AWWOP Sunday.17

AW WOP

FLAG: WOP/Sunday

HEAD: Learning the Gospel

SUBHEAD:

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 *“I have learned the Gospel from him”* (Philipp Melanchthon).

Philipp Melanchthon, the peace-loving and consensus-seeking fellow Reformer of Martin Luther, was one day asked by friends why he was so devoted to Luther, although the great man could sometimes be rather obstinate, bossy, and rude. Melanchthon, himself being one of the great scholars of the Reformation period, simply and concisely replied: “I have learned the Gospel from him.”

Through the influence of Luther and the Reformation “the Gospel” returned to the center of Christian faith at the beginning of the modern era. According to the apostle Paul, it is the message through which “the power of God” works, bringing “salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16, NIV).

This definition provided by the apostle presents five terms of particular importance:

**Gospel**

This word means the “good news,” the “joyful message,” the “victory message.” It is the “gospel of God” (Rom. 1:1) because it comes from God and speaks of God. But it is also the “gospel of Christ” (Rom. 15:19), i.e., the message of the mission, the sacrifice, and the atoning death of Jesus of Nazareth, the divine Messiah, for the world. Further, it also speaks of His victory over death, His mediation before God for His people who are still living and struggling in this world, and also of His future return to complete His work. Thus, the gospel consoles us that after the present “salvation in an unsaved world,” Christ will return to “change the whole world.” The gospel provides the solution to the basic human problem: “For earth’s sin and misery the gospel is the only antidote.”1

**Power of God**

The gospel has creative power because it is God’s Word. Human words do not hold creative power. They are often only “sound and fury.” But when God speaks the gospel, what He says also happens: everyone who believes receives salvation.

**Salvation**

Salvation does not occur as a result of philosophical speculation, theorems, or wisdom gleaned from books. The salvation of humanity from their misery of guilt and fleetingness of life is not produced by human speech, but by divine action and divine acquittal. It is, what Luther called, the “admirabile commercium,”2 the marvelous exchange or substitution.

At the cross “God . . . in Christ” (2 Cor. 5:19) exchanged places with the world. He took over the judgment that should have been executed on the sinner: “The Judge judged in our place.”3 He took our punishment on Himself and gives us His righteousness (verse 21); He became weak and gives us His strength (2 Cor. 12:9); He became poor for us and gives us His abundance (2 Cor. 8:9); He exchanged misery for glory, suffering for joy, and “made himself ‘nothing’ (Phil. 2:7) in contrast to His ‘all,’ so that we ‘have all,’ although we ‘have nothing’ ” (2 Cor. 6:10).4

**For All**

The gospel’s wonders apply not only to a particular nation, gender or social status but are for all.

Through his Damascus experience the apostle Paul, who would have proudly boasted of his Jewish ancestry and Pharisaic self-righteousness (Phil. 3:4-6), became a friend of the Gentile nations to which so many of his fellow Christians belonged. They were his “joy and crown” (Phil. 4:1). For him, Christ’s suffering and death for all (1 Tim. 2:6) erased all national, social, and gender prejudices (Gal. 3:26-28). The gospel breaks through all barriers and creates a supranational community. In Christ diverse people with different origins and varied education and experience are merged into the “familia Dei,” the family of God: “Christ tears away the wall of partition, the dividing prejudice of nationality, and teaches a love for all the human family.”5 Above all, humans all become “children of God.” Christ unites us not only on the horizontal plane, but also and especially on the vertical: He reconnects humanity with God by His salvific death. How?

**Through Faith in Christ**

When Paul speaks of “believing,” he does not refer to surmising or imagining, nor even agreeing to a specific statement. Believing in the Scriptures—the Old Testament at that time—means to “take firmly hold of, grasp, be faithful.”6 In the New Testament, belief means “trust” and “faithfulness.” We receive salvation—forgiveness of sins, acceptance by God, renewal of life and final redemption—by trusting Christ’s promise of salvation, holding firmly on to it, and remaining faithful to the end. What saves the “wicked,” or the sinner, is not her religious achievements (“works”), but her trust in the God who declares her righteous in Christ (Rom. 4:5). Justification of the sinner, i.e., his declaration of being righteous before the mercy seat of God, happens by faith alone, apart from the works of the law (Gal. 2:16).

The church believed that it had preserved this gospel through the centuries, and that it was its faithful interpreter. Many who thought they understood Paul had forgotten the essence of his message. A type of “innocent righteousness of works”7 had taken possession of Christendom and had turned the apostolic preaching of grace by faith into a subtle work religion. Under the influence of synagogue legalism, Greek virtue teachings, and Roman legal thought, the sinner’s acquittal by grace was replaced by an indispensable “toil,”8 in which the salvation seeker never knew whether they had done enough to be worthy of salvation. There were dissenting voices, but either they were not entirely clear themselves or went unheeded.

Then came the glorious rediscovery of the apostolic message by the Reformation of the sixteenth century, when Paul’s word, “The righteous will live by faith” (Rom. 1:17, NIV), again began to shine, and Christendom once more realized: “The only glory of Christians is in Jesus Christ alone.”9

**QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND SHARING**

1. How has the gospel changed your life? What have you gained by it?

2. How can we interact with people of a scientific mind-set, to show them that they need the gospel?

3. What healing effect does the message of justification by faith alone have for our soul?

4. What in the gospel can attract young or old people to the importance of the Christian faith?

(Endnotes)

1 Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1905), p. 141.

2 Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2003), vol. 7, p. 25.

3 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2009), Vol. IV.1, p. 211.

4 Horst Pöhlmann, *Abriss der Dogmatik* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag, 1975), p. 185.

5 Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1898), p. 823.

6 Rolf Luther, *Neutestamentliches Wörterbuch* (Hamburg: Furche Verlag, 1963), p. 95.

7 Barth, p. 523.

8 Tertullian *De poenitentia* 6.

9 Martin Luther, *Luthers Schriften: Weimar Edition* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2004), vol. 13, p. 570.