

"NOT, BENEFICIUM ACCEPTUM, SED DATUM" (NOT A BENEFIT RECEIVED BUT A BENEFIT CONFERRED)

By

Rev. Jack L Torgersen, retired ELCA Pastor
238 Johnson Ave N.
Cokato, MN 55321

From the time of Luther's great reform of the church in the first half of the 16th Century until the present day a fundamental concern that faces the Christian Church in every generation is the proper distinction between law and gospel. Understanding what is "law" and what is "gospel" is the anchor that holds the Church fast to an accurate understanding of the message of the Scriptures and of the Apostolic Faith delivered to the saints. Unfortunately the "Zeit Geist", "the spirit of the Age", allied with "the Old Adam, is at work in every generation to tear the Church loose from its moorings. The words of the Epistle to the Ephesians continue to be a timely admonition to the Church in our day and generation, as they were for the apostolic church.

Ephes. 4:14-16 (NRSV)

We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. [15] But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, [16] from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

The hubris or fatal pride of "the Old Adam" invariably attempts to drive us to confuse "law" and "gospel". Only through this confusion, this blurring of an essential distinction, can "the Old Adam" perpetuate his existence inside the Church. The Gospel, you see, in its purest form is a death sentence to "the Old Adam and the Old Eve" in all of us. It cannot be reformed, it can only be put to death. This is what we are taught is the significance of baptism for daily living in the Small Catechism.

Fourth

What then is the significance of such a baptism with water? Answer:

It signifies that the old creature⁸¹ in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily contrition and repentance,⁸² and on the other hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

Where is this written? Answer:

St. Paul says in Romans 6[:4*], "We were buried with Christ through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we, too, are to walk in a new life."

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"The Old Adam" is most successful at self preservation in the church when he attempts to make the difference between "Law and Gospel" unclear and undistinguishable. How is this done? It is accomplished by directing our attention away from what God has done, is doing and will do, and redirecting our attention toward our actions and our participation in the process of faith and of salvation . It is then subtly suggested in various ways that human factor is "the effective" or "the operative" element in events that are transpiring. The popular reasoning goes like this: "Yes, Jesus died for me, but it does not apply, it does not become operative, until we respond to it." Our response, rather than what our Lord has done, is transformed into the pivotal matter on which all else turns. It ultimately transforms faith from a precious gift from God into the final form of work which we present before God as the basis of our justification.

I also believe that one of the ways this confusion is expressing itself is in the area of Christian Worship. The right distinction of Law and Gospel is of great importance in the area of worship because it ultimately, though subtly, shapes our understanding of "the means of grace", the Word and the sacraments. The general principle Lutheran Worship is that modes and patterns of worship are "*adiaphora*". They are matters indifferent to salvation, in which great latitude is permissible. One can be "high church" i.e., very liturgical, or "low church" i.e., non-liturgical, and still be equally Lutheran in a confessional sense. The exception to this is when a liturgical practice impinges on basic or fundamental teachings of the Faith. The difficulty arises at a very practical level when we deal with the reality that worship practice tends to shape basic understanding, at least at the popular level. Our understanding of what is occurring in worship is shaped much

¹Kolb, R. 2000. *The Book of Concord : The confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Fortress Press: Minneapolis, p.360

more by how we do things than by doctrine. In this sense, the Latin dictum, "*lex orandi, lex credendi*" (the law of prayer is the law of belief) continues to be true in our day. We are reminded that liturgical concerns are not always peripheral or unessential issues. A very strong case can be made for the argument that the disagreement between the Romanists and the followers of Luther reached the level of irreconcilable differences after the publication of "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church, 1520". "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church" was the work which assailed the sacramental system of the medieval church. Questions of worship were significant issues at the time of the reformation.

As I was pondering this matter, I took the opportunity to read one of the Reformer's lesser known writings, "A Treatise on the New Testament, That Is, The Holy Mass (1520)." In that treatise Luther elucidates a principle that is very helpful and applicable in discussing questions of worship in our day. That principle is "not 'beneficium acceptum, sed datum'" (*not a benefit received but a benefit conferred*).² Luther uses this principle to deny the prevailing teaching in that day concerning the Sacrament of the altar. In the translators' notes and the translators' introduction to this treatise in the American edition of Luther's Works, we read:

As to sacrifice, the treatise is significant in that it represents Luther's first clear and public attack on the Roman doctrine of the mass as a bloodless repetition of the sacrifice once made on Calvary—**a theory which forgets that the mass is really a testament and sacrament in which God promises and gives something to us, not we to him.**⁶ However while rejecting the Roman sacrificial theory, Luther does not remove the fact of sacrifice from the mass. Christ in heaven is our Mediator, bringing our sacrifice of prayer and thanksgiving, indeed, of our very selves, to the Father. We do not offer Christ; he offers us. We lay ourselves upon him through faith; he in turn offers himself for us—continually—in heaven³

Luther himself goes on to explain what he means by the words "not 'beneficium acceptum, sed datum'" and their implication, further on in the discourse.

² For a testament is not *beneficium acceptum, sed datum*;²⁰ it does not take benefit from us, but brings benefit to us. Who has ever heard that he who receives an inheritance has done a good work? He simply takes for himself a benefit. *LW*, Vol. 35: 93

³Luther, M. 1999, c1960. *Luther's works, vol. 35 : Word and Sacrament I* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works. Vol. 35 (Vol. 35, Page 78). Fortress Press: Philadelphia

19. It must necessarily follow where faith and the word or promise of God decline or are neglected, that in their place there arise works and a false, presumptuous trust in them. For where there is no promise of God there is no faith. Where there is no faith, there everyone presumptuously undertakes to better himself and make himself well pleasing to God by means of works. Where this happens, false security and presumption arise, as though man were pleasing to God because of his own works. Where it does not happen, the conscience has no rest and knows not what to do in order to become well pleasing to God.

So too, I fear that many have made the mass into a good work, whereby they have thought to do a great service to Almighty God. Now if we have properly understood what has been said above, namely, that the mass is nothing else than a testament and sacrament in which God makes a pledge to us and gives us grace and mercy, I think it is not fitting that we should make a good work or merit out of it. **For a testament is not *beneficium acceptum, sed datum*;²⁰ it does not take benefit from us, but brings benefit to us.** Who has ever heard that he who receives an inheritance has done a good work? He simply takes for himself a benefit. Likewise in the mass we give nothing to Christ, but only receive from him; unless they are willing to call this a good work, that a person sits still and permits himself to be benefited, given food and drink, clothed and healed, helped and redeemed. **Just as in baptism, in which there is also a divine testament and sacrament, no one gives God anything or does him a service, but instead takes something, so it is in all other sacraments²¹ and in the sermon as well.**

Next, I believe that we need to return to a matter mentioned in a very cursory fashion earlier, our understanding of “the means of grace”. What do we, as Lutheran Christians, mean by the words, “the means of grace”? We understand them to be the means or tools through which God creates, sustains and nurtures faith in the life of each and every believer. The means of grace are not just passive descriptions about God. They are active and powerful. They bring light and life to the darkness and decay of this fallen creation. They are the fulfillment of that powerful promise first given through the mouth of the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah 55:10-11 (NRSV)

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
¹¹ so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,

⁴Luther, M. 1999, c1960. *Luther's works, vol. 35 : Word and Sacrament I* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works. Vol. 35 (Vol. 35, Page 92-93). Fortress Press: Philadelphia

but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Our Lord himself teaches us in St. John's Gospel.

John 3:5-8 (NRSV)

Jesus answered, "**Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.**"

The means of grace participate in the power of "the Word". They are active and powerful. They are also given for a very specific purpose. Their purpose is to bring about salvation by creating sustaining and nurturing true faith in our lives. This understanding of the power and purpose of the Word active in the means of grace defines the church itself.

[V. Concerning Ministry in the Church]

So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. **For through the Word and the sacraments as through instruments the Holy Spirit is given, who effects faith where and when it pleases God in those who hear the gospel, that is to say, in those who hear that God, not on account of our own merits but on account of Christ, justifies those who** believe that they are received into grace on account of Christ. Galatians 3[:14b*]: "So that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith."⁵⁴

What is true of the Church collectively is also true of the each and every Christian, individually.

The Third⁵⁵ Article: On Being Made Holy⁵⁶

I believe in the Holy Spirit, one holy Christian church, the community of the saints,⁵⁷ forgiveness of sins, resurrection of the flesh, and eternal life. Amen.

What is this? Answer:

I believe that by my own understanding or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my LORD or come to him, but instead the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, made me holy and kept me in the true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian church⁵⁸ on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith. Daily in this Christian church the Holy Spirit abundantly

⁵Kolb, R. 2000. *The Book of Concord : The confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Fortress Press: Minneapolis, p. 41

forgives all sins—mine and those of all believers. On the Last Day the Holy Spirit will raise me and all the dead and will give to me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true.⁶

We clearly believe and teach that God alone is the source and the giver of all true faith. God brings about this faith through the power of The Word, active and effective, in the means of grace. The next most obvious difficulty is the question of whence comes unbelief. The source of unbelief is found in sin. It comes with our fallen nature which is the “Old Adam and the Old Eve” in all of us. It is also a manifestation of a world separated and in rebellion against the Lordship of God. In the Smalcald Articles we find the following words:

Here we must confess (as St. Paul says in Rom. 5[:12*]) that sin comes from that one human being, Adam, through whose disobedience all people became sinners and subject to death and the devil. This is called the original sin,⁷⁴ or the chief sin.

The fruits of this sin are the subsequent evil works, which are forbidden in the Ten Commandments, such as unbelief, false belief, idolatry, being without the fear of God, presumption, despair, blindness, and, in short, not knowing or honoring God. Beyond that, there is lying, swearing [falsely] by God’s name,⁷⁵ not praying or calling on God’s name, neglect of God’s Word, being disobedient to parents, murdering, behaving promiscuously, stealing, deceiving, etc.

This inherited sin has caused such a deep, evil corruption of nature that reason does not comprehend it; rather, it must be believed on the basis of the revelation in the Scriptures (Ps. 51[:5*] and Rom. 5[:12*]; Exod. 33[:20*]; Gen. 3[:6ff*]).

This deep, evil corruption of nature was so pervasive that there is no part of our being, body; soul, spirit, reason or will, that is untouched or untainted by original sin. It infects or contaminates even the best of our actions and attitudes and calls them into question. Let us return to this matter of faith. When all goes well for us in life we are perfectly satisfied to speak in terms of our faith and take great comfort and reassurance from it. At times of great difficulty, when life seems to be literally “going to hell in a hand basket,” the situation changes. At these times, the matter is less simple and less simplistic. As we enter into “the dark night of the soul” we wrestle with a number of difficult questions. How can we be sure that we believe sincerely and confidently enough? In matters of

⁶Kolb, R. 2000. *The Book of Concord : The confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Fortress Press: Minneapolis, p.p. 354-355

⁷Kolb, R. 2000. *The Book of Concord : The confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Fortress Press: Minneapolis, p.p. 310-311

repentance do we truly regret our sins or are we merely motivated by a fear of punishment. Let us consider what Luther wrote concerning this matter of repentance in the Smalcald Articles.

[3:] Concerning Repentance⁸³

The New Testament retains this office of the law and teaches it, as Paul does and says, in Romans 1[:18*]: “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all” people. Also Romans 3[:19–20*]: “So that . . . the whole world may be held accountable to God” and “no human being will be justified in his sight”; and Christ says in John 16[:8*]: the Holy Spirit “will convict the world of sin.”⁸⁴

Now this is the thunderbolt of God, by means of which he destroys both the open sinner and the false saint⁸⁵ and allows no one to be right but drives the whole lot of them into terror and despair. This is the hammer of which Jeremiah speaks: “My word is a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces” [Jer. 23:29*]. **This is not “active contrition,”**⁸⁶ **a contrived remorse, but “passive contrition,”**⁸⁷ **true affliction of the heart, suffering, and the pain of death.**

This is really what it means to begin true repentance. Here a person must listen to a judgment such as this: “You are all of no account—whether you appear publicly to be sinners or saints.”⁸⁸ **You must all become something different from what you are now and act in a different way, no matter who you are now and what you do. You may be as great, wise, powerful, and holy as you could want, but here no one is righteous, etc.**⁸⁹

To this office of the law, however, the New Testament immediately adds the consoling promise of grace through the gospel. This we should believe. As Christ says in Mark 1[:15*]: “Repent, and believe in the good news.” This is the same as, “Become and act otherwise, and believe my promise.” Even before Jesus, John the Baptizer was called a preacher of repentance—but for the purpose of the forgiveness of sins. That is, John was to convict them all and turn them into sinners, so that they would know how they stood before God and would recognize themselves as lost people. In this way they were to be prepared for the Lord⁹⁰ to receive grace, to await and accept from him forgiveness of sins. Jesus himself says in Luke 24[:47*]: “You must preach repentance and forgiveness of sins in my name to the whole world.”⁹¹

But where the law exercises such an office alone, without the addition of the gospel, there is⁹² **death and hell, and the human creature must despair, like Saul and Judas. As St. Paul says: “The law kills through sin.”**⁹³ **Moreover, the gospel does not give consolation and forgiveness in only one way—but rather through the Word, sacraments, and the like (as we shall hear),**⁹⁴ **so that with God there is truly rich redemption from the great prison of sin (as Ps. 130[:7–8*] says).**⁸

⁸Kolb, R. 2000. *The Book of Concord : The confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Fortress Press: Minneapolis, p.p.312-313

All of us know ourselves well enough to admit that we seldom if ever do anything from a pure or unblemished motivation, stemming from respect, love and trust in God alone. Our sole sense of hope and assurance comes not from looking inward at ourselves, but in looking to God and his promise alone. This is equally true with regards to this matter of repentance. Repentance is necessary, but is not just a something God demands of us. It is a work that God accomplishes in us. In the final analysis we can trust in Him and his power far more than we can trust in ourselves. We can only exclaim with the father of the possessed child spoken of in Mark 9, "Lord , I believe, help my unbelief!".

The concern that has motivated this paper is the second recommendation for the absolution given in the "Lutheran Hymnal for Church and Home 'Reclaim', Preview Edition."

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, has had mercy on you, and has given his only Son to die for you, and for his sake forgives you all your sins. To all who believe in Jesus Christ he gives the power to become children of God, and bestows on you his Holy Spirit On the other hand, I declare to the impenitent and unbelieving, that so long as you continue in your impenitence, God has not forgiven your sins, and will surely visit your iniquities upon you if you do not turn from your sinful ways and come to repentance and faith in Christ before the day of grace is ended. Amen.⁹

This begins by declaring God's unconditional forgiveness in Jesus Christ and then continues by directing our attention back on our repentance as the condition for God's forgiveness to occur. This is confessionally and theologically questionable for all of the reasons that I have stated earlier in this paper. It ultimately shifts the emphasis from God back to us, whether it intends to do so or not. In doing so it negates and contravenes the principal stated by 'The Reclaim Team' in their introduction to the preview edition.

We believe that the Lutheran Church will be seriously compromised if we do not resist the temptation to make the service about ourselves and our participation in God's work.¹⁰

I agree whole heartedly with those words. This has motivated my writing of this paper and my criticism this second option for the absolution in the service of holy communion in the "Reclaim" Hymnal.

⁹ Lutheran Hymnal for Church and Home "**Reclaim**" Preview Edition , ed. Gracia Grindal , Reclaim Resources, in co-operation with Bronze Bow Publishing Inc.. p. 7

¹⁰ Ibid., page 1

In all our liturgical practice, as in all other matters of the faith and life of the church we must be guided by the principle “not *beneficium acceptum, sed datum*.” We must be reminded that God is at work to teach “ to repent of our sins, to believe on Jesus in life and in death and to grow day by day in grace and holiness.” to quote the words of the ancient “klokker’s” prayer. In this way God’s Holy Spirit creates true faith in us and He sustains and nurtures that faith all of our days.