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Announcement: Third Annual Symposium  
on the Lutheran Confessions..... 271

Rabbinical Writings of the Early  
Christian Centuries and  
New Testament Interpretation..... Raymond F. Surburg 273

God's Ministers, Their Calls, and Their  
Relationship to Each Other..... Vernon H. Harley 286

The Case of the Lost Luther Reference ... Bjarne W. Teigen 295

The State of Evangelism in the  
Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod..... Erwin J. Kolb 310

An Application of Case Grammar to Two  
New Testament Passages..... Theodore Mueller 320

A Reformation Hymn..... Douglas Judisch 326

Opinion of the Department of Systematic Theology ..... 327

Homiletical Studies..... 338

Book Reviews ..... 373



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# An Application of Case Grammar to Two New Testament Passages

Theodore Mueller

## I. Mark 1:4. The Baptism of Repentance

What is a “baptism of repentance,” an expression which occurs several times in the Gospels and Acts? In a baptism of water, water is the means used for the sacred act; in the baptism of the Holy Spirit, we understand the outpouring of the Holy Spirit; and in the baptism of John, John is the agent performing the sacrament. But repentance does not fit into any of these categories; it cannot be the means or the agent of baptism. The interpretation centers around the genitive *metanoias* which modifies the noun *baptisma*. What is the nature of this modification?

Commentators<sup>1</sup> and traditional grammarians<sup>2</sup> have labelled the genitive as a qualitative or descriptive genitive: “a baptism connected with repentance,”<sup>3</sup> “symbolic of, and accompanied by repentance.”<sup>4</sup> Further elaborating on the genitive, Lenski makes it a “condition”<sup>5</sup> for baptism, an obligation of man before receiving forgiveness. Such an emphasis, however, introduces synergistic overtones. The resultant translations reflect this interpretation: “Turn away from your sins and be baptized and God will forgive your sins” (Good News); “a baptism in token of repentance, for the forgiveness of sins” (New English Bible); “baptism as the mark of a complete change of heart and of the forgiveness of sins” (Phillips). In these translations man’s acting precedes the forgiveness, the same relationship as when mother says: “Eat your carrots and you’ll get some cake.”

The well-known linguist Eugene Nida describes his analysis as a process of transforming an expression back into the presumed “underlying kernel or core structure.”<sup>6</sup> In reference to the expression under discussion he states: “A possible combination of kernels which might be adequate for transfer to some receptor language could be formulated as: *John preached that the people should repent and be baptized so that God would forgive the evil they had done.*”<sup>7</sup> In this analysis note how forgiveness is predicated on man’s repentance through the conjunction *so that*. Nida’s interpretation, nevertheless, rests on the same grammatical analysis as that of the traditional grammarians.

Recently a form of linguistic scholarship known as Case Grammar has taken a somewhat different approach to language analysis. It assumes that specific syntactic relationships are fundamental to every expression. Furthermore the words we read may be the result of transformations which hide or obscure the particular relationship. These basic relationships and their transformations will first be illustrated from clear and uncontroverted Greek passages and then from English before applying this knowledge to the passage under discussion. Scripture states that God justifies the sinner and stresses His grace, Christ, His redemption, or His blood as the *cause* or the *motive* for the acts of justification, a syntactic relationship which is expressed through the dative (Rom. 3:24), through *dia* plus the genitive (Rom. 3:24), or *en* plus dative (Rom. 5:9). Man receives justification by faith as the *means* or the *instrument*, a relationship expressed through the dative (Rom. 3:28), or by *ek* or *dia* plus the genitive (Rom. 3:30). While the preposition *ek* may place more emphasis on the *circumstances* under which, rather than the *means* by which, man is declared righteous, yet by linking the two prepositions St. Paul equates the two expressions in their *instrumental* relationship, just as Luther accumulates the prepositions "mit, durch, and unter" to express the same syntactic relationship for the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper. These examples illustrate the *fundamental syntactic relationships* between the verb and the various noun phrases describing the act of justification. It is at this point that grammar and meaning coincide, that is, that grammar is the tool expressing the relationship of the various concepts contained in the words. These relationships are linguistic universals, that is, relationships which are common to all languages, and make a translation from the one to the other possible.

Greek can transform these fundamental expressions in two ways. The governing verb is often changed into a noun, *dikaioō* to *dikaioōsunē*, while the same prepositional phrases are retained under the governance of the noun and express the same basic relationships. Thus the instrumental relationship of faith is expressed by *ek* or *dia* plus the genitive: *dikaioōsunē dia pisteōs* (Rom. 3:22), *hē ek pisteōs dikaioōsunē* (Rom. 10:6), an expression which has become a formula for righteousness. Secondly, Greek can transform a noun plus a prepositional phrase into a noun plus a genitive, *dikaioōsunē tēs pisteōs* (Rom. 4:11). The genitive phrase no longer expresses the fundamental relationship explicitly, as did its foregoing prepositional phrase, but merely indicates a vague dependence on the noun. To the reader at that time such genitive phrases presented no difficulty; no doubt, he readily

assumed the fundamental relationship as the native speaker of English does in his language, as will be shown subsequently. In the parlance of linguistics, the fundamental syntactic relationships are called the *deep level structure*, while by contrast the *surface level structure* consists of the sequence of spoken or written words which may or may not express the precise syntactic relationship depending on the various transformations which have been applied to it. While the deep structures are language universals, the surface structures are said to be language-specific; that is, each language has its own peculiar ways of expression.

These concepts will be illustrated once more from English. Expressions like *shoe sale, garage sale, fire sale, promotion sale, charity sale*. have the same surface structure, a governing noun "sale" plus a dependant noun. Yet it is obvious that a "garage sale" does not sell garages, nor does a "fire sale" sell fire, as might be inferred from "shoe sale." On the deep level the syntactic relationship differs in the various expressions. They are assumed to be transformations from more explicit phrases, such as a sale selling shoes, a sale occurring at a garage, a sale because of a fire, a sale for the purpose of charity or promotion. A foreigner, of course, unfamiliar with English, will have difficulty understanding the former expressions, particularly if his language does not permit the same nominal structure at the surface level. He fails to see the precise syntactic relationship at the deep level. Together with the exegetes we experience the same difficulty with similar Greek expressions.

After this grammatical digression, what is the meaning of "baptism of repentance," or better, what is the specific syntactic relationship presumed to exist for the genitive at the deep level? John gives the key in Matthew 3:11, *baptizō en hudati eis metanoian, for the purpose of, or, with the result of, a change of attitude (repentance)*; a purpose or a result relationship is expressed through the preposition *eis*. The genitive *metanoias*, viewed as a transformation from *eis metanoian*, has, therefore, the same relationship as the subsequent prepositional phrase *eis aphesin hamartiōn*; both a change of attitude and the remission of sins are stated as the purpose or the result of baptism and preaching. While not a very common relationship, a purpose or result relationship is found in a number of genitive phrases as the context or other parallel expressions suggest: *dia loutrou paligenesias* (Tim. 3:5) is the washing *for the purpose of, or resulting in regeneration*. Likewise in *eis anastasin zoes* (Jn. 5:29) the genitive *zōēs* expresses the purpose of the resurrection. In Luke 19:42 the expression *ta pros eirēnēn* states the purpose relationship through the preposition *pros*, an expression which St. Paul

has transformed into a genitive phrase *ta tēs eirēnēs* (Rom. 14:19): *the things which result in peace.*

Interpreting the genitive *metanoias* as a purpose or result relationship, moreover, fits into the context of the Gospels, which preaching and baptism are said to produce a change of attitude, and of Acts 19:4 where baptism alone is linked to it. The passage under discussion, then, may be translated into English thus: "John preached and baptized for (the purpose of) a change of attitude and the forgiveness of sins." A better and freer translation might be this: "John preached and baptized to achieve repentance and convey the forgiveness of sins."

Traditional grammar analyzes the surface phenomena. It tries to attach a meaning to the case in which the word appears: "What is the meaning of this genitive?" Case grammar analyzes the syntactic relationship, that is, its deep structure, a relationship which may not be apparent on the surface level: "What is the precise relationship for which the genitive case merely indicates a vague dependence on another noun?" From Matthew 3:11 a purpose or result relationship is inferred. This approach leads to a meaning more in line with Scripture: conversion and forgiveness result from Word and Sacrament.

## II. Luke 2:14. The Hymn of the Angels

When scholarship established what is believed to be the original text for the angelic choir, that is, when the dative *anthrōpois* of the Textus Receptus was replaced by the prepositional phrase *en anthrōpois*, and the nominative *eudokia* by the genitive, the meaning of what the angels sang became a problem for us speakers of a modern language. Commentators<sup>8</sup> interpret the prepositional phrase *en anthrōpois* as a modifier of *eirēnē* indicating to whom peace is extended. The word order makes this analysis most plausible to us, speakers of a language in which word order is an essential syntactic signal. The genitive *eudokias* is seen as a qualifier (genitive of quality) modifying *anthrōpois*, and specifying what kind of men receive His peace. Alford states it succinctly: "The only admissible rendering is *Among men of God's good pleasure*, i.e. among the elect people of God."<sup>9</sup> The various translations follow this interpretation, summarized in the RSV rendition: "Peace among men with whom He is pleased."

A theological problem, however, arises if the genitive "limits" *anthrōpois*.<sup>10</sup> Just as the expression "all people who believe" refers to a group of people characterized and set apart from the others by their faith, so here the people who have God's favor indicates a group of people separate from the rest of humanity,

“the elect.”<sup>11</sup> And indeed this is the interpretation of the Editorial Committee of the United Bible Society Greek New Testament as Metzger records it: “At the birth of the Saviour God’s peace rests on those whom He has chosen in accord with His good pleasure.”<sup>12</sup> Such a limiting genitive, however, implies a denial of God’s universal grace which, according to Scripture, is extended to all people through Christ (Tit. 2:11, John 3:16).

It appears more reasonable, in fact, to associate the prepositional phrase *en anthropois* with *eudokias* and to interpret the genitive as standing in an origin-cause relationship linked to *eirēne*. We have already seen that associating a prepositional phrase with a governing noun is a common occurrence and that Greek frequently transforms a verb and its complement into a noun which retains the same complementation as the verb. The verb *eudokeō* governs a prepositional phrase consisting in *en* plus the dative as its complement: *en soi eudokēsa* (Luke 3:22: “I am well pleased with You”), the voice of the Father at the baptism of Jesus. From this construction the nominal transformation *eudokia en tini* is inferred, meaning “good will for some one.”

Such a nominal transformation is assumed to be the basis for the Greek phrase under discussion. It does not occur elsewhere in the New Testament but is found in the LXX; Sirach 39:18 has *en prostagmati autou pasa hē eudokia*, “his entire delight with His commandment.” Thus, the meaning of the phrase in Luke must be: “[God’s] good pleasure with mankind.”

Linking the genitive *eudokias* with *eirēne* as an indication of cause or origin is admittedly not a common relationship. However, it was the interpretation of Origen. Alford, who reports this fact, calls it a “curious connection” which “might be admissible as a matter of mere construction.”<sup>13</sup> It is a transformation from the noun plus a prepositional phrase with *apo*. For instance, the phrase *eirenē apo theou* (Rom. 1:7), “peace from God,” a frequent greeting in the epistles, is the equivalent of *eirēne tou theou* (Phil. 4:7), usually translated as “the peace of God.” However, if the genitive just mentioned were a qualifier to peace, its meaning would be “the divine peace,” that is, a peace which is not a human experience, which is obviously not the case. Other genitive phrases indicating origin-cause relationships can be found in the New Testament: *hupakoēn pisteōs* (Rom. 1:5) is “the obedience which springs from faith.”<sup>14</sup> In 1 Thess. 1:3 three such genitives occur in the same verse: “work coming from faith, labor originating in love, and endurance resulting from hope.”

On the basis of the foregoing grammatical discussion, it is sug-

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gested that the message of the angelic choir should be translated as follows:

Glory to God in the highest

And on earth peace coming from His good pleasure with  
mankind,

a freer rendering of the last line would be: "And on earth peace because He is well pleased with mankind." This interpretation can also be defended from an artistic point of view. The hymn of the angels is poetry and is printed as such in Aland's edition of the Greek New Testament. There is a chiasmic word order: *doxa* corresponds to *eirēnē* and *ev hupsistois* parallels *epi gēs*. Furthermore, to *theō* in the first line corresponds *en anthrōpois eudokias* in the second, a goal relationship which is parallel to a source relationship. And *theos* is a necessary echo in *eudokia* since admittedly it is God who shows good will towards men, regardless of the grammatical interpretation.

Language is the only means by which God has revealed His thoughts to us. It is also the only way by which we communicate with each other. Communication may break down just as much through our ignorance of how language works as our lack of knowledge of uncommon words. The concept of transformation from an underlying structure to what is written offers a fresh approach to some of the difficulties we may find in the wording of Scripture.

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