

EIGHTH EVENING LECTURE.

(November 14. 1884.)

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If the Holy Scriptures were really so obscure a book that the meaning of all those passages which form the basis of articles of the Christian Creed could not be definitely ascertained, and if, as a result of this, we should have to acknowledge that without some other authority it would be impossible to decide which of two or several interpretations of Scripture-passages is the only correct one, — if these conditions, I say, were true, the Scriptures could not be the Word of God. How could a book that leaves us groping in darkness and uncertainty regarding its essential contents serve as a revelation? The old Jewish Bible scholars of the Middle Ages, in particular, declared the meaning of the Scriptures was, indeed, plain, but that there was a secret meaning of Scripture that is of the highest importance, and this secret meaning could not be explored without the aid of the Cabala. For instance, they pointed out that in the first as well as in the last verse of the Hebrew text the letter *aleph* occurs six times. Now, an ordinary person, they say, cannot know why that is so, but the Cabala gives the explanation, *vis.*, that the world is to last six thousand years.

This claim is, of course, quite absurd. However, even with the Christian Church, in the Papacy, the teaching is current that the Scriptures are so obscure that you can scarcely understand a single passage in them; at any rate, very many important teachings of the Christian religion, it is asserted, cannot be substantiated from Scripture. To this end the traditions of the Church are said to be absolutely necessary. This claim of the papists is evidence of their blindness. To them applies what Paul says 2 Cor. 4, 3: “If our Gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost.”

Luther is right when he says in his exposition of Ps. 37 (St. L. Ed. V, 335): “There is not a plainer book on earth than the Holy Scriptures. It is, in comparison with all other books, what the sun is compared with all other luminaries. The papists are giving us their twaddle about the Scriptures for the sole purpose of leading us away from the Scriptures and raising up themselves as masters over us in order to force us to believe their preaching of dreams. It is an abomination, a disgraceful defamation of Holy Writ and the entire Christian Church, to say that the Holy Scriptures are obscure, that they are not clear enough to be understood by everybody and to enable everybody to teach and prove what he believes.”

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In his *Appeal to the Counselors of All Cities of Germany in Behalf of the Establishment and Maintenance of Christian Schools*, *Luther* says (St. L. Ed. X, 473): “The sophists have claimed that the Scriptures are obscure, meaning that it is the very nature of the Word of God to be obscure and to speak in strange fashion. But they do not see that the whole trouble is caused by the *languages*. If we understood the languages, there would not be anything that has ever been spoken easier to understand than the Word of God. Of course, a Turk will talk obscure things to be because I do not know Turkish; but a Turkish child seven years old understands him readily.”

Luther is entirely right. The Holy Scriptures are not only as perspicuous as the plainest writing of men, but they are much clearer, because they have been set down by the Holy Spirit, the Creator of the languages. It is therefore absolutely impossible to prove an error or even a contradiction in Scripture if you stick to its words. It is truth, then, what we express in our beautiful Communion hymn “Lord Jesus, Thou Art Truly Good,” when we sing:

Firm as a rock Thy Word still stands,

Unshaken by the en'mies, hands,
Though they be e'er so cunning.

However, while the historico-grammatical meaning of Scripture can readily be opened up by any one who understand its language, it is impossible without the Holy Spirit for any one to understand the Holy Scriptures unto his salvation, no matter how great a linguist, how famous a philologist, how keen a logician he may be. The Apostle Paul declares, 1 Cor. 2, 14: "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." Again, the same apostle says, 1 Cor. 1, 23: "We preach Christ Crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling-block and unto the Greeks foolishness."

Now, the primary requisite for a salutary knowledge of the Holy Scriptures is the correct understanding of the distinction between the Law and the Gospel. The Bible is full of light to every one who has this knowledge. Wherever this knowledge is lacking, all Scripture remains a book sealed with seven seals.

We now proceed to

Thesis IV.

The true knowledge of the distinction between the Law and the Gospel is not only a glorious light, affording the correct understanding of the entire Holy Scriptures, but without this knowledge Scripture is and remains a sealed book.

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Turning the leaves of the Holy Scriptures while still ignorant of the distinction between the Law and the Gospel, a person receives the impression that a great number of contradictions are contained in the Scriptures; in fact, the entire Scripture seem to be made up of contradictions, worse than the Koran of the Turks. Now the Scriptures pronounce one blessed, now they condemn him. When the rich youth asked the Lord: "What good things shall I do that I may have eternal life?" the Lord replied: "If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments." When the jailer at Philippi addressed the identical question to Paul and Silas, he received this answer: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved and thy house." On the one hand, we read in Hab. 2, 4: "The just shall live by his faith"; on the other hand, we note that John in his First Epistle, chap. 3, 7, says: "He that doeth righteousness is righteous." Over and against this the Apostle Paul declares: "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." On the one hand, we note that Scripture declares God has no pleasure in sinners; on the other hand, we find that it states: "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." In one place Paul cries: "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men," and Ps. 5, 4 we read: "Thou art not a God that hath pleasure in wickedness; neither shall evil dwell with Thee"; in another place we hear Peter saying: "Hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you." On the one hand, we are told that all the world is under the wrath of God; on the other hand, we read: "God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Another remarkable passage is 1 Cor. 6, 9–11, where the apostles first makes this statement: "Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners shall inherit the kingdom of God," and then adds: "And such were some of you. But ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God." Must not a person who knows nothing of the distinction between the Law and the Gospel be swallowed up in utter darkness

when reading all this? Must he not indignantly cry out: “What? That is to be God’s Word? A book full of such contradictions?”

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For the situation is not this, that the Old Testament reveals a wrathful, the New Testament a gracious God, or that the Old Testament teaches salvation by a person’s own works, the New Testament, by faith. No; we find both teachings in the Old as well as in the New Testament. But the moment we learn to know the distinction between the Law and the Gospel, it is as if the sun were rising upon the Scriptures, and we behold all the contents of the Scriptures in the most beautiful harmony. We see that the Law was not revealed to us to put that notion into our heads that we can become righteous by it, but to teach us that we are utterly unable to fulfil the Law. When we have learned this, we shall know what a sweet message, what a glorious doctrine, the Gospel is and shall receive it with exuberant joy.

The history of the Church, too, illustrates the importance of understanding this distinction. Corruption entered the Church when Law and Gospel began to be confounded. A perusal of the writings of the Church Fathers soon reveals the cause of the Church’s misery in those early days: people did not know how to distinguish properly between Law and Gospel. Up to the sixth century we still find glorious testimonies exhibiting this distinction, but from that time on we notice that this light is growing dim and that the distinction is gradually forgotten.

An instance illustrating this fact is the monastic life, which is seen to rise to ever greater distinction. The reply of the Lord to the rich young man was understood as showing what is necessary for a person’s salvation. The preaches in those days proclaimed the Law to people to whom they should have preached the Gospel.

Following the course of history to the time when the Papacy had become dominant, we find that the knowledge of this distinction became utterly extinct; a truly abysmal darkness settled upon the Church, and sheer paganism and idolatry gained their way into it.

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Remember the agonies of our dear Luther! Considering the darkness which reigned in his day, we must say that, compared with others he had acquired a great deal of knowledge at the beginning of his career, but he did not know how to distinguish the Law from the Gospel. Oh, the toil and torments he had to undergo! His self-castigation and fasting brought him to the point of death. The most crushing, the most appalling statement in his estimation at that time was this, that the righteousness which is valid in the sight of God is revealed in the Gospel. “Alas!” he mused, “what a woeful state of affairs! First we are approached by the Law, which demands of us that we fulfil it; and now, in addition, we are to be made righteous by obeying the Gospel!” Luther confesses that there were times in his life when he was harassed with blasphemous thoughts. Suddenly a new light shone in upon him, showing him of what kind of righteousness the Gospel is speaking. He relates that from that moment he began to run through the whole Scriptures in an endeavor to obtain a clear understanding as to which portions of the Scriptures are Law and which Gospel. He says that he pried into every book in the Bible, and now all its parts became clear to him. The birth of the Reformer dates from the moment when Luther understood this distinction. The tremendous success of his public activity, moreover, is due to the same cause. By his new knowledge Luther liberated the poor people from the misery into which they had been driven by the Law-preaching of their priests.

You are to become pastors, my friends. Do you not sense the immense importance of this matter for your future vocation? Some one who is in anguish and distress will come to you. In every instance the cause of such anguish of soul will be that the Law has taken effect in your parishioner, and it does not occur to him that he can be saved by the Gospel. He does not think of that while he wails: “Alas! I am a

poor sinner; I am worthy of damnation,” etc. To such a person you must say: “You are indeed a lost and condemned creature. But the passage of Scripture which has told you that is Law. There is, however, another teaching in Scripture. The Law has done its work in you; by the Law is to come the knowledge of sin. You must now quit Sinai and go to Golgotha. See yonder your Savior, bleeding and dying for you!” Not until you enter the ministry, will you realize the great importance of the distinction between Law and Gospel and the fact that only the knowledge of this distinction, and nothing else, will make you capable to discharge the office that is to save the world. The matter of paramount importance, of course, will always be this, that you have experienced this distinction upon yourself. I am not referring to those among you who have never been in anguish over your sins, who consider themselves orthodox because they have been reared in Christian homes. I am referring to those who are concerned about their salvation. There will be moments when such of you will imagine that you are God’s children. Again, there will be times when you think that your sins have not been forgiven you. If on such occasions you desire genuine peace, it can come to you only through the knowledge of the distinction between Law and Gospel.

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In the *Apology* of the Augsburg Confession (Mueller, p. 119; *Triglot Concordia*, p. 173) we read: “For rightly to understand the benefit of Christ and the great treasure of the Gospel (which Paul extols so greatly), we must separate as far as the heavens are from the earth the promise of God and the grace that is offered, on the one hand, from the Law, on the other.” The Word of God may preach the Gospel to us with ever so great comfort, we shall nevertheless not obtain the peace it offers unless we know that Holy Writ contains also the Law, from which we have escaped and that, being lost and doomed sinners, we have embraced the Gospel. We may hit upon a comforting passage and say to ourselves: “Aye, I have the forgiveness of sins,” and then we may strike another passage which makes us believe that we are lost, — all this because we do not know the distinction between Law and Gospel.

The *Formula of Concord*, in the Epitome (Mueller, p. 533; *Triglot Concordia*, p. 801), says: “We believe, teach, and confess that the distinction between the Law and the Gospel is to be maintained in the Church with great diligence as an especially brilliant light, by which, according to the admonition of St. Paul, the Word of God is rightly divided.” This is repeated in the Declaration of Art. V (Mueller, p. 633; *Triglot Concordia*, p. 951) as follows: “As the distinction between the Law and the Gospel is a special brilliant light, which serves to the end that God’s Word may be rightly divided and the Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles may be properly explained and understood, we must guard it with especial care in order that these two doctrines may not be mingled with one another or a Law be made out of the Gospel, whereby *the merit of Christ is obscured* and troubled consciences are *robbed of their comfort* which they otherwise have in the Gospel when it is preached genuinely and in its purity, and by which they can support themselves in their most grievous trials against the terrors of the Law.” If these two doctrines are not kept separate, the merit of Christ is obscured; for when I am afraid of the threatening of the Law, I have forgotten Christ, who says to me: “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. All ye that labor and are heavy laden, do but come, and you shall find rest unto your souls.” These facts will not be rightly proclaimed by the preacher unless he has received an indelible impression of the distinction between the Law and the Gospel. Only he, moreover, can lie down and die in peace. The devil may whisper all manner of insinuations to him, but he will say to him: “Your charges against me are quite correct; but I have another doctrine, which tells me something altogether different. I am glad that the Law has put me in such a woeful plight; for now I can relish the Gospel all the more.”

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At the conclusion of Art. V we read in the *Formula of Concord* (Mueller, p. 639; *Triglot Concordia*, p. 961): “Now, in order that both doctrines, that of the Law and that of the Gospel, be not mingled and confounded with one another, and what belongs to the one may not be ascribed to the other, whereby the merit and benefits of Christ are easily obscured and the Gospel is again turned into a doctrine of the Law, as has occurred in the Papacy, and thus Christians are deprived of the true comfort which they have in the Gospel against the terrors of the Law, and the door is again opened in the Church of God to the Papacy, therefore the true and proper distinction between the Law and Gospel must with all diligence be inculcated and preserved, and whatever gives occasion for confusion *iter legum et evangelium* [between the Law and the Gospel], that is, whereby the two doctrines, Law and Gospel, may be confounded and mingled into one doctrine, should be diligently prevented.” — We, too, are in the great danger here sketched. Read the writings of those who claim to be the best preachers. They terrify, to be sure, but their incisiveness is due to the fact that they confound the Law with the Gospel. As a result, people who have read these writings are on their dying bed often harassed with doubts. Many a one among them dies with the thoughts in his heart: “I’ll see whether God will receive me.” Any one dying in such uncertainty does not depart in saving faith. Now, whose fault is it, at least in many instances? The preacher’s.

However, the preacher must also be careful not to say that the Law has been abolished; for that is not true. The Law remains in force; it is not abrogated. But we have another message besides that of the Law. God does not say: “By the Law is righteousness,” but: “By the Law is the knowledge of sin.” Yea, we read in the Epistle to the Romans: “To him that ... believeth on Him that justifieth *the ungodly*, his faith is counted for righteousness.” Hence we are on the right way to salvation the moment we are convinced that we are ungodly.

Commenting on Gal. 3, 19, *Luther* says (St. L. Ed. IX, 415): “If the Gospel is not fundamentally and plainly set apart from the Law, it is impossible to keep the Christians doctrine *unadulterated*. Again, when this distinction has been correctly and firmly established, we can have a fine and correct knowledge of the manner how, and by what means, we are to become righteous in the sight of God. Where this illuminating knowledge prevails, in is easy to distinguish faith from works, Christ from Moses, the Gospel from the Law of Moses and all other secular laws, statutes and ordinances.”

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In conclusion, *Chemnitz* writes in his *Chapters on Theology (Loci Theologici)*, in the chapter on Justification (fol. 206): “Paul states distinctly that the righteousness which is valid in the sight of God is revealed in the Gospel, apart from the Law. Hence the principal matter in this inquiry regarding justification is that the true and proper distinction between the Law and the Gospel be fixed and carefully maintained. ... Is there any other light, besides the one furnished by the true distinction between the Law and the Gospel, that has so forcibly broken up the dense darkness of the Pope’s dominion?” The darkness of the Papacy has not been dispelled by any other light than the appearance of the teaching that there is a distinction to be made between the Law and the Gospel. Great councils of the Church wanted to make an attempt at reforming the Church; mighty emperors had undertaken this task. What did they accomplish? Nothing. Matters went from bad to worse. What is the reason why a poor, miserable monk succeeded in this work? No doubt it was because he put the candlestick of this doctrine back in the holy place. He might have preached in ever so evangelical a fashion, Christians would not have been comforted. For the moment they would have come across the Law, they would have exclaimed: “Ah, I have been in error after all! I have to keep the commandments of God if I want to enter into life.”

Here is the point where most of the reformers before the Reformation were at fault. Huss preached the Gospel exceedingly well, but he did not show his hearers the proper distinction between the Law and the Gospel. For that reason his work, his attempt at reformation, did not endure.

May God, then, who has kindled this light for us, preserve it unto us! I am thinking of you in particular when I say this. We, who are old, will soon be in our graves. The light began to shine once more in our time. See to it that it is not put out again. You are following a wrong track if you imagine that you have comprehended this whole teaching in these few hours. If this light is not carefully guarded, it will soon go out. For instance, we find that this light was still burning in the days when the earliest writings of the Church Fathers were composed. But in the writings of the ecclesiastical teaches who followed them no definite statement is found regarding the distinction between the Law and the Gospel. That is the reason why the Papacy, in a later age, made such rapid headway. The same danger is now threatening us.

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The principal passage of Scripture establishing our thesis is Rom. 10, 2–4: *For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they, being ignorant of God's righteousness and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness to every one that believeth.* To what ignorance of the Jews does the apostle refer in this passage when he says “not according to knowledge”? This: “They do not recognize the righteousness that is valid in the sight of God.” That is their lack of understanding. They imagined they must be zealots in behalf of the Law; for as it was most assuredly God's Law, how might any one dare depart from it? If they had paid attention to Paul's preaching, they would soon have observed that Paul allowed the Law to remain in force. Seeing that, they would not have become enemies of the Gospel, and the dreadful darkness which settled upon them like the pall of night would have been dispelled.