The commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism

Ursinus, Z


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THE

COMMENTARY

OF

DR. ZACHARIAS URSINUS

ON THE

HEIDELBERG CATECHISM

TRANSLATED FROM THE ORIGINAL LATIN,
BY THE REV. G. W. WILLIARD, A. M.

WM. B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING CO.
Grand Rapids 1956 Michigan
he 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 Belial?” (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 with 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. We may, however, here say, that there are three marks by which the church is known: Purity of doctrine—the proper use of the sacraments, and obedience to God according to all the parts of this doctrine, whether of faith or practice. And if it be here objected, that great vices have often made their appearance in the church, we would reply that these are not defended and adhered to by the church, as by the various sects. Yes, the church is the first to censure and condemn them. Hence, if there are faults in the church, these are disapproved of and removed. As long as this state of things lasts, so long the church remains.

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 behoved 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 covers written in these writings, and that they are grants unto us, viz: his favor, remission of sins, and also what he, in return, requires of us in obedience. These, now, are the three parts of the gospel.

4. Christ is the substance and ground of the doctrine contained in the law and gospel; and which is knowledge of Christ and his benevolence towards his own; in which righteousness is, which he has written the gospel, professedly, treats of the doctrine of the church. Therefore we have, in the law and gospel, comprehending the doctrine revealed of the church, consist in these three things:

1. The subject, or general character of the doctrine. The law prescribes and enjoins what must be avoided: whilst the gospel宣布s and for the sake of Christ.

2. In the manner of the revelation of the doctrine from nature; the gospel is divinely inspired.

3. In the promises which they contain; the law having been made upon the condition of perfect obedience in Christ, and the commandments there of, however, more will be said upon this point.

III. IN WHAT DOES THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH DIFFER FROM OTHER RELIGIONS, AND WHAT ARE THESE DISTINCTIONS?

The doctrine of the church differs in several respects. First: the doctrine of the church was delivered, through the various religious systems of sectarians, without the suggestion of the devil. Secondly, the sacred writings contain such divine testimony in confirmation of the promises of God, and which is calculated to quiet the doubts of men as to the truth of these promises. Thirdly: in the church of God, the law is uncorrupted, whilst in other systems of religion, it is basely corrupted; for the adversary of Christ rejects the doctrine of the first tabernacle, in which God, through Moses, has revealed himself to the church; and the knowledge of God, not in his Son, in himself, otherwise than he has commanded it, and has revealed it to the world, is nothing more than a pious figment in relation to the external deportment of men. Fourthly: the church of God, through the living Jesus Christ, is not only the means of salvation, but the instrument of the salvation of sinners.
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 it what it appears to be?
IV. What are its effects?
V. 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 εὐαγγελία are of a somewhat different significance. 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
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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; which 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 doctrine, 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: 41. 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; 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 proof of this are the following:

1. The testimony of the Apostles. Peter says, "To him gave all the prophets witness, that through his name, whatsoever 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 be blessed." (Gen. 22: 18.) "A star shall come forth out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel." (Gen. 49: 10.) "Therefore the gospel has not always been known in the Church. Therefore the gospel has not always been a new doctrine.

Obj. 1. Paul declares that the gospel has not always been known to the ancient fathers, as it is now. Nevertheless, there was a knowledge of the promises concerning the Messiah, and outpouring of the gifts of the Spirit, of repentance, of faith, and the announcement of the Messiah, as it were, to them, and to the right hand of the Father, and to us, the subjects of the new covenant. Paul says of the ancient fathers, "He had promise of the gift of the Spirit, concerning which either he had received knowledge by revelation, or that which was promised was not received by the ancient fathers, as it is now. "To him gave all the prophets witness," (John 5: 36. Acts 10: 43.)

Obj. 2. The apostle Peter kept the Messiah's coming secret since the world began, and the benefits thereof to the sons of men, until the time of Christ's coming, who gives us the gospel, and the right understanding of the promises. The objection contains an incorrect view of the way in which the gospel is kept secret, as not to be separated from the present dispensation, as it is now; which is not the case. By the former times the gospel was foreshadowed to the ancient fathers, although not so clearly perceived, and that the Messiah was to be revealed and made manifest, and the sacrifice of the Messiah, and the fulfilment of types of Christ, and of his doctrine, and of his person, in the ancient fathers, as it is now. But yet the ancient fathers, although not so clearly perceived, it was not as a new doctrine, but as a re-discovery of the former promise, by which they also the same grace was understood, and would subsequently appear in a

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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 propheeced of the grace that should come unto us. Therefore the gospel has not always been. As 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 which, 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 sons of men. (Rom. 16: 25. Eph. 3: 5.) Ans. This objection contains an incorrect division, insomuch as it disjoins things which ought not to be separated. For the apostle adds, in connection with the above, "as it is now;" which ought not to be omitted, because it shows that in former times the gospel was also known, though less clearly, and to fewer persons, than it now is. The objection is also weak, in affirming that it is only declared in a certain respect; for it does not follow, that it was then altogether unknown, because it is now more clearly perceived, and that by many more persons. It was known to the fathers, although not so clearly as to us. Hence the importance of the distinction between the words κρυπτός and ὑποκρύπτω, as above expressed.

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 mea-
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 engraved 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 gospel says, "Believe this promise; fly to the Father, and to commence the work of repentance declared by him." "The gospel is of God unto salvation." (Rom. 3: 20; 4: 15. 2 Corinthians 5: 21.) The gospel says, "Believe this promise; fly to the Father, and to commence the work of repentance declared by him." "The gospel is of God unto salvation." (Rom. 3: 20; 4: 15. 2 Corinthians 5: 21.)
true knowledge of God, which is said, "The only being hath declared him." Without me ye can do nothing. The gospel was not by him.

The subject of this part of his office to us was the seed which he wrote and spoke to us. But it was the work which he at the same time did for him away from us. - Teachers - he fulfilled the judicial law.

FROM THE LAW?

It is true both from God, and the nature, will, and purpose of the law, that there is a difference between them: one respects the manner in which it is known. The law was given by Moses; the gospel is therefore-known to us by revelation. "The Gentiles believed; Romans 2:15.) The testimony of the New Testament, and also exhorts us by the Holy Spirit, and by the gospel, 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; and this is the ministration of the gospel. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation, &c. (Rom. 1:16.)

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. "The gospel is the ministration of the Spirit." (Rom. 10:17; 2 Cor. 3:13. 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.

5. 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 fulfillment of these prophecies, which took place under the New Testament dispensation.

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

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

4. They differ in their effects. The law, without the gospel, is the letter which killeth, and is the ministration of death: "For by the law is the knowledge of sin." (Rom. 3:20; 4:15. 2 Cor. 3:6.) The outward preaching, and simple knowledge of what ought to be done, is known through the letter: for it declares our duty, and that righteousness which God requires; and, whilst it neither gives us the ability to perform it, nor points out the way through which it may be attained, it finds fault with, and condemns our righteousness. But the gospel is the ministration of life, and of the Spirit, that is, it has the operations of the Spirit united with it, and quickens those that are dead in sin, because it is through the gospel that the Holy Spirit works faith and life in the elect. "The gospel is the power of God unto salvation," &c. (Rom. 1:16.)

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. No duty is more general; for this precept is peculiar to the gospel, which commands us to believe, to embrace the promises of grace, and also exhorts us by the Holy Spirit, and by the gospel, 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; and this is the ministration of the gospel. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation, &c. (Rom. 1:16.)

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