



## The Pastor's Study

February, 2020



We live in a culture which has in large part abandoned the traditional values of Christianity. That fact and the effect it's had on church attendance is obvious to all. Many also recognized the other effect our culture has had on Christendom: the decline of morality within the church itself.

Some Christians concerned about the problem of immorality in the church say that pastors are preaching "too much Gospel." They say that too much emphasis on Christ's love and forgiveness encourages hearers to sin without consequence. Instead, pastors should preach the law in all of its "fire and brimstone" in order to get their listeners to behave better.

Something similar is said of church bodies that, for example, affirm homosexuality and other sexual sins. "All they preach is the Gospel...no wonder they condone all of this bad behavior." In fact, some in these more progressive church bodies say this of themselves as a way to justify their playing fast and loose with Scriptural sexual ethics. "We don't condemn anyone. We just preach Christ's acceptance of everyone. We are all about the Gospel."

But the problem with immorality in the church does not come from preaching too much Gospel. People who are sinning need more faith, which means they need more Gospel, not less. But no one can receive the Gospel without the conviction of sin. The law and gospel always must work together.

As for progressive evangelicals, liberal Lutherans, and mainline Protestants who reject Biblical sexual morality, far from preaching too much Gospel, they are not preaching the Gospel at all. Teaching people that they are not sinners... that their vices aren't sins at all...that they don't need the free forgiveness offered by Christ, is the farthest thing from preaching the Gospel. And, tragically, this well-intentioned niceness prevents sinners from finding the grace they so desperately need.

These thoughts arise from Jeff Mallinson's article "Virtue Ethics and Its Application Within Lutheran Congregations." Prof. Mallinson writes as follows (emphasis mine):

In both scholarly and colloquial contexts, there has been an unfortunate tendency to blame an over-emphasis on the Gospel for progressive Lutherans' acceptance of progressive social values such as an openness to and affirmation of LGBT clergy and same-sex marriage. This allegation could not be further from the truth. In the first place, progressives would bristle at the idea that the embrace of LGBT individuals is a matter of excessive forgiveness or grace. On the contrary, they hold that same-sex orientation ought no longer be considered sinful. To forgive is (first) to condemn, so their stance is based on a particular conception of justice, not licentiousness. It is precisely their understanding of ethics that motivates their policies, not the doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone.

This is only one example of the church's moral decline. Whenever this happens, it's not that Christians are liberally applying the Gospel, it's that they are eliminating the need for it by eliminating sin. They've turned from the truth for a lie, and the disastrous result is encouragement of sinners in their sin and the destruction of souls our Savior died to redeem.

So how do we respond? Well, the answer doesn't lie with "less Gospel." Instead it lies with the full counsel of God...both Law and Gospel. We continue to proclaim the truth, following the example of Jesus. He wasn't afraid to call sin "sin," but he did so with love. He didn't approach sinners with hate or disgust, but with love and compassion. While sexual sins are unique in certain ways, they are no more sinful than any other...including the very things we ourselves are guilty of. We are sinners, no different than our LGBT neighbor. The only difference is that someone had the compassion to show us our sin and point us to the Gospel for salvation. Do we have the compassion to do the same for others?

-Pr. Brad Novacek