The commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism

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THE

COMMENTARY

OF

DR. ZACHARIAHS URSINUUS

ON THE

HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

TRANSLATED FROM THE ORIGINAL LATIN,
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be himself will not be joined with idols and devils, so he will not have his truth confounded with falsehood, and his church with her enemies, the children of the devil; but will have them carefully distinguished and separated. It would be reproachful to God to suppose that he would have and acknowledge as his children, such as persecute him; yea, it would be blasphemy to make God the author of false doctrine, and the defender of the wicked; for "what concord has Christ with Believers." (2 Cor. 6. 14.) Secondly, on account of the consolation and salvation of his people; for it is necessary that the church should be visible in the world, that the elect, scattered abroad among the whole human race, may know what society they ought to unite themselves, and that, being gathered into the church, they may enjoy this sure comfort, that they are members of that family in which God delights, and which has the promises of everlasting life. For it is the will of God that all those who are to be saved, should be gathered into the church in this life. Out of the church there is no salvation.

How the church may be known, and what are the marks by which it may be distinguished from the various sects, will be shown when we come to speak regularly upon the subject of the church. 

II. WHAT ARE THE PARTS OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH, AND IN WHAT DO THEY DIFFER FROM EACH OTHER?

The doctrine of the church consists of two parts; the Law, and the Gospel; in which we have comprehended the sum and substance of the sacred Scriptures. The law is called the Decalogue, and the gospel is the doctrine concerning Christ the mediator, and the free remission of sins, through faith. This division of the doctrine of the church is established by these plain and forcible arguments.

1. The whole doctrine comprised in the sacred writings, is either concerning the nature of God, his will, his works, or sin, which is the proper work of men and devils. But all these subjects are fully set forth and taught, either in the law, or in the gospel, or in both. Therefore, the law and gospel are the chief and general divisions of the holy scriptures, and comprise the entire doctrine comprehended therein.

2. Christ himself makes this division of the doctrine which he will have preached in his name, when he says, "Thus it is written, and thus it behooved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day; and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name." (Luke 24. 46, 47.) But this embraces the entire substance of the law and gospel.

3. The writings of the prophets and apostles, comprise the old and new Testament, or covenant between God and man. It is, therefore, necessary that the principal parts of the covenant in these writings, and that they agree, grants unto us, viz. his favor, remission of sins, and also what he, in return, requires of us. These, now, are the three distinctions.

Concerning the doctrine contained in the law as to the grace of God, and the knowledge of Christ and his benefit to us. Therefore we have, in the law comprehending the doctrine revealed.

The principal differences between the church, consist in these three things:

1. In the subject, or general character.
2. In the manner of the revelation from nature; the gospel is divinely,
3. In the promises which they are upon the condition of perfect obedience in Christ and the commencement of it, however, more will be said upon this.

III. IN WHAT DOES THE DOCTRINE OF OTHER RELIGIONS, AND THESE DISTINCTIONS

The doctrine of the church differs in respects. First: the doctrine of the church, with whom it was delivered, through the various religious systems of sectaries has no suggestion of the devil. Secondly: such divine testimony in confirmation thereof, and which is calculated to quiet the sects of error. Thirdly: in the church and uncorrupted, whilst in other systems and basely corrupted; for the devil reject the doctrine of the first tabernacle of the true God, either setting up a knowledge of God, not in his Son, or otherwise than he has commanded it, because they are also equally ignorant of the inward table; and whatever truth and religion, it is nothing more than a part in relation to the external deportment of men owe to each other. Fourthly:
CONCERNING THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH.

that the principal parts of the covenant should be contained and explained in these writings, and that they should declare what God promises and grants unto us, viz: his favor, remission of sins, righteousness, and eternal life; and also what he, in return, requires from us: which is faith and obedience. These, now, are the things which are taught in the law and gospel.

4. Christ is the substance and ground of the entire Scriptures: But the doctrine contained in the law and gospel is necessary to lead us to a knowledge of Christ and his benefits: for the law is our schoolmaster, to bring us to Christ, constraining us to fly to him, and showing us what that righteousness is, which he has wrought out, and now offers unto us. But the gospel, professedly, treats of the person, office, and benefits of Christ. Therefore we have, in the law and gospel, the whole of the Scriptures, comprehending the doctrine revealed from heaven for our salvation.

The principal differences between these two parts of the doctrine of the church, consist in these three things:

1. In the subject, or general character of the doctrine, peculiar to each. The law prescribes and enjoins what is to be done, and forbids what ought to be avoided: whilst the gospel announces the free remission of sin, through and for the sake of Christ.

2. In the manner of the revelation peculiar to each. The law is known from nature; the gospel is divinely revealed.

3. In the promises which they make to man. The law promises life upon the condition of perfect obedience; the gospel, on the condition of faith in Christ and the commencement of new obedience. Hereafter, however, more will be said upon this subject in the proper place.

III. IN WHAT DOES THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH DIFFER FROM THAT OF OTHER RELIGIONS, AND FROM PHILOSOPHY: AND WHY THESE DISTINCTIONS SHOULD BE RETAINED?

The doctrine of the church differs from that of all other religions, in four respects. First: the doctrine of the church has God for its author, by whom it was delivered, through the prophets and apostles, whilst the various religious systems of sectarists have been invented by men, through the suggestion of the devil. Secondly: the doctrine of the church alone, has such divine testimony in confirmation of its truth, as is sure and infallible, and which is calculated to quiet the conscience, and convict all the various sects of error. Thirdly: in the church the law of God is retained entire and uncorrupted, whilst in other systems of religion it is narrowed down and basely corrupted; for the advocates of these false religions entirely reject the doctrine of the first table, concerning the knowledge and worship of the true God, either setting forth some other God besides him who has revealed himself to the church by his word and works, and seeking a knowledge of God, not in his Son, but out of him, or worshipping him otherwise than he has commanded in his word. And not only so, but they are also equally ignorant of the inward and spiritual obedience of the second table; and whatever truth and excellence there is in these systems of religion, it is nothing more than a part of the precepts of the second table, in relation to the external deportment of the life, and the civil duties which men owe to each other. Fourthly: it is only in the church that the
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God. So it is here asked: Whence knowest thou thy deliverance? Out of the gospel. Having, therefore, spoken of the Mediator, we must now speak of the doctrine which reveals, describes, and offers him unto us—which doctrine is the Gospel. After having spoken of the gospel, we must in the next place, speak of the way in which we are made partakers of the Mediator, and his benefits—which is by faith. First, then, we must speak of the gospel, which is, with great propriety, made to follow the doctrine of the Mediator, and the covenant. 1. Because the Mediator is the subject of the gospel, which teaches who and what kind of a Mediator he is. 2. Because he is the author of the gospel. It is a part of the office of the Mediator to reveal the gospel, as it is said: “The only begotten which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.” (John 1: 18.) 3. Because the gospel is a part of the covenant; and is often taken for the new covenant.

The principal questions to be discussed, in relation to the gospel, are the following:

I. What is the gospel?
II. Is it a new doctrine?
III. Is what does it differ from the law?
IV. What are its effects?
V. From what does it appear that the gospel is true?

I. What is the Gospel?

The term gospel signifies, 1. A joyful message, or good news. 2. The sacrifice which is offered to God for this good news. 3. The reward which is given to him who announces these joyful tidings. Here it signifies the doctrine, or joyful news of Christ manifested in the flesh; as “behold, I bring unto you good tidings of great joy, for unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2: 10, 11.)

The words εὐαγγέλιον and εὐαγγέλιον are of a somewhat different signification. The former denotes the promise of a mediator that was to come; the latter is the announcement of a mediator already come. This distinction, however, is not always observed; and is rather in the words than in the thing itself; for both denote the same benefits of the Messiah, so that the distinction is only in the circumstances of time, and in the manner of his appearance, as is evident from the following declarations of Scripture: “Abraham saw my day, and was glad.” “No man cometh to the Father but by me.” “I am the door, by me if any.” “God hath appointed him head over all things to the church.” “Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, to-day, and forever.” (John 8: 56; 14: 6; 10: 7, Eph. 1: 22. Heb. 13: 8.)

The gospel is, therefore, the doctrine which the Son of God, our Mediator, revealed from heaven in Paradise, immediately after the fall, and which he brought from the bosom of the Eternal Father; which promises, and announces, in view of the free grace and mercy of God, to all those that repent and believe, deliverance from sin, death, condemnation, and the wrath of God; which is the same thing as to say that it promises and proclaims the remission of sin, salvation, and eternal life, by and for the

In the old covenant, on account of the Messiah, who has already shone forth in our behalf,

* a promise of grace. In this painful, such as circumstances, there are only two—both of which are passages of good things to &c. Hence every thing would be saved to unite and better understand, which is revealed.

The effusion of the Holy Spirit was confined to the church; and in the circumstance of the law being abrogated, and the church was confined to the church; the new church was thus extended and united among all nations, and the livid condition, or language, was often used in Scripture by such a part: is taken for the which is especially treated more strenuously; and also more obscure. The sign of the most part taken for the law is abrogated, and

The revelation of the Catechism, which is by faith? Out of the law of
sake of the Son of God, the Mediator; and is that through which the Holy Spirit works effectually in the hearts of the faithful, kindling and exciting in them, faith, repentance, and the beginning of eternal life. Or, we may, in accordance with the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth questions of the Catechism, define the gospel to be the doctrine which God revealed first in Paradise, and afterwards published by the Patriarchs and Prophets, which he was pleased to represent by the shadows of sacrifices, and the other ceremonies of the law, and which he has accomplished by his only begotten Son; teaching that the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, is made unto us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption; that is to say that he is a perfect Mediator, satisfying for the sins of the human race, restoring righteousness and eternal life to all those who by a true faith are ingrafted into him, and embrace his benefits.

The following passages of Scripture confirm this definition, which we have given of the gospel: "This is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life, and I will raise him up at the last day." "And that repentance and remission of sin should be preached in his name, among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem." "The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ." (John 6:44; Luke 24:47; John 1:17.)

II. HAS THE GOSPEL ALWAYS BEEN KNOWN IN THE CHURCH, OR IS IT A NEW DOCTRINE?

The gospel sometimes signifies the doctrine concerning the promise of grace, and the remission of sins to be granted freely, on account of the sacrifice of the Messiah, who had not as yet come in the flesh; and then, again, it signifies the doctrine of the Messiah as already come. In the latter sense, it has not always been, but commenced with the New Testament. In the former sense, however, it has always been in the Church; for immediately after the fall it was revealed in Paradise to our first parents—afterwards it was published by the Patriarchs, and Prophets, and was at length fully accomplished, and revealed by Christ himself. The proofs of this are the following:

1. The testimony of the Apostles. Peter says, "To him gave all the Prophets witness, that through his name, whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins." "Of which salvation the prophets have inquired, and searched diligently." (Acts 10:43; 1 Pet. 1:10.) Paul says of the gospel, "Which he had promised afore by his prophets." (Rom. 1:2.) Christ himself says, "Had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me, for he wrote of me." (John 5:46.)

2. The promises and prophecies which relate to the Messiah, establish the same thing.

This must, therefore, be carefully noticed, because God will have us know that there was, and is from the beginning to the end of the world, only one doctrine, and way of salvation through Christ, according to what is said, "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever." "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." "No man cometh to the Father but by me." "Moses wrote of me." (Heb. 13:8; John 14:6; 5:46.) Does any one ask, How Moses wrote of Christ? We answer, 1. By enumerating the promises which had respect to the Messiah. "In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth bless thee," etc. "A star shall rise out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and shall come forth from Zion; and shall reign in the midst of the Gentiles." (Gen. 22:18; Gen. 49:10.)

Obj. 1. Paul declares that the gospel has not always been known to us. Therefore the gospel is a new doctrine, and Peter says that the promise was afterwards made to his people. Therefore it has not always been known to us. Therefore the promise was afterwards made to his people.

Obj. 3. The law came in to give way to the gospel. Therefore the gospel has not always been known to us.
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seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.” “God shall raise up a prophet,” &c. “A star shall rise out of Jacob.” “The sceptre shall not depart from Judah until Shiloh come.” (Gen. 12; 3. Deut. 10: 15. Num. 24: 17. Gen. 49: 10.) 2. He restricted these promises to a certain family from which the Messiah was to be born; and to which the promise was afterwards more frequently referred, and spoken of. 3. The whole Levitical priesthood, and ceremonial worship, as sacrifices, oblations, the altar, the temple, and other things which Moses described, all looked forward to Christ. The kings and kingdom of the Jewish nation were types of Christ, and of his kingdom. Hence Moses wrote many things of Christ.

Obj. 1. Paul declares the gospel was promised through the prophets; and Peter says that the prophets prophesied of the grace that should come unto us. Therefore the gospel has not always been. Ans. We grant that the gospel has not always been, if we understand by it the doctrine of the promise of grace as fulfilled through the manifestation of Christ in the flesh, and as it respects the clearness and evidence of this doctrine; for in ancient times the gospel was not, but was only promised by the prophets: 1. As concerning the fulfillment of those things, in the Old Testament, were predicted of the Messiah. 2. In regard to the clearer knowledge of the promise of grace. 3. In respect to the more copious outpouring of the gifts of the Holy Spirit; that is, the gospel then was not the announcement of Christ already come, dead, risen again, and seated at the right hand of the Father, as it now is; but it was a preaching of Christ, who would at some future time come, and accomplish all these things. Nevertheless, there was a gospel, that is, there was a joyful announcement of the benefits of the Messiah that was to come, sufficient for the salvation of the ancient fathers, as it is said, “Abraham saw my day, and rejoiced.” “To him gave all the prophets witness.” “Christ is the end of the law.” (John 8: 56. Acts 10: 43. Rom. 10: 4.)

Obj. 2. The apostle Paul says, the gospel was the mystery which was kept secret since the world began, and that in other ages it was not made known to the Messiah, establish no such thing; because God will have us to the end of the world, Christ, according to what he saith, and for ever.” “I come not to the Father but John 14: 6; 5: 46.)

Obj. 3. The law came by Moses, grace and truth by Jesus Christ. Therefore the gospel has not always been known. Ans. Grace and truth did indeed come through Christ, viz, in respect to the fulfillment of types, and the full exhibition and copious application of those things which were formerly promised in the Old Testament. But it does not follow from this, that the ancient fathers were entirely destitute of this grace; for unto them also the same grace was applied by, and on account of Christ, who would subsequently appear in the flesh, although it was given in smaller meas-
sures to them than to us. For, whatever grace and true knowledge of God has ever come to men, has come through Christ, as it is said, “The only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.” “No man cometh to the Father, but by me.” “Without me ye can do nothing.” (John 1: 18; 14: 6; 15: 5.)

But it is said, the law was by Moses; therefore the gospel was not by him. Ans. This is so declared, because it was the principal part of his office to publish the law; yet he also taught the gospel, because he wrote and spoke of Christ, although more obscurely, as has been shown. But it was the peculiar office of Christ to publish the gospel, although he at the same time taught the law, but not principally, as did Moses: for he took away from the moral law the corruptions and glosses of false teachers—fulfilled the ceremonial law, and abrogated it, together with the judicial law.

III. IN WHAT DOES THE GOSPEL DIFFER FROM THE LAW?

The gospel and the law agree in this, that they are both from God, and that there is something revealed in each concerning the nature, will, and works of God. There is, however, a very great difference between them:

1. In the revelations which they contain; or, as it respects the manner in which the revelation peculiar to each is made known. The law was engraven upon the heart of man in his creation, and is therefore known to all naturally, although no other revelation were given. “The Gentiles have the work of the law written in their hearts.” (Rom. 2: 15.) The gospel is not known naturally, but is divinely revealed to the Church alone through Christ, the Mediator. For no creature could have seen or hoped for that mitigation of the law concerning satisfaction for our sins through another, if the Son of God had not revealed it. “No man knoweth the Father, but the Son, and he to whom the Son will reveal him.” “Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee.” “The Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.” (Matt. 11: 27; 16: 17.)

2. In the kind of doctrine, or subject peculiar to each. The law teaches us what we ought to be, and what God requires of us, but it does not give us the ability to perform it, nor does it point out the way by which we may avoid what is forbidden. But the gospel teaches us in what manner we may be made such as the law requires: for it offers unto us the promise of grace, by having the righteousness of Christ imputed to us through faith, and that in such a way as if it were properly ours, teaching us that we are just before God, through the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. The law says, “Pay what thou owest.” “Do this, and live.” (Matt. 18: 28. Luke 10: 28.) The gospel says, “Only believe.” (Mark 5: 36.)

3. In the promises. The law promises life to those who are righteous in themselves, or on the condition of righteousness, and perfect obedience. “He that doeth them, shall live in them.” “If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.” (Lev. 18: 5. Matt. 19: 17.) The gospel, on the other hand, promises life to those who are justified by faith in Christ, or on the condition of the righteousness of Christ, applied unto us by faith. The law and gospel are, however, not opposed to each other in these respects: for although the law requires us to keep the commandments if we would enter into life, yet it does not exclude us from life if another perform these things for us. It does indeed propose a way of satisfaction, which is through ourselves, shown.

4. They differ in their effect which killed, and is the knowledge of sin.” “The (Rom. 3: 20; 4: 15. 2 Cor.) knowledge of what ought it declares our duty, and whilst it neither gives us in through which it may be a righteousness. But the gospel that is, it has the operations which are dead in sin, because works faith and life in the salvation.” (Rom. 3: 18: 20.)

IV. WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF THE GOSPEL?

The proper effects of the gospel are:

1. Faith; because “faith of God.” “The gospel is the power of God unto salvation.” (Rom. 10: 17.)

2. Through faith, our election and salvation; for the promises of God benefit.

V. FROM WHAT DOES THE GOSPEL DIFFER FROM THE LAWS?

The truth of the gospel is:

1. From the testimony of the law.

2. From the prophecies of the Old Testament.

3. From the fulfilment of the Old Testament.

4. From the miracles by
true knowledge of God, and is said, "The only be-

which is through ourselves, but it does not forbid the other, as has been

which he wrote and spoke - he fulfilled his office to teach and observe the judicial law. 

obj. There is no precept, or commandment belonging to the gospel, but to the law. The preaching of repentance is a precept. Therefore the preaching of repentance does not belong to the gospel, but to the law. Ana. We deny the major, if it is taken generally; for this precept is peculiar to the gospel, which commands us to believe, to embrace the benefits of Christ, and to commence new obedience, or that righteousness which the law requires. If it be objected that the law also commands us to believe in God, we reply that it does this only in general, by requiring us to give credit to all the divine promises, precepts and denunciations, and that with a threatening of punishment, unless we do it. But the gospel commands us expressly and particularly to embrace, by faith, the promise of grace; believing all the promises of God, leaving this to the law; but it says in particular, Believe this promise; fly to Christ, and thy sins shall be forgiven thee.

IV. WHAT ARE THE PROPER EFFECTS OF THE GOSPEL?

The proper effects of the gospel are -

1. Faith; because faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. (Mark. 4: 47.) The gospel is the power of God unto salvation. (Rom. 1: 16.)

2. Through faith, our entire conversion to God, justification, regeneration and salvation; for through faith we receive Christ, with all his benefits.

V. FROM WHAT DOES THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL APPEAR?

The truth of the gospel appears -

1. From the testimony of the Holy Ghost.

2. From the prophecies which were uttered by the prophets.

3. From the fulfilment of these prophecies, which took place under the New Testament dispensation.

4. From the miracles by which the doctrine of the gospel was confirmed.