans 3 and 4, the New Testament as a whole does seem at least to wrestle with justification and questions of righteousness. Biblical scholar John Reumann goes so far as to say that righteousness/justification represents a central theme of the Bible as a whole.<sup>3</sup> Its centrality, therefore, gives us some useful guidance in thinking through our theological task. The claim we would make, the claim of the Lutheran movement, is that justification by grace through faith is the central hermeneutical lens through which we interpret the diversity of Scripture. This represents a starting point for theology that is, we believe, in continuity with the gospel proclamations to which the Scriptures themselves bear witness.

This brings us to our second reason for using justification by grace through faith as our starting point for situational gospel reflection: its usefulness as a heuristic tool. The word *heuristic* goes back to a Greek verb that means "to find" (*heuriskein*) and is defined by *Webster's Dictionary* as "helping to discover or

learn.”<sup>4</sup> The idea is that our gospel starting point of justification by grace through faith helps us to discover or learn something about situations that launches us off into further exploration and theological reflection. In a sense, this heuristic use is not all that different from how some have described justification by grace through faith, namely, as a critical principle for doing theology. While the doctrine of justification of faith is not the “solution” to situational problems, it helps heuristically to shake things loose. While the gospel commonplaces will represent different loci or commonplaces of theology, this “core” doctrine will make room for us to “explore” a new gospel horizon for the kinds of situations we face.

### Critical Presuppositions Going Forward

If we are to use this doctrine as our starting point for the work that follows, we also need to acknowledge some of the presuppositions that shape our use of this starting point. Three of the presuppositions arise because of the doctrine of justification itself, while one of them represents a problem with the doctrine as it has often been understood.

One presupposition is that the doctrine of justification offers a word of radical grace in any context and situation. The gospel is God’s unconditional promise for the future of creation made in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus. Given the moralism that predominates in our culture, whether in advertisements and public media or even pious conceptions of the religious life and its relation to certain moral values, the doctrine of justification sounds an unequivocal word of gospel grace. Our observation is that much of the wider culture operates on a different calculus than unconditional promise.<sup>5</sup> Given our context, therefore, this doctrine is uniquely suited for proclaiming a gospel of radical grace in a context where we cannot depend on the word of God’s promise being already present.

This leads to a second presupposition, and one of exceeding importance for us: the notion that the word of the gospel is itself *extra nos*, that is, “outside of us.” The importance of this idea is

that it helps us to articulate a gospel that is theocentric, or God centered, rather than anthropocentric, or human centered. For the gospel to be good news, it needs to disclose not what we human beings do or need to do, but rather what *God* is doing to redeem. The good news is the gospel of God in Christ, not the gospel of what we need to do to get our lives together. While God does use human and earthly things to speak this *extra nos* gospel word to us (e.g., the voices of preachers, the words of Scripture, the waters of baptism, and the bread and wine of the Eucharist), God's gospel word is not resident in the psyches of preachers and celebrants or hearers, but remains God's own living voice. Incarnation is God's own way to move toward us with the gospel: God comes to us in the flesh. God joins Godself to our little preaching words and to sacramental elements precisely because God is God. Whether the incarnate Christ or in word and sacrament, though, God is still other. This *extra nos* of the word reminds us that the gospel is both from God and about God, neither from us nor about us. It aids us in proclaiming a gospel in which the word becomes flesh.

A third presupposition of this work is that justification by grace through faith is a matter of divine promise<sup>6</sup> and always has an eschatological shape. To say that the gospel is God's promise is to make several claims. The most basic is that the promise is God's and is therefore unconditional in a way that human promises never can be. The same God who created the universe *ex nihilo* also promises to bring all creation to completion in spite of our efforts to abort the project before its time. When God raised the crucified Jesus from the dead, God promised once and for all that the destiny of creation is good. Despite us, God's promise will prevail in the end.

To claim that the gospel is promise is to claim that the gospel is *a* promise and not a guarantee. This means that the appropriate response is hope and trust. A promise, even an unconditional promise, also contains within itself an ambiguity. God is most certainly faithful and trustworthy, but we know that on the basis of faith, not sight. What has been promised has not yet been revealed in its fulfillment, and even when the fulfillment

comes, promise and fulfillment are not connected in the way that cause and effect are. What we are promised is a justified destiny, but what we are now is *simul iustus et peccator*, simultaneously saints and sinners. What we are promised is the reign of God, but what we see now is the rule of humanly devised institutions. What we are promised is a renewed creation, but what we see is a world in desperate need of renewal. What we are promised is the Savior of the *cosmos*, but what we see is the crucified Jesus.

By articulating the gospel as promise, we preserve the quality of faith as well as radical grace. Justification by grace *through faith* reminds us of the “already but not yet,” proleptic character of the gospel promise. Especially in the earlier part of his career, Luther often pointed to the statement in Hebrews that “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1).<sup>7</sup> The goal of gospel-shaped situational preaching is not to make once and for all pronouncements about the contingent world we live in as if everything were all “settled” and life now unambiguous, but to speak the promises of God in the midst of the ambiguous and sometimes even mysterious realities we face. Gospel speech is grounded in present reality while refusing to consign to a fixed past what actually participates in an open and still unknown future. Thus, it articulates hope-filled faith in the midst of suffering and life.

The fourth and final presupposition is an enlargement of some pietistic and individualistic conceptions of the *pro me* (“for me”) of the gospel. In these readings the *pro me* of the gospel has too often been understood to exclude the world God loves and human social life in the name of a penal substitution that is perceived in largely individualistic terms. We find Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s emphasis on the *pro nobis* (“for us”) and *pro aliis* (“for others”) character of the doctrine of justification to be more helpful. Insofar as societal, political, and cultural forces participate in strategies of self-justification, the doctrine of justification by grace through faith by its very nature speaks to broader social realities than just the tortured individual conscience.<sup>8</sup> The world of creation—the *cosmos*—and the world of

social and political life—the *polis*—belong to God as much as the interior *psyche* of the troubled conscience belongs to God. God is gracious to sinners, and it seems hard to claim that God would be somehow less gracious to *cosmos* and *polis* than to *psyche*.<sup>9</sup>

## A Lutheran Theology of the Gospel in Postmodern Context

From its very beginning, the Lutheran theological movement has been about a theology of the gospel and has had a central understanding of what that gospel is. Philipp Melancthon's words in the Augsburg Confession both set and sum up that tradition:

Furthermore, it is taught that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness in his sight as St. Paul says in Romans 3 and 4.<sup>10</sup>

We might well ask here Luther's catechetical question, "What does this mean?" Especially in an age when concepts like "forgiveness of sin" and "righteousness before God" are foreign to most ears, and what "faith" and "grace" mean to most people is nothing like what Luther and Melancthon meant by those words, we need to be clear about what theology of the gospel we are confessing.

Most Lutheran theologians of the last generation or two have been generally agreed that the gospel is God's word of unconditional promise spoken in Christ and in the preaching of the church. In the words of Eric Gritsch and Robert Jenson, "According to the Reformation insight and discovery, the gospel is a wholly unconditional promise of the human fulfillment of its hearers, made by the narrative of Jesus' death and resurrection.

The gospel, rightly spoken, involves no ifs, ands, buts, or maybes of any sort. . . . The gospel says, ‘Because the Crucified lives as Lord, your destiny is good.’”<sup>11</sup> Gritsch and Jenson here express the core of the mainstream North American Lutheran view of the meaning of the doctrine of justification, a consensus that formed the way the two of us learned the doctrine and the way we teach it. At the center of the gospel is radical grace, the radically unconditional promise that God makes to creation in Christ.

The gospel expressed in this way, at least among Lutherans, has two corollaries. The first is that talk about the gospel is always talk about the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. In the twentieth century this insight was made forcefully in Walther von Loewenich’s *Luther’s Theology of the Cross* and in a series of systematic studies that followed from von Loewenich’s insights.<sup>12</sup> The most important of these insights is that the crucifixion of Jesus is not just one point of a doctrine of the atonement, but is the paradigmatic event of Christian theology as a whole. Everything the church says and does is refracted through the cross. The second, and very much related, corollary is the “eschatological reservation.” This is the insight that Christian life in this world here and now is lived with the full consciousness of the resurrection of the crucified Jesus and in the full consciousness that the reign of God has not yet come in its fullness. The cross continues to be both a promise and a shadow. Christians are *simul iustus et peccator*, simultaneously justified saints and sinners under judgment. The risen Christ still carries the wounds of crucifixion on his body. These intertwined themes will in some way be part of speaking the gospel. In many of the *loci* in the following chapters the observant reader will notice that no matter where we go, we typically end up with the meaning of the crucifixion of Jesus for whichever theme we are pursuing at the moment.

If this contemporary understanding of the doctrine of justification has any weakness, it is that it most often has a more individual focus rather than communal focus in the way that it is taught. At a time when many see the problems of hyper-individualistic consumerism, we must ask how to express the doctrine of justification so that it is not heard as a religious



affirmation of the therapized consumer cocooned in a giant SUV. Is it time for a little “narrative chaos”? What story are we telling when we tell the story of the sinner forgiven by grace? Are we telling the story of what God has done in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus, or are we telling some other story?

### **An Excursus: Expressing the Gospel of Grace in the Postmodern Context**

Let us illustrate what we mean with a little excursus into how we might express the gospel for a postmodern audience. What follows is a bit of an experiment that should help the reader see what we mean when we say that there are multiple ways to express the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in our current context.

One of the issues placed before us by the postmodern and deconstructionist philosophers such as Jacques Derrida and Emanuel Levinas is the reality of the other. Otherness or “alterity” has become central to philosophical and literary discussion, and works on the topic seem to be popping up in all directions and in all disciplines. What the philosophers have reminded us is that the one who is other than ourselves has a crucial claim on our attention. We have, in modernity, tended to see ourselves as subject and the other as object and we have come to believe that we can be objective in our study of and relation to the other. The postmodernists challenge the claim to objectivity and deny the distinction between subject and object as a glossing over of the chasm between self and other. Some even challenge the existence of something known as a “self” as a delusion. This is all contested territory, of course, but these challenges to the intellectual worldview that provide the context for modern versions of the doctrine of justification (not to mention theology as a whole) do call upon the preacher to think carefully about how to speak the gospel so that it can be heard in the present.<sup>13</sup>

Otherness should not really be a strange concept to pastors. Many of us were introduced to Karl Barth in seminary and are

aware that he used otherness as a central way to understand God in relationship to humanity. For Barth God is utterly transcendent, wholly other. The chasm between self and other is, in the case of God and ourselves, so deep that one begins to wonder how it can possibly be bridged, even from God's side. Contemporary theologians who have followed Barth speak of the incommensurability of gospel speaking and any other language. Whether one follows postmodernism or Barth, there is the possibility that the gulf between "self" and "other" is too deep and wide to cross.

We can see the practical evidence for this view of things in the current state of relations between Euro-American societies and Asian and African societies that are deeply influenced by Islam. For many people in our society today, the Muslim is the ultimate "other," often portrayed as the "monster" who cannot be understood, but only fought against in some ultimate apocalyptic struggle as Beowulf fought Grendel or St. George battled the dragon. We hear the expression of this kind of thinking from politicians and newscasters, pundits and (sad to say) preachers. There are also those within Islam who think much the same way about us. God or Satan, ultimate good or ultimate evil, are the only options presented. The question that animates many postmodern philosophers is how to develop a way to deal realistically with difference without resorting to the sort of apocalyptic violence that the popular view of otherness seems to entail.

If our identity and our place before God is decided already by God's unconditional promise in Christ, then our encounter with the other does not have to be objectified nor does it have to unfold in violence; there is another way. In the first place, the doctrine of justification claims that God, the Ultimate Other, encounters us not as monsters to be destroyed, but as children to be embraced. The encounter with God is not simple or easy—the doctrine of justification has never said that—but its outcome is decided by unconditional promise, not by anything else, and especially not by our own achievements or power.

Our encounter with God is not simple, because we perceive God in a variety of ways. In many situations we even perceive God as malevolent presence, as the monstrous other. Luther called this perception *Anfechtungen*, “terrors of the soul,”<sup>14</sup> and Søren Kierkegaard called it anxiety. We feel that God is set to destroy us, to cast us into hell itself. The only way out seems to be either to submit to destruction or to go to war against God. God as Wholly Other is God as the final source of terror. Encounter with God means death, eternal death and oblivion, and so atheism seems the only possibility if one wants to live.

But atheism is not the only possibility. As we descend into the depths of divine violence and destruction, God speaks a word to us. That word is promise: “There is hope that the impossible is possible.”<sup>15</sup> That hope of the possible impossible is the gospel word of grace. The gospel proclaims that the God who is other than us is not out to destroy and slay, but to love and heal. The gospel word opens up the possible that is impossible, proclaims that though God is hidden and other, God is also revealed in Jesus as in the flesh and making all things new. Our sense of God as the author of monstrous violence is something from inside our own fears of what God might be (and fears that we project onto the other in many settings) and contradicts the God who is revealed in Jesus of Nazareth.

According to the gospel, even our relationships with human others are opened to new possibilities not otherwise conceivable. One way to read Luther’s basic message in the Reformation is, “By the grace of God in Christ you have been set free from worrying about your own salvation; now you are free to worry about the welfare of your community.” That is, since the word of God proclaims our personal salvation by grace through faith, I no longer have to spend any energy at all in the effort to secure my own individual, personal salvation. I am released from the prison that I create when my own destiny is my ultimate concern. In being honest about what really goes on inside myself, I no longer need to project the monstrous onto the other. “I” is free to be “we,” and this particular “we” does not need a “them” to find its identity. Identity is a gift, not something to be secured.

The other—who also exists before God by grace alone—is free to be other, and thereby the impossible possibility of dialogue with the other is open.

This is just one way, we believe, that the gospel can be expressed in the present sociocultural situation. The gospel of unconditional promise does not just speak to the problem of the guilt I feel for the individual sins I have committed. It is not just a religious form of personal therapy. It is not even addressed only to the problem of existential estrangement and alienation. God's unconditional promise made to creation in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus speaks to anything and everything in the cosmos that is the result of the rift between Creator and creature narrated in Genesis 3. The word of promise breaks into the created world from outside, crucifying the old and creating the new, the impossible possibility, in Christ.

### **Gospel as Radical Promise**

The proclamation of a promise that radical is the focus of preaching. As preachers our task is to preach sermons that are as radical as God's promise so that people can hear the good news that the promise is meant for them in their situation. In order to do that we need certain "rules of grammar," if you will, that help us to speak the gospel so that it is heard as the good news. One of these "rules" is that preaching must be honest and truthful about what goes on within and among humans as well as truthful about the promise of God in Christ. Following Luther, Lutherans have made this point under the heading of "the proper distinction between law and gospel."<sup>16</sup> By "law" the tradition means those words from God that point out the problem with our existence as creatures who refuse to recognize who we really are. One image of the law is that of a "mirror" that shows us the truth about ourselves. These words can be commands from God, or they can be promises made with conditions attached. They can also be "look what you have done now" statements. By "gospel" the tradition means the word of God that articulates the unconditional promise of God in

Christ. This is the word that justifies, that liberates, that enables discipleship.

When we say that law and gospel must be distinguished properly, we are not saying that the Hebrew Scriptures must be separated from the New Testament (both contain both law and gospel) or anything like that. The distinction of law and gospel is not some Manichean dividing of God into two, one harsh and the other compassionate. The distinction of law and gospel is also not a distinction between Judaism and Christianity or Catholicism and Protestantism. We are also not advocating an approach to preaching that first beats people up and then says something nice to them. All of these are evidence of a fundamental misunderstanding of the proper distinction of law and gospel.

The distinction between law and gospel is a paradox, not a dualism. The word of God comes to us in this paradoxical form that is, in the end, the good news of what God is doing in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus. Paradoxically, God reconciles us to Godself by first showing us how alien we are. That paradox animates the dialectic of both biblical interpretation and preaching. The preacher must be clear about the difference between law and gospel and be clear about which word is being spoken at the moment. Distinguishing law and gospel is a theological, dialectical, and hermeneutical act in which the preacher discerns the context and the situation and discerns the word the text speaks into that situation. For us, therefore, law and gospel are aids to theological reflection and discernment.<sup>17</sup>

The problem with preaching that confuses law and gospel is that it fails to be truthful about us and about God. We are encouraged to see ourselves either as people who really aren't so bad after all or as people who are utterly beyond any hope of salvation. We are encouraged to see God as a celestial accountant, keeping the books on who is naughty and who is nice. If we think of ourselves as nice, we thank God for making us better. If we think of ourselves as beyond naughty, we see God as the all-consuming monster who takes delight in damning sinners to hell.

Let us state it again: the only legitimate response to such nonsense is atheism. If that were who God is, then the only response with any integrity is to slay the monster. But the problem is not with God; the problem is in us and too often projected from us into our preaching. The problem is with our inability to recognize the monstrous in ourselves and our inability to hear that the wholly unconditional promise of God in Christ is spoken to us and spoken for us nonetheless. When we confuse law and gospel, we encourage the worst in Christians and leave thoughtful people no option but atheism.

Our approach, however, is not a formulaic homiletical structure, but a theological hermeneutic that begins with the hearing of the gospel and spirals through a process of reflection, which includes reading and interpreting the foundational texts in light of historical and contextual experience. Faith begins in the hearing of the gospel, and the hearing of the gospel changes everything.<sup>18</sup> Faith leads us into a community and into a way of life in which we question the reality we see around us and question God. In the community of faith, such questions lead us into an encounter with the sources upon which the community is built, the Scriptures and the traditions of reading those Scriptures. We try the best we can to hear what prophets, apostles, and theologians were saying to the people whom they addressed directly, a primarily historical question. The historical question pushes us further. We are pushed to interpret what these sources say to us from the perspective of the world in which we live and the life into which faith has led us. Our world of meanings comes up against the worlds of the texts and a dialogue of question and question ensues. Note that this is a dialogue of question and *question*, not a dialogue of question and *answer*. We come to the texts with our question, but the texts do not provide answers. Rather, the texts interrogate us. Taken aback by their boldness, we reformulate our questions.<sup>19</sup>

In this encounter we bring to interpretation not only our questions but the context within which we exist. The context is where our questions arise, but it is also much more. Our context provides us with a worldview, an ideology, a way of seeing and

understanding the world around us—our world of meanings. All of this enters into the dialogue of question and question. In order to understand what God may be saying to us in Scripture and tradition, we are pressed to understand our context better. As theologians we are at the point where two worlds collide, the world of the text and the world of the context. We move back and forth on a bridge, sometimes feeling more at home on one side and sometimes more at home on the other side.

The movement of this spiral is toward action. “Praxis” is action or practice that is informed by theory. In this sense all of Christian life is praxis, action in the world informed by a (hopefully) growing understanding of the implications of the gospel. The goal of all theological interpretation is Christian praxis. At some point the questions are set aside so that action can be taken. The action of faithful praxis is a funny sort of action. In praxis the questions we have set aside for the moment come back to the fore, but they come back in a different form, a form influenced by the action, by praxis. In the midst of praxis we hear the gospel again, perhaps in a way we have never heard it before. In that hearing old questions are reformulated and new questions arise, and so a new lap of the spiral begins.

Preaching is an important part of this spiral. For the preacher, the act of preaching is a moment of praxis; for the congregation the sermon is a snapshot of interpretation that forms part of the community’s movement toward praxis. The need for situational preaching arises when one particular question has presented itself to the community and must encounter the questions of Scripture and tradition. Scripture and tradition send us together with the gospel more deeply into context and situation where questions must be lived.