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# Gospel

Word of Life for the Church and for the World  
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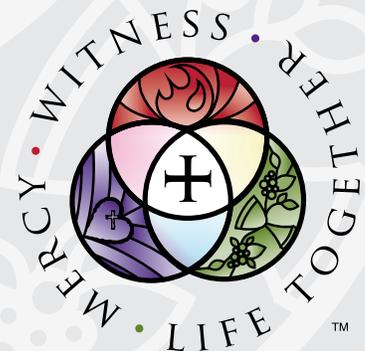
## LEADER'S GUIDE

**Author: Rev. Daniel Schoessow**

Pastor, Christ and Zion Ev. Lutheran Churches, Chili and Granton, Wisc.  
[lutheranpastor@gmail.com](mailto:lutheranpastor@gmail.com)

**General Editor: Rev. Mark W. Love**

Pastor, St. Peter's Lutheran Church, Rockford, Mich.  
[markwlove@gmail.com](mailto:markwlove@gmail.com)



## FOCUS

We are constantly bombarded with bad news and depressing headlines in our sin-infected world. Stories of war, crime, natural disasters, tragic accidents, political disputes and economic hardships dominate the evening news. Although most newscasts try to end with a “feel-good” story, the proportion of bad news to good news is often lopsided. Consequently we may choose to avoid the newscasts altogether and settle instead for a re-run of “The Simpsons.”

This lopsided proportion of bad news to good news takes place in our spiritual lives as well. Personal conflicts, family tragedies and financial hardships weigh heavily on our minds. Guilt and shame linger and fester deep down in our hearts. Our consciences are disturbed by the news the Law written in our hearts brings to us and news heard by our ears and experienced in our lives.

## SCRIPTURAL AND CONFESSIONAL UNDERSTANDING

1. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word “BASAR” means “to convey good news.” It is used for general good news of political or military victory:

1 Kings 1:42 *“And Adonijah said, ‘Come in, for you are a worthy man and bring good news.’”*<sup>1</sup>

It later takes on a more spiritual sense, describing the coming of the Lord to His people:

Is. 52:7 *“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns.’”*

Is. 61:1 *“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.”*

2. Read Luke 4:18–21 and examine how and why Jesus quotes Isaiah 61.

**Jesus shows that this Good News is now being fulfilled with His coming.**

<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. Copyright 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers, Wheaton, Illinois.

How desperate we are for good news! This is what the Christian church (and only the Christian church), has to offer the world: the Good News of the Gospel. This Word that we use so frequently and take for granted so easily is actually packed with the richest blessings God has to offer the world.

How would you define the word “Gospel”?

**When Christians use the word “Gospel,” we are referring to the Good News that Jesus Christ died to pay the penalty for our sin and make us heirs of heaven through faith in Him.**

The Greek word “*euangelion*” means “good news.” It is a combination of the prefix “*eu*” (good) and the noun “*angelos*” (messenger). The noun “*euangelion*” (Gospel) and the verb “*euangelizo*” (to bring good news, to evangelize) occur 130 times in the Greek New Testament. St. Paul uses the noun “Gospel” most often in his letters (60 times).

3. According to the following verses, how would you define the “Gospel” in the wide sense?

Matt. 26:13 [Jesus said] *“Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her.”*

Mark 1:1 *“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”*

**Used in the wide sense, the word “Gospel” covers the entire message of Scripture.**

4. Read the following texts and discuss how each defines the “Gospel” in the narrow sense?

› Rom. 1:1–5

› 1 Cor. 15:1–5

**In the narrow sense, the word “Gospel” is specifically the Good News of Jesus, the Son of God, dying on the cross to win salvation for the world.**

According to these passages, what is the heart and soul of the Gospel message?

**Christ's death and resurrection are the heart and soul of the Gospel message. Paul described these truths as "of first importance." He reminded the Corinthians of this.**

5. Look at Peter's preaching in Acts 2–5. How did he include Law and Gospel in proclaiming Christ's death and resurrection?

**In Peter's sermon on Pentecost (Acts 2), in his second sermon after healing the lame man (Acts 3), while on trial before the high priest (Acts 4) and again on trial before the Council (Acts 5), he proclaimed Christ crucified and resurrected. He consistently confronted them with strong Law: "You put Him to death." Naturally they would expect Christ's wrath and judgment, but in each instance Peter then connects Christ's death to God's offer of forgiveness:**

*"Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).*

*"Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out" (Acts 3:19).*

*"And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).*

*"God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins" (Acts 5:31).*

The Gospel is the Good News that Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again for our justification (Rom. 4:25). Every single sin of every single sinner of every single second in history has been paid for completely by the sufferings of Christ in our place. It goes against all human logic and fairness, yet it is the only way we can have God's righteousness; it has to be completely done for us and then distributed to us by God Himself. And so in the Gospel proclaimed (Word) and the Gospel applied (Sacraments), God the Holy Spirit gives what He promises: forgiveness of sins and a place in heaven, all as His free gift received by faith.

The Bible is full of Gospel in both the Old and New Testaments. But it is more than just a general message of God's goodness and blessing; it is a specific promise of grace conveyed through the substitutional sacrifice of God's Son for our sins. Through His death and resurrection, God offers a lost world rescue and redemption simply by believing the message!

## CONFESSIONAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

The Lutheran Confessions were written in defense of the Gospel, while they rarely define the word "Gospel."

1. How do the following excerpts still serve well to defend the Gospel from the abuses of from within and without the Church yet today?

*"The Gospel, however, is that doctrine which teaches what a man should believe in order to obtain the forgiveness of sins from God, since man has failed to keep the law of God and has transgressed it, his corrupted nature, thoughts, words, and deeds war against the law, and he is therefore subject to the wrath of God, to death, to temporal miseries, and to the punishment of hell-fire. The content of the Gospel is this, that the Son of God, Christ our Lord, himself assumed and bore the curse of the law and expiated and paid for all our sins, that through him alone we re-enter the good graces of God, obtain forgiveness*

*of sins through faith, are freed from death and all the punishments of sin, and are saved eternally." (FC SD, V, 20 T. G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2000, p. 561).*

2. Consider what Robert D. Preus about FC SD, V, 20:

*"This statement may well be considered one of the most important and formative statements in our Lutheran Confessions. Why? Because it is the most complete and beautiful definition of the Gospel to be found in them. And that is what our Confessions are all about – the Gospel! Our great 24 Lutheran Confessions were written for the sake of the Gospel. The Augsburg Confession, Luther's catechisms, the Formula of Concord were not written just to blast or correct abuses in the Roman Church, or to defend Lutheran theology against the attacks of papists, or to perpetuate party spirit. These Confessions were all prompted by a faith in the Gospel, a love for it, and a determination to teach and confess it according to the*

Scriptures.” (Robert D. Preus, *Getting into The Theology of Concord*, St. Louis: CPH, 1977, pgs. 24–25.)

The main article of contention with the Roman Catholics — Article IV of the Augsburg Confession concerning justification — is a defense of the Gospel message itself. Its author, Philip Melancthon, explains in the Apology why this article is so critical: “*The Gospel (that is, the promise that sins are forgiven freely for Christ’s sake) must be retained in the church. Whoever fails to teach about this faith we are discussing completely destroys the Gospel*” (Apology IV, 120, T. G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2000, p. 124).

3. Immediately after the chief article on justification, the Augsburg Confession in Article V states:

*“To obtain such faith God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the Sacraments. Through these, as through means, He gives the Holy Spirit, Who works faith, when and where He pleases, in those who hear the Gospel. And the Gospel teaches that we have a gracious God, not by our own merits but by the merit of Christ, when we believe this.”* (AC, V, The Office of The Ministry, T. G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2000, p. 31).

4. Consider the Smalcald Article’s brief article “The Gospel:”

*“We shall now return to the Gospel, which offers counsel and help against sin in more than one way, for God is surpassingly rich in His grace: First, through the spoken word, by which the forgiveness of sin (the peculiar function of the Gospel) is preached to the whole world; secondly, through Baptism; third, through the holy Sacrament of the Altar; fourth, through the power of the keys; and finally, through the mutual conversation and*

*consolation of brethren. Matt. 18:20: ‘Where two or three are gathered together,’ etc.”* (SA, part III, article IV, T. G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2000, p. 310).

This article follows an article on “The Law” and a lengthy article on “Repentance,” all of which (in part III) are directed not so much at the Roman Catholics (“*The pope and his court do not care much about these things; they are not concerned about matters of conscience but only about money, honor, and power.*” [Introduction to part III, T. G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2000, p. 302]), but are intended for discussion among the reformers themselves.

5. This distinction between Law and Gospel was a breakthrough teaching for Lutherans, and the discussion of their roles provides the context for the word “Gospel” to be defined in the Confessions. Consider again in the Formula of Concord:

*“But the Gospel, strictly speaking, is the kind of doctrine that teaches what a man who has not kept the law and is condemned by it should believe, namely, that Christ has satisfied and paid for all guilt and without man’s merit has obtained and won for him forgiveness of sins, the ‘righteousness that avails before God,’ (Rom. 1:17, II Cor. 5:21), and eternal life.”* (FC, Epitome V, “Law and Gospel”, T. G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2000, p. 478)

6. The Lutheran Confessions were written as a defense of the Gospel from the abuses occurring within Catholicism and within the Lutheran Reformation. Why are these essential tools in preserving the Gospel from the modern abuses?

## TEACHING/PREACHING USAGE OF THE WORD

This distinction between Law and Gospel remains a peculiar message and strength of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. We hold on strongly to this precious “evangelical” label, even though the “evangelical movement” around us threatens to re-define and take this good word from us.

1. Discuss how the various ways that message of the Gospel is shifted from the pure saving work of Christ to the work/experience of man?

Various strains of modern evangelicalism, despite the meaning of the term, are shifting their focus from the pure Gospel work of Christ to the works and feelings of man. In the evangelical movement, salvation comes by one’s own decision and commitment. The Gospel message is replaced with lists of do’s and don’ts for successful living. Sacraments (Gospel) are turned into ordinances (Law), a sign and pledge of our allegiance to God. They “re-gift” God’s grace by getting it from Him, re-wrapping it as their own personal project and offering it back to God as their

gift to Him. When we do this with a Christmas sweater or fruitcake, it's an embarrassing social faux-pax. When we do it with God's gifts, it's a sad diminishing of the precious soul-saving Gospel into human hubris, thinking we are doing God a favor by agreeing to be His children.

## 2. What drives this shift for believers?

People like law. This is why cults and legalistic false religions and evangelicalism grow so easily. Satan appeals to our human pride and urges us to compare ourselves with others. If we see that we are doing more for God than others, we assume we are more deserving of His grace and favor.

## 3. Having a strong heritage and claim upon the preaching of Law and Gospel, are Lutherans as susceptible to shifting our focus away from Christ's righteousness and onto our own?

It is equally tempting for Lutherans to shift our focus from Christ's work to our own works. According to a survey of 5,000 Lutherans, 59 percent believe that *"the main emphasis of the Gospel is on God's rules for right living"* and 50 percent of Lutherans agree that *"God is satisfied if a person lives the best life he can"* (A Study of Generations, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972, p. 369). These statistics tell pastors that we can never take for granted that our people understand and embrace the Gospel message of free salvation through faith in Christ alone.

## 4. What may inhibit pastors from preaching the Gospel clearly and consistently in their congregations?

Perhaps we hesitate to preach the Gospel clearly and consistently because, as they say in the GEICO commercials, "Everybody knows that." We fear we are repeating ourselves and boring our people. The Gospel is easily short-changed and skipped over because we assume people already know it. Satan loves this trick, because he knows this is the message that delivers us out of his chains. So he attacks and distracts and replaces the Gospel treasure with any shiny trinket that will get our attention away from Christ. St. Paul laments to the Galatians, *"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ"* (Gal. 1:6–7). Pastors need to be on guard against this temptation and continue to proclaim clearly and consistently Christ's death and resurrection for the forgiveness of our sins.

Preaching about the Gospel is not preaching the Gospel. Mentioning "the Gospel" without mentioning Christ, assuming people know what He did and why He did it, doesn't forgive sins or build up faith. Like a well-trained doctor, Lutheran pastors are equipped to apply the specific soul-soothing salve of Gospel to the sin-infected heart that has been cut open with equally skillful use of the Law scalpel.

Consider the following gifts of the Gospel that the Holy Spirit provide through the Gospel message?

› **PEACE:** The Gospel eases our sin-burdened consciences and lets us rest in confidence that our salvation is sure. It is not in our hands to accomplish, but is done already, 100 percent completed, by Christ on the cross.

Through Luther's "tower experience," we gain insight and understanding that God's righteousness is not something we have to measure up to ourselves, but rather is accomplished by Christ and given to us by faith. Of this realization Luther writes:

*"Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the "justice of God" had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven."* (Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1980, p. 49–50)

Luther had been trying feverishly to live up to God's righteousness, but he was crushed with the constant realization he could never measure up to the holiness that God's Law demanded. The more he tried, the more he failed, and the more the Law accused him. With St. Paul he stood condemned and cried out, *"Who will rescue me from this body of death?"* (Rom. 7:24). The answer comes in the Gospel: *"Fear not! You have a Savior! You are rescued from the crushing burden of the Law. Christ lifted it off you and carried it Himself."* This *"Gospel of peace"* (Eph. 6:15) gives relief and peace: peace of our conscience, peace from our fear of judgment, peace with God and peace with one another.

› **PAYMENT:** The Gospel also assures us that full payment has been made for our sins. Christ has redeemed us, paid for our salvation in full, proclaimed *"tetelestai!"* ("It is finished!") Our ransom is paid in full.

The sacrificial system of the Old Testament shows God's Gospel plan to allow substitute payment for sin. The sin offerings allowed an animal to pay the wages of sin (death) so the people could live free and forgiven. Of course the

life of an animal, or even a million animals, is not enough to pay for a single sin. But these sacrifices were like a credit card payment, allowing people to receive the “merchandise” (forgiveness) immediately, with promise of a future payment to be made. Christ paid off that credit card debt on the cross: *“For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.”* (Heb. 10:14). And we too, by faith, have Christ’s righteousness credited to our account: *“Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness”* (Gen. 15:6, Rom. 4:3).

› **POWER:** The Gospel is more than a message of historical information. The Gospel actually conveys God’s power. It has the power to create faith and give salvation to those who receive it.

Rom. 1:16 *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”*

1 Thess. 1:5 *“Our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.”*

Heb. 4:12 *“For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”*

The Gospel is not just human words, but God’s Word that is powerful and able to work miraculously in us. Just as God’s Word was powerful enough to create the universe, that same authoritative Word creates faith and brings salvation to those who hear it. Luther says, *“The Gospel doesn’t need our help.”*

This Gospel Word is also powerful to bring forth the fruits of faith in our lives. Through the Gospel, the Holy Spirit causes our faith to grow and change our hearts and lives.

Col. 1:5–6 *“Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing — as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth;”*

1 Thess. 2:13 *“And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.”*

Lutheran pastors trust the Gospel to produce the fruits of the Holy Spirit and conform our lives to Christ. We don’t need to badger and coerce good works of sacrifice and service and stewardship out of our members; we see the power of the Gospel causing them to mature and grow and want to glorify and give back to God out of sincere gratitude for His grace.

## DISCUSSION

1. Why is it that so many biblical verses of Law (i.e. *“Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ”* [Eph. 5:21]; *“This is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another”* [1 John 3:11]), which speak of a good outcome or virtue, are often referred to as Gospel?

Because the outcome is deemed good, any means by which it may be reached is often considered Gospel. In this case, the end defines Gospel, not the means.

2. What are some other names for the Gospel in Scripture? (The Word, the seed, the message, the truth, the power of God for salvation, etc.)

3. How can you more effectively preach the Law so people are eager and hungry to hear the Gospel?

(Peter pointed out their responsibility in Christ’s death with second-person terms (*“you crucified”*) and pointed out the perverse generation from which they were to separate themselves [Acts 2:23, 40].)

4. How can you more effectively preach the Gospel, so people understand and appreciate this priceless gift?

(Do not hesitate to repeat the Gospel news clearly, and apply it also with second-person terms like *“for you.”*)

5. What are your favorite “Gospel in a nut-shell” verses? *“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”* (John 1:29).

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”* (John 3:16).

*“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”* (John 14:6).

*“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:23–24).*

*“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1).*

*“The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost” (1 Tim. 1:15).*

*“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the Spirit” (1 Peter 3:18).*

## SUMMARY

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To the Christian, the Gospel is our lifeline! It is the good news of God’s salvation, the cause of our faith, the source of our peace, the promise of God’s payment for our sins and the power to help us live for Christ. It is the only cure available for the bad news of sin, death and hell that are otherwise inevitable for us. The Christian, especially the Christian pastor, should never be ashamed of the Gospel nor hesitant to speak it to anyone crying out (usually silently), *“What must I do to be saved?”* The Rev. Dr. C. F. W. Walther’s last thesis in *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* (St. Louis: CPH 1986, p. 4) states: *“The Word of God is not rightly divided when the person teaching it does not allow the Gospel to have a general predominance in his teaching.”*

The task is not easy. The world is blinded to the importance of the gospel by Satan, who wants to keep us enslaved in death and darkness forever. One of Martin Luther’s greatest frustrations was that after the Gospel was brought back to the Church and preached to the people, it seemed they soon grew tired of hearing it, and like the Children of Israel rescued from Egypt, they wanted to go back to slavery. Satan does not give up his prey easily. And his lies continue to tempt people to come back under his slavery. The battle is never over; the task of preaching Law and Gospel is never done. We face might obstacles: Satan, the selfish, stubborn hearts of men and our own frustrations and feelings of futility. But let Luther encourage you:

*“I will learn and teach this [Gospel] as long as I live. It shall be diligently presented in my sermons, for I see well enough what it does where it is present and what harm is caused when it is absent.” (E. M. Plass, *What Luther Says*, St. Louis: CPH, 1959, p. 564).*