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# What is The Gospel

Zacharias Ursinus

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**By**

## Zacharias Ursinus



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# What is The Gospel?

# by Zacharias Ursinus (1534-1583)

Zacharias Ursinus was one of the primary authors of the Heidelberg Catechism.

This article can be found in the exposition of question and answer 19 of this same catechism in Ursinus'

"Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism," pp. 101-106

(P & R, English Translation 1851).

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# 1. 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 *επαγγελια* and *ευαγγελια* 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 circumstance 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,” etc. “God hath appointed him head over all things to the church.” “Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, 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 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 definition which we have given of the gospel: I 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.)

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## 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, today, 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.” “God shall raise up a prophet,” etc. “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 Levitial 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.

Objection 1. Paul declares the gospel was promised through the prophets; and Peter says that the prophets prophecied of the grace that should come unto us. Therefore the gospel has not always been. Answer: 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.)

Objection 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.) Answer: This objection contains an incorrect division, inasmuch 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, although less clearly, and to fewer persons, than it now is. The objection is also weak, in affirming that to be strictly so, which was only declared such 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 *επαγγελια* and *ευαγγελια* as above expressed.

Objection 3. The law came by Moses, grace and truth by Jesus Christ. Therefore the gospel has not always been known. Answer: 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 measures 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. Answer: 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 — he 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. A 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, 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.” “The law worketh wrath; and the letter killeth.” (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,” etc. (Rom. 1: 16.)

Objection: 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. Answer: 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; and also exhorts us by the Holy Spirit, and by the Word, to walk worthy of our heavenly calling. This however it does only in general, not specifying any duty in particular, saying thou shalt do this, or that, but it leaves this to the law; as, on the contrary, it does not say in general, believe 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.” “The gospel is the ministration of the Spirit.” “The power of God unto salvation.” (Rom. 10: 17. 2 Cor. 3: 8. 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.

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## 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 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.

5. By the testimony of the gospel itself; because it alone shows the way of escape from sin, and ministers solid comfort to the wounded conscience.

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