



Gospel Determinism: A Preview

By T. R. Halvorson

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Elements

Gospel determinism has two elements.

1. We know the Gospel.

2. Gospel determines everything.

The elements are simple. Together they are total. The Gospel rules all.

Effects

The elements spawn their implications in two rounds. The first round is their implications about Scripture. The second is their implications for a host of doctrines and practices.

First Round: On Scripture

In the first round, the elements imply that the Gospel precedes Scripture as the source of knowledge. Gospel determinism does not subscribe to Scripture *because* it is God-breathed and true. Gospel determinism subscribes to Scripture *insofar as* it accords with the Gospel.

Second Round: On Doctrine and Practice

Once the Gospel puts Scripture into a dependent position, then in the second round, any doctrine historically believed from Scripture can be changed to meet the demands of the Gospel. Belief in what Scripture says always remains provisional and contingent upon Scripture's agreement with the Gospel. Anything Scripture says may be jettisoned so long as the Gospel is preserved. The authority of Scripture is replaced by the authority of the Gospel.

Examples of Effects

Some of the well-known earlier examples of what the Gospel determines to be unnecessary are: creation, the fall, the flood, Old Testament miracles, the virgin birth of Christ, the miracles of Christ, Christ's bodily resurrection, and the miracles of the apostles. These can be mythical, unhistorical, un-biographical, or un-factual so long as by teaching them people hear the Gospel. Scripture does not need to be true so long as the Gospel remains true.

Some of the popularly tolerated examples of what gospel determinism approves relate to: divorce, remarriage, adultery, and fornication. Forgiveness in the Gospel means it is fine to go ahead with these. Whoever says anything against them is denying the Gospel. There is no Word of God but the Gospel. The Gospel is total.

Gospel determinism mandates the ordination of women into the Office of Public Ministry. While gospel determinism likes to reduce the Bible right down to Paul as if he alone among Bible writers knows what the Gospel is, even he often forgets the Gospel as happens when he teaches that only men should be ordained. Those unforgiving sayings of Paul, while they are part of Scripture, are not God's Word because they are not Gospel.

Some of the well-known contemporary examples of the implications of gospel determinism are: homosexuality and transgenderism. Love is love. Nothing but the Gospel can tell us what love is. God cannot say anything but the Gospel. The Gospel shushes God.

Less known among lay people are the dictates of gospel determinism on: the Incarnation, atonement, justification, sanctification, canonicity of Scripture, text criticism of Scripture, hermeneutics, exegetics, homiletics, and ecclesiology.

Escaping the notice even of most pastors and theologians is the eventual sovereignty the Gospel will exercise over God. Gospel determinism will change the Trinity. It will determine that God evolved to beget the Son because the Gospel needed the Son. Oh wait! Already there are theologians who say that. The Trinity *qua* Trinity is abolished.

Without the Trinity there is no Baptism.¹ Gospel determinism does not need the Real Presence of Christ in the Sacrament of the Altar. Without the Sacraments, there is no Divine Service, no liturgy, and no worship of the communion of saints. Though Christ said, “I will build my church,” that really is not necessary either. The Gospel doesn’t need it. No more than the Gospel needs marriage or family in any scriptural sense does it need the Church in any scriptural sense. The Gospel creates the Church in its own image.

Having deconstructed everything, gospel determinism stands as Creator, Author, and Finisher.

Caveats

Caveat 1: Partial Partakers

The dizzying array of theologies and theologians who depart from the truth of Scripture on particular things do not all partake of everything about gospel determinism in its fullness. This one partakes of this part, and that one partakes of that part. When, on another day going beyond a preview, we look at specific examples, to give a theologian or a theology as an example of a particular point within gospel determinism is not to suggest that everything which is true of gospel determinism is true of that theologian or theology. The example and point go only as far as they go. Thank God for incompleteness and inconsistency in theologians and theologies! That is how truths can remain amidst errors.

Caveat 2: Individual Salvation

In identifying a part of someone’s theology as partaking of gospel determinism, we are not judging an individual’s saving relationship with Jesus Christ. “There are Christians who offer bad examples of theology, just as there are Christians who offer bad examples of morality.”² Christianity in the individual depends on fear, love, and trust in God incarnate

in Jesus Christ dying to atone for the individual's sin and rising for the individual's justification. As confusing and complicated as it may seem, one might actually have this saving faith in Christ despite bad theology because of a gap between their heart and mouth. At heart, they really do not trust what they are saying. The trouble is that because of their false teaching, they might lead others to actually trust according to their error. For the sake of that, we must call out the false teaching.

The Throbbing Question

The throbbing question gospel determinism raises is: *How do we know the Gospel?*

Epistemologically, gospel determinism replaces Scripture with the Gospel. Somehow we know the Gospel before and without Scripture, and from there we know everything else. But how? Had Scripture not first revealed the Gospel, how would we have known it?

Upper-Story with No Ground Floor

Gospel determinism is like a second story, an upper floor of a house with no ground floor. Our knowledge of the Gospel just floats in the air without Scripture as its ground. Then from this floating upper-story experience, we know when Paul, Peter, or Jesus says something that cannot be God's Word because it is not Gospel. We know, out of the air up there, that Paul is wrong about ordination of women, for example, or about closed Communion. What does Paul know? He only met the resurrected Christ directly and was taught by him. But we mustn't let Christ's own inspiration of an apostle trump our self-knowledge of the Gospel.

Jesus: The Word Living by the Word

Supposedly, gospel determinism makes life kinder and gentler. It tolerates everything. Love is whatever you want to do. Everything else is bibliolatry, legalism, phobia, hatred, and fundamentalism.

But how did Jesus live? His Baptism and wilderness temptation show. First, He heard the Word, "You are my Son."³ Immediately⁴ the Spirit drove him into the wilderness⁵ to be tempted by the Devil.⁶ Having just heard the Word, "You are my Son," the Devil says, "If you are the Son."⁷ Immediately the Devil challenged the Word of Christ's Baptism.

Understand: Temptation is a challenge to the Word. As Baptism is about the Word,⁸ the baptized life is about the Word. The challenge in life is the challenge against the Word. The way of life is "every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God."⁹ That is how Jesus defended his life when tempted by the Devil in the wilderness. Not some words or just one word, the Gospel, but every word.

Jesus is the Word.¹⁰ Gospel determinism uses that to set Jesus, the Word, against “It is written.” But the Word lives by the written Word and every word. They are not against each other.

Can we expect to live some other way? Where do we get the promise that we can live some way other than how Jesus lived? Adam dies losing the Word. He failed to echo God’s words just as God had said them.¹¹ Jesus lives holding the Word, quoting it verbally and exactly, defeating the Devil’s distortions, denials, lies, and murder.

Jesus lived by “It is written,” not by gospel determinism.

Is “Gospel” Actually the Gospel?

In gospel determinism, is what is being called the Gospel actually the Gospel? Gospel determinism deconstructs everything else. How do you know it has not deconstructed the Gospel?

Recalling Caveat 1, things get messy. Variants of gospel determinism may be distinguished in two general ways:

In the first element, the source of our knowledge of the Gospel.

In the second element, the extent and thoroughness of carrying out the determinism.

At a nascent stage of development, gospel determinism still could uphold the Gospel. Suppose that in the first element, a theology accidentally lands on the true Gospel. Suppose further that this adoption has little momentum. The theology travels part way down the road of gospel determinism, and then stalls out. It could hold on to a lot of orthodoxy. I do not deny there are instances of this. But the risk is momentum. For the majority of theologies, adoption of the first element in and of itself is a transitory state. The inertia of moving from orthodoxy to the first element carries on past the first element into the second. That is why it is important to identify gospel determinism in nascent form and warn against it.

The momentum might not carry through in one generation. But we should not endanger the next generations with the risk. I think of a friend, now departed, who urgently asked me during a taxi ride from one conference venue to another, “Tom, why has my son become a nihilist?” The anxiety was so heavy that I had to defer giving an answer until a time when my friend could endure it. My friend’s philosophy was of this sort: “A truth for you and a truth for me.” A parent might say that and not develop past that. But there is an intergenerational momentum. The inertia of the parent having moved from another philosophy to “A truth for you and a truth for me” carries through to the children. A

teenager listens to “A truth for you and a truth for me” and calls balderdash on that. The teenager recognizes more rapidly than does the parent “A truth for you and a truth for me” just means there is no truth. Sometimes we don’t hear what we are saying, but our children do. The answer I never could say overtly to my friend was, “Your son is a nihilist because of you. You taught him there is no truth.”

We might adopt the first element of gospel determinism and stop in our own time. But what have we done to our children? Be careful about the foundations, the ground floor, that we place under the feet of our children.

¹ Matthew 28:19, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

² Harold O. J. Brown, *The Protest of a Troubled Protestant* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1969), 134.

³ Matthew 3:17; Mark 1:11; and Luke 3:22.

⁴ Mark 1:12.

⁵ Matthew 4:1; Mark 1:12; and Luke 4:1.

⁶ Matthew 4:1; Mark 1:13; and Luke 4:2.

⁷ Matthew 4:3; and Luke 4:3.

⁸ “What is Baptism?”

Baptism is not just plain water, but it is the water included in God’s command and combined with God’s word.

How can water do such great things?

Certainly not just water, but the word of God in and with the water does these things, along with the faith which trusts this word of God in the water. For without God’s word the water is plain water and no Baptism. But with the word of God it is a Baptism, that is, a life-giving water, rich in grace, and a washing of the new birth in the Holy Spirit.

Small Catechism, Baptism, First and Third.

⁹ Matthew 4:4; and Deuteronomy 8:3.

¹⁰ John 1:1.

¹¹ God said, “Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” (Genesis 2:17) Eve did not echo that word accurately. She did not say, “You shall surely die.” She said, “lest you die.” Today’s translations do not bring fully to light what she said in the word “lest.” That word speaks of peradventure. Her meaning would be expressed more clearly as, “You shall not eat it, perchance you might die.” Maybe, perhaps, possibly, conceivably, feasibly, imaginably, you might die.

That movement from faith to unbelief in the Word was an opening for the Devil. After Eve said lest, perchance, or peradventure we die, then he brashly declared, “You will not surely die.” (Genesis 3:4)

Luther says:

She does not mention the punishment as God had stated it. He had simply stated (Gen. 2:17): “On whatever day you will eat from it, you will surely die.” Out of this absolute statement she herself makes one that is not absolute when she adds: “Lest perchance we shall die.”

This is a striking flaw, and one that must not be overlooked; for it shows that she has turned from faith to unbelief. For just as a promise demands faith, so a threat also demands faith. ... On her own she is adding to God’s Word the little word “perchance.” And so the deceit of the lying spirit met with success. What he sought to achieve above all – to lead Eve away from the Word and faith – this he has now achieved to the extent that Eve distorts the Word of God.

Martin Luther, Lectures on Genesis in *Luther’s Works*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958) 1:155.

Johann Gerhard expresses the same thing this way.

On her own she added “perchance,” as if it were uncertain that they would die if they had eaten of it, though God nevertheless had expressed His will openly and clearly [Gen 2:17)]. She also adds on her own that the tree was indeed not even to be touched. ...

Afterward, on the basis of the answer of Eve, who did not correctly recount God’s prohibition, the devil becomes more bold and completely denies the Word of God.

Johann Gerhard, *Theological Commonplaces: On Original Sin, On Actual Sins, On Free Choice*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2014), 7, 15.