

Observing The Proper Distinction Between Law And Gospel In The Preaching And Teaching Ministry.

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The phrase, “the proper distinction between law and Gospel” is so familiar to us as Lutherans that we are in danger of uttering it without meaning and without thought. We all know that the Formula of Concord says, “The proper distinction between law and Gospel is an especially brilliant light which serves the purpose that the Word of God may be rightly divided and the writings of the holy prophets and apostles may be explained and understood correctly.”

It is not our intention in this essay to deal with the whole question of the distinction between law and Gospel in detail. If we remember that Dr. Walther gave a series of thirty-nine lectures on the proper distinction between law and Gospel, each one of which took about as much time to deliver as the time allotted to our subject today, it will become obvious that a detailed treatment of this matter would be impossible. We shall therefore limit ourselves, first, to demonstrating once more that there is indeed a distinction between law and Gospel and, secondly, we shall note some ways in which we are in danger of not observing the proper distinction between law and Gospel in the preaching and teaching ministry and, finally, how the difficulties involved are resolved.

I. THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN LAW AND GOSPEL.

When we say that law and Gospel are distinct from each other we mean that they are different from each other. This difference between them is so great that law and Gospel appear to human reason to contradict each other. Often we do not notice this contradiction because we either ignore either law or Gospel on a certain point or somehow we refuse to take some clear and unmistakable statement of the Scripture at full face value.

Before we look at some of the Biblical evidence for this distinction, it will be well for us to be reminded of Luther’s admonition not to play the carpenter with God’s Word. He did not only mean that we should not cut out of God’s Word what does not suit our fancy. He also meant that we should not destroy the point of some passages by refusing to take them in their normal, natural meaning. He often expressed the same thought by saying that we should not treat Scripture as a wax nose that we can shape to our liking.

Bearing this in mind, we remember that the Bible says not only that God loves the whole world, that He therefore loves all men without exception, but that it also says that God hates all workers of iniquity (Ps 5:5), that He hates the wicked (Ps 11:5). And if we remember that the Bible says that all men are wicked workers of iniquity, we know that we are justified in saying that God hates all men without exception. On the one hand, God says to the children of Israel, through the prophet Jeremiah, “I have loved thee with an everlasting love” (Jr 31:3), and the same God through Hosea says of the same children of Israel, “I will love them no more” (Ho 9:15), in fact, He says that He hates them (Ho 9:14).

Because God loves all men, He wants all men to be saved and is not willing that any should perish (2 Pe 3:9; 1 Ti 2:4). He has no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Eze 33:11). Yet St. Paul says that this same God wills to show His wrath (Ro 9:22) and that He hardens whom He wills (Ro 9:18). We are inclined to emphasize the first truth and to ignore the second.

The Bible says, too, that God is gracious and well-disposed toward all, for St. Paul wrote to Titus that the grace of God that bringeth salvation has appeared to all men (Tit 2:11), yet the

same Bible says that this same God is angry with the wicked every day (Ps 7:11). It says that all the families of the earth shall be blessed in Abraham's seed (Ge 22:18), and yet says that every one that continueth not in all the works of the law shall be cursed (Dt 27:26).

In the same vein we are told on the one hand that God has forgiven the sins of the whole world, that God reconciled the world to Himself by not imputing their trespasses unto them (2 Co 5:19), but on the other hand we read of this God that He will by no means clear the guilty (Ex 34:7), that He will not at all acquit the wicked (Na 1:3), and that He will not forgive men their sins (Jos 24:19). Surely, the one set of passages is no less the Word of God and no less true than the other.

On the basis of God's Word we can say that the same Bible that without exception threatens every man who breaks the law of God with sure damnation in hell and at the same time just as emphatically and again without exception offers to all men who have broken the law eternal life in heaven through Christ. On the one hand it says that the justifying of wicked men is an abomination to the Lord (Pr 17:15), and on the other hand it declares that God Himself justifies the ungodly (Ro 4:5). It says that the doers of the law shall be justified (Ro 2:13) and a few verses later that men are justified without the deeds of the law (Ro 3:28). It will not be necessary to continue to multiply examples, for by this time it should be clear, as Luther says, that law and Gospel are more widely separated from each other than contradictions (WA, 40, 1, 520). He takes note of some of these things in his commentary on Galatians, where he says that the Gospel tells us that we are just and loved by God, and that at the same time the law, which is no less the Word of God, tells us that we are sinners and hated by God. He goes on to comment, "These things are diametrically opposed to each other" (WA, 40, 1, 371).

In another place Luther says that in the Bible we have a twofold picture of God, one picture of fear, that is, an overwhelming picture of the fierce wrath of God, before which no one can stand, but we must despair, if we do not have faith. Over against this picture of fear there is set for us also the picture of grace, in order that faith may look at it and take out of it for itself a cheerful, comforting confidence in God coupled with hope (WA, 12, 633).

In his very first lecture on the proper distinction between law and Gospel, Dr. Walther told his students,

Comparing Holy Scripture with other writings we observe that no book is apparently so full of contradictions as the Bible, and that not only in minor points, but in the principal matter, in the doctrine how we may come to God and be saved (*Law and Gospel*, p.6).

He calls attention to this apparent contradiction in the Bible again and again. In one place he says that the entire Scriptures seem to be made up of contradictions, worse than the Koran of the Turks (*Law and Gospel*, p.61).

These examples will suffice to remind us of the tremendous difference between these two principal doctrines of the Bible which are as far apart as heaven and hell, life and death, blessing and cursing, and yet must be kept together in our preaching. We shall, therefore, proceed to the second portion of our essay to consider some of the dangers that confront us as we strive to keep them distinct from each other while proclaiming both of them to our people.

II. OBSERVING THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN LAW AND GOSPEL IN OUR MINISTRY

Perhaps one of the greatest dangers against which we must be on our guard lies in a tendency to deny the truth and the full force of some of the clear law statements that we find in God's Word. A subtle antinomianism is a danger against which Lutherans especially must be on

our guard. Our Lutheran emphasis on universal grace, which is a mark of our loyalty to Scripture, keeps us from finding a solution to the apparent contradiction between law and Gospel by applying the one to a portion of the human race and the other to the rest of mankind, on the basis of the sovereignty of divine race in the Calvinistic fashion. Our equally insistent stress on the *sola gratia* keeps us from accepting the Roman solution, which, in effect, says that God loves those who are good and hates those who are bad.

Because all of us by nature are unwilling to bring the sacrifice of the intellect, it would appear to human reason that only one course is left open to Lutherans. We are tempted to play the carpenter with the law and to make its statements somehow a little more compatible with our emphatic teaching of the Gospel.

One remark that is heard again and again in Lutheran circles and which can be used to blunt the sharp edge of the law of God and which is often understood in that way is this, "God hates the sin, but He loves the sinner."

This statement in itself is perfectly correct. It would be possible to cite passage upon passage that makes it clear that God hates sin all of its forms. It is just as easy to quote Scripture upon Scripture in support of the thesis that God loves all sinners without exception. Since love is the opposite of hate, we might even restate this truth in a negative way by saying that God does not hate sinners. He loves also those sinners who hate Him and reject Him, for He loves them all.

Yet from my experience with students it seems to me that many of our people who hear us say this understand this sentence in a way that takes the sharp edge from the preaching of the law. The statement, "God loves the sinner" is pure Gospel, but it should not be understood as negating the Biblical statement which tells us just as definitely that God hates the sinner. And again, because love is the opposite of hate, we might just as correctly conclude that God does not love sinners.

If we see the statement, "God hates the sin but loves the sinner," as a way to resolve the difficulty which human reason has with the apparent conflict between law and Gospel, we might just as well say that God damns the sin but He does not damn the sinner. It is clear, however, from the Scriptures that it is the sinner who is condemned to eternal punishment in hell.

And just in this connection we often hear the remark, "God does not send sinners to hell because He wants to, but because He is forced to do that." If we say this to make clear that the sinner is totally responsible for his own damnation, that statement may serve some purpose, but, again, as a rational solution of the apparent contradiction between law and Gospel it is useless, and it may also lead to a total misunderstanding of the relationship between God and the law.

We ought to realize that God does not do anything because He has to, for He acts in perfect freedom. There is no law to which He must conform. There are no standards by which He can be judged. There is no higher being to whom He is accountable.

The law of God is the expression of His will. A well-known definition of the law is that it is the holy will of God. It tells us what God wants. When we are preaching law, we can say with St. Paul that God wills to show His wrath. He wants to demonstrate His anger. When He sends sinner to eternal damnation in hell, He is not acting under compulsion. He is not operating under duress.

The dogmaticians have sought to deal with this question by speaking of an antecedent and a consequent will of God. They say that the antecedent will of God is that will according to which He wants to save all men. The consequent will of God is that will of God whereby He wants to damn all those who do not believe in Christ, and since the Scripture has concluded all in unbelief, as St. Paul says, there is a sense in which it can be said that He wants to damn all men.

For myself, I would rather define the consequent will of God as that will whereby He wants to damn all those who violate His law, and quote as an expression of the consequent will the passage, “Cursed be he that confirmeth not all the words of this law to do them” (Deut.27:26). When the consequent will is defined in relation to unbelief, it is too easy, as J. P. Meyer says in his dogmatics notes, to misuse this distinction in the interest of synergism.

The distinction between the antecedent and the consequent will of God, which is really the distinction between law and Gospel expressed in different terms, is often misunderstood. The whole matter becomes crystal clear if we remember that the point of reference in this terminology is human behavior. When God takes human behavior into consideration in determining to act in a certain way, we say that He is acting in accord with His consequent will and what happens to men is a consequence of their own action. In that sense it can be said that men send themselves to hell, yet it is clear that the Bible teaches that it is God who destroys the sinner body and soul in hell.

On the other hand, when God does not take human behavior into consideration when He determines to act in a certain way, we say that He is acting in accord with His antecedent will, and, in this case, what happens to men is not a consequence of their action, but it comes to them as a consequence of the will of God acting in perfect freedom.

It may help to clarify this matter if we point out that one of the great distinctive doctrines of Lutheranism is involved in this matter. Calvinism makes both the salvation and the damnation of men a matter of God’s antecedent will. This is their doctrine of unconditional election, which says that God, in eternity, by an act of His sovereign will determined that a certain specified number of men would be saved and that the rest would be damned. In doing this God’s choice was not conditioned by anything that He foresaw in man’s behavior, for He saw nothing but total depravity in all of them. His choice was simply an act of sovereign freedom.

Romanism, and the various forms of synergism, on the other hand, make both the salvation and the damnation of men a matter of the consequent will of God. In effect Rome teaches that those who do evil works will be rewarded for this with eternal damnation and those who do good works will be rewarded for this with eternal life. Their doctrine of election follows the same pattern. God from eternity predestined those of whom He foresaw that they would do good to eternal life and those of whom He foresaw that they would do evil He predestined to eternal death. The Synergistic view which substitutes the word “believe” in that sentence for “do good” is obviously only a variation of the Roman doctrine.

Lutheranism, however, insists that man’s salvation is a matter of God’s antecedent will, in which the behavior of man is left out of consideration as a cause of salvation. With equal force it holds that man’s damnation is a matter of God’s consequent will, in which the behavior of man is viewed as the cause of damnation. In this whole area we see another example of why Lutheran dogmatics is not a philosophical system, in the sense in which either Calvinism or Romanism might be called a “system.”

III. THE RESOLUTION OF THE APPARENT CONTRADICTION AT THE CROSS.

Yet, even though to human reason, law and Gospel are farther removed from each other than contradictory statements, as Luther says (WA. 40, 1, 520) there is a very simple solution to the difficulty. Luther gives us the clue to the answer when he says somewhere that Christ reconciles not only between God and men, but also between law and Gospel. In those words he again demonstrates a remarkable insight into the heart of Christianity.

Without the doctrine of the vicarious atonement the Christian religion just does not make sense, and only the cross of Christ, understood as it is presented to us in the Bible, enables us to accept both law and Gospel at full face value without playing the carpenter with God's Word.

When the law says that only the doers of the law shall be justified, this requirement of the law needs no revocation or modification before we sinners can be saved because we can point to the vicarious obedience of Christ by which all of us are in a position to say that we have kept the law, even as St. Paul says that by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous (Ro 5:18,19), and in that assurance also I can believe the Bible when it says that we are justified by faith without the deeds of the law.

When the law says that God will not at all acquit the wicked (Na 1:3) and that He will by no means clear the guilty (Ex 34:7), I see my Savior sweating drops of blood and praying to be spared the suffering of Calvary if that were at all possible and behold Him numbered with the transgressors on the cross, because God means it when He says that the guilt of sin must be borne and the punishment of sin must be suffered.

When the law says that the soul that sins shall die, I know that this also needs no annulment and no limitation when the Gospel promises me everlasting life, for the Bible also says that one died for all and that all died in Him and with Him (2 Co 5:15). Because He tasted death for every man, in place of every man, therefore I can say in faith that in Him I have paid the wages of sin in full.

When the Bible says that everyone who does not do all the works of the law shall be cursed, this, too, needs no abolition or qualification when the Gospel message comes with the assurance of everlasting blessing, for this assurance is brought to us in Him who has redeemed us from the curse of the law by being made a curse for us.

Thus we may say that at the cross of Christ God Himself has found a way by which He at one and the same time and in one and the same act can condemn sinners and acquit them, punish sin and forgive sin, curse men and bless them, hate and reject, love and receive. Everything the law demands is given by Christ to God; everything the Gospel promises is given by Christ to us. As man and as the representative of all other men He renders to God what God asks of us. As the very image and glory of God He gives us all that we need for life and salvation. Here at Calvary the justice of God and the grace of God that seems to human reason to be completely contradicting both stand unchanged and unmodified yet perfectly compatible. Here it becomes clear that the antecedent will of God, the will to save, and the consequent will, the will to damn, are not in any way contradictory to each other. The psalmist already in the Old Testament caught a vision of this when he said, "Mercy and truth are met together, righteousness and peace have kissed each other" (Ps 85:10). The God who threatens to punish and means every word of it is the God who promises to forgive and means it too, but the only place in the world where both are true is on the green hill far away outside a city wall.

This is part of the glory of an unmodified proclamation of law and Gospel. It will force the preacher to turn again and again to the cross of Christ as the missing piece of the puzzle, and it will serve as a constant reminder to us of the centrality of the doctrine of the vicarious atonement. To say that God hates the sin but loves the sinner may sound appealing to human reason, but it may also obscure some of the glory of the cross. How much more in harmony with the Scriptural presentation it is to say that God hates all workers of iniquity and threatens to punish them, but the same God also loves sinners and sent His Son into this world to suffer the punishment for them, and that the cross is a fearful preaching of God's wrath, as the confessions say (F.C.,S.D., V, 12), and at the same time a wonderful proclamation of His love. It is no

wonder that Luther says that Christ reconciles not only between God and men but also between law and Gospel.

Here, too, we will find the answer to the question which has often been debated with such heat by conservative Lutherans about whether there is a change in God or only a change in the sinner's status before God. Both sides in that debate can quote passages of Scripture to sustain their point of view. The Bible does say that God puts away His wrath and is well-disposed toward those who have deserved His anger (See, e.g. Ps 85). But the change must not be viewed as though an angry God has been converted into a gracious God. The cross of Calvary ought to teach us how He can be both at once and through all eternity, the God in whom there is no variableness nor shadow of turning. His wrath has been turned away because for Jesus' sake the God who once looked at me and saw a sinner now looks at me and sees a saint, and yet I, too, remain both a sinner and a saint before Him, a sinner condemned by the law and a saint acquitted by the Gospel, "simul justus et peccator" as Luther says, "holy and profane, an enemy of God and a son of God" (WA, 40, 1, 372). In that same connection Luther also says,

How then can these two contradictory things be true at the same time, namely, I have sin and am most worthy of wrath and divine hatred, and, the Father loves me? Here nothing at all will bring about a reconciliation but the only mediator, Christ (WA, 40, 1, 372).

IV. THE RESOLUTION OF THE APPARENT CONTRADICTION IN THE HEART.

There is another resolution of the apparent contradiction which is of special significance for those who teach the Word in the pulpit or in the classroom. Because man himself is a contradictory creature, who is at the same time both a saint and a sinner, in whose heart the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh, therefore he needs this twofold message which also appears as a contradiction. Luther also understood this with uncommon insight. He said of law and Gospel that these two, "which are greatly different from each other and separated from each other more than contradictory statements are in the heart closely joined to each other" (WA.40, 1, 520). In this case the heart is the missing piece of the puzzle.

As pastors and teachers we must first of all remember that, as Luther says the purpose of the law is to terrify (WA, 36, 22). He said that despite the fact that in his youth he had been driven to the point of despair by the rigid proclamation of law. When we criticize the Roman church for presenting Christ to Luther as an angry judge, we ought to imitate Luther and place an "only" into that sentence. In depicting Christ as an angry judge the Roman church of Luther's day was proclaiming an important truth. It's error lay in not holding forth to terrified sinners the Christ who said, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy-laden and I will give you rest." We are in danger of committing the same error in reverse, by downgrading the angry Christ for the compassionate Christ. Human reason finds it difficult to see them both together, so we ignore the one and exalt the other.

For an effective ministry this could be disastrous, for sinful man needs to be terrified and ought to be frightened. We often hear it said that when the Bible says that we should fear God, this does not mean that we should be afraid of God but only that we should stand in awe and respect before Him. This is the way it ought to be and this is the way it would be if only we were not sinners. But we are sinners and must stand in terror before God's wrath.

A part of our problem is that the German word "*Furcht*" can often mean "*Ehrfurcht*" or "respect," and the same is true of our English word "fear." Luther and the confessions, however, often use the German words, "*Erschrecken*" and "*Angst*," and the Latin words "*terror*" and "*pavor*" none of which ever mean awe and respect.

The *Augsburg Confession*; for example, defines contrition in the Latin text as “*terrores conscientiae*,” “Terrors of conscience,” and in the German text it defines contrition and sorrow as “*Schrecken haben ueber die Suende*,” which literally means “to experience fright because of sin.”

The confessions also teach that this fear does not suddenly end and disappear forever when a man is converted and becomes a Christian. In defining contrition, the Roman Church of the Middle Ages had made a sharp distinction between sorrow out of love for God and sorrow that consisted in fear of punishment. To this day it calls the first “contrition” and the second “attrition.” The Lutheran confessions reject this distinction in practice although they admit that they can be discussed in the abstract. *The Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, for example, says,

When, however, will a terrified conscience, especially in those serious, true, and great terrors which are described in the psalms and the prophets, and which those certainly taste who are truly converted, be able to decide whether it fears God for His own sake (out of love), or is fleeing from eternal punishments? (These people may not have experienced much of these anxieties [the German words here are “*von diesen groszen Aengsten*”], because they juggle words and make distinctions according to their dreams. But in the heart, when the test is applied, the matter turns out quite differently, and the conscience cannot be set at rest with paltry syllables and words.) These great emotion can be distinguished in letters and terms; they are not thus separated in fact, as those sweet sophists dream. (Apol., XII, 8. 9).

This discussion of the nature of true contrition is followed by a defense of the definition of repentance found in the *Augsburg Confession*. In discussing this definition, Melancthon, as the spokesman of the Lutheran Church, says,

We eliminate from contrition those useless and endless discussions as to when we are sorry because we love God and when because we fear punishment. (For these are nothing but mere words and the useless babbling of those who have never experienced what a terrified conscience is really like.) But we say that contrition is the true terror of conscience (Latin: “*veros terrores conscientiae*”; German: “*wenn das Gewissen erschreckt wird*”), which feels that God is angry with sin, and which grieves that it has sinned (Apol. XII, 29).

The confessions have a totally different way of distinguishing the fear of a Christian from that of an unbeliever. The *Apology* speaks of the fear of the Christian as childlike fear, “*timor filialis*,” and of the fear of the unbeliever as slavish fear, “*timor servilis*,” and says,

Filial fear can be clearly defined as such anxiety (Latin: *pavor*, German: *Fuerchten und Erschrecken von Gott*) as has been connected with faith, i.e., where faith consoles and sustains the anxious heart (Latin: *pavidum cor*). It is servile fear when faith does not sustain the anxious heart (The German translation simply says that servile fear is fear without faith.) (Apol. XII, 38).

But what shall we do with the argument which we often hear that Christians are not supposed to be afraid? Before we proceed to answer that question, it might be well to say that when we speak of a Christian as being afraid we do not mean that he should be reduced to a state of gibbering idiocy by fear or that his fear should be neurotic and psychopathic. Here also something that Luther said about contrition should be helpful. He once defined contrition as “believing the law.” When a man believes that there is a hell to which he deserves to go, this is a frightening thought, even though we may not go to pieces over it.

It is sometimes argued that the Bible forbids fear when it says so often, "Fear not." This argument is very similar to the contention that it is wrong for Christians to weep at funerals because Jesus said to the widow of Nain, "Weep not." If we would pay attention to the original Greek here, we would not even need to cite all the passages that demonstrate that tears are not always wrong for a Christian. The command of Jesus in the original reads, a present negative imperative, which is not a blanket prohibition of weeping, but can be translated, "Stop crying," or, as one of the modern versions has it, "Dry your tears." The whole context also makes it clear that Jesus is graciously inviting her to dry her tears because the need for tears will soon come to an end when her son is given back to her alive.

The command, or rather the invitation, "Fear not," is exactly the same type of construction. In almost every case where the Gospel says in our English version, "Fear not," the wording in the original Greek is a negative present imperative, which can be translated, "Stop being afraid." This translation is also in harmony with the context, for in many cases the words are spoken in a situation in which those who hear the word are filled with fear and almost always they are followed by a statement which gives the reason why fear can be put aside. The angel says to Zacharias, for example, "Fear not, for your prayer is heard," to Mary, "Fear not, for you have found favor with God," and to the shepherds, "Fear not, for unto you is born a Savior." Likewise, Jesus says to His disciples, "Fear not, ye are of more value than many sparrows," and, "Fear not, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." We might well summarize the teaching of all these passages by saying that to people who are afraid the Gospel comes with message that helps them stop being afraid.

A corollary of the statement should never be afraid is the pronouncement which is even stronger and says that a Christian is not afraid. That statement needs some very strong qualifications. It meets us in many forms: "A Christian is not afraid to die." "A Christian is not afraid of God's wrath." "A Christian is not afraid of judgment day." "A Christian is not afraid of the end of the world."

Such statements coming from the lips of an orthodox preacher may well be orthodox, but they can be extremely unsettling to those whose consciences are terrified and they often indicate a failure to observe the proper distinction between law and Gospel. The Christian qua Christian, considered in the abstract, is not afraid to die. But the Christian as he really is, sinner and saint at the same time, is often a person filled with fear, and often when we say that we are not afraid of death, we say it in the same way that we say that we are not afraid of lions and tigers and king cobra snakes.

In fact, the purpose of the law is to keep alive a healthy fear of death and the judgment in the heart of the child of God. Dr. Walther in his *Law and Gospel* describes the fearful spectacle the children of Israel saw at Mt. Sinai and then goes on to say,

By this spectacle God has indicated to us how we are to preach the Law. True, we cannot reproduce the thunder and lightening of that day, except in a spiritual way. If we do, it will be a salutary sermon when the people sit in their pews and the preacher begins to preach the Law in its fullness and to expound its spiritual meaning. There may be many in the audience who will say to themselves, "If that man is right, I am lost."

Some, indeed, may say, "That is not the way for an evangelical minister to preach." But it certainly is; he could not be an evangelical preacher if he did not preach thus....

For your catechizing you must adopt the same method...Even little children have to pass through these experiences of anguish and terror in the presence of the Law. (*Law and Gospel* , pp. 82f)

There are times when a Christian can sing and mean every word of it,
Jerusalem, thou city fair and high,
Would God I were in thee.
My longing heart, fain, fain to thee would fly.
It will not stay with me.
Far over vale and mountain,
Far over field and plain,
It hastes to seek its fountain,
And leave this world of pain.

He may even speak of the time of death with joyful anticipation and continue,
O happy day, and yet far happier hour,
When wilt thou come at last,
When fearless to my Father's love and power,
Whose promise standeth fast,
My soul I gladly render?
For surely shall His hand
Lead her, with guidance tender,
To heaven, her fatherland.

Yet there may be times when we would do well to remind ourselves of the words of Luther found in his *Tischreden*,

I am not pleased with examples which show how men die gladly. But I am pleased with those who tremble and quake and grow pale before death, and yet suffer it. Great saints do not die gladly. Fear is natural because death is a punishment. Therefore it is sad. (WA-TR, 1, 177).

We shall observe the proper distinction between law and Gospel only if we remember that our primary purpose in preaching, the law is to make men afraid and sad. Luther once said that the purpose of the law is to make us guilty, to humiliate us, to kill us, to lead us into hell, and to take everything away from us. The purpose of the Gospel, he said, is to declare us not guilty and acquit us, to exalt us, to make us alive, to carry us to heaven and to make us possessors of all things. Between the two of them, he concluded, they manage to kill us to life (WA, 40, 1, 529). A more modern writer expressed the same truth when he said, "The business of a Christian preacher is to afflict the comfortable, and to comfort the afflicted."

And when we comfort the afflicted and begin to preach the Gospel we must again take care to observe the proper distinction between it and the law, and keep the law as far away as heaven is from hell. Law and Gospel may indeed be preached in the same sentence, but always in such a way that the difference between them is not ignored or obscured.

Here, too, we stand in constant danger of falling short. Perhaps the greatest danger lies in a tendency that lurks in the heart of every one of us to be afraid to divorce from our preaching of the Gospel every trace of a conditioned forgiveness and salvation.

Such a conditional salvation is not preached only when we say that God will love us if we are good or that He will forgive us if we are sorry or if we believe. It may lie hidden even in the way we offer forgiveness to men. When the *Common Confession* said, for example, that forgiveness has been provided for all men, it was not proclaiming a false doctrine. When it said that this is sometimes called universal justification, this may well have been true, because things

are often called by a wrong name in this world. But those who knew that this was the best that the Missouri Synod could obtain from the ALC, which refused to say that God has forgiven the sins of all men, also knew how wrong that statement was, because it did not offer men a completed and sure forgiveness but really only spoke of a possible forgiveness that was easily made conditional.

The law promises salvation to those who are good and do all the right things. The Gospel just promises forgiveness and salvation, period. It is significant that when Jesus sent out His disciples to convert the world after His resurrection, He told them, according to Luke's Gospel, not to preach *about* forgiveness, but just to preach forgiveness. It is significant also that the word for preach in that passage (Luke 24:47) is the word that describes the activity of a herald. As heralds of the King of kings, our great high priest, they were to go out into all the world and announce to all men that their sins are forgiven.

In this doctrine of universal justification our Lutheran Church has one of its greatest bulwarks against a mixing of law and Gospel, for if it is really true that God has forgiven the sins of all men, then it is obvious that forgiveness in itself cannot be dependent on or conditioned by anything that we do, and in proclaiming it to our congregations from the pulpit or in teaching it to our children in the classroom we will simply tell them that their sins are forgiven.

They really are! It is significant, too, that in the second half of the sentence, "Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them," the Lord Jesus used a Greek perfect tense, which is correctly translated as a present tense in our English Bible. A difficulty, however, arises because the English present is so easily understood as a future tense, as in the sentence, "I am going downtown tomorrow."

The Greek perfect tense, which Jesus used when He said, "They are remitted unto them," often signifies an action which was completed in the past and continues into the present in its completed state. And that is exactly what it denotes here. Forgiveness, or as we may mispronounce it with greater communicative effect, "forgiven-ness," is a word that denotes a completed state, which was finished once and for all when Jesus was raised for our justification, because we had been justified.

Because of the righteousness of one, the free gift has come upon all men unto justification, and the whole human race, which is declared guilty and damned by the law, is likewise declared not guilty and saved by the Gospel. As we have seen, such a message cannot be proclaimed apart from the cross of Christ and the doctrine of the vicarious atonement, but against that background it should be proclaimed in just that way. I can go to any man on earth and tell him that his sins are forgiven, no matter who he is or what he has done. Whether I will tell him this or not depends on many things, for the same Savior who told us to preach forgiveness also said, "Whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained."

If I were still a member of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, I would feel inclined to belabor this point at great length, because I always felt that the doctrine of universal or objective justification was gradually fading away in that church. More than a dozen years ago, when I was still teaching dogmatics at River Forest, a pastor who had been a classmate of mine in St. Louis, wrote to complain that the new teacher, who had graduated from Concordia the year before, was teaching the children in school that the sins of all of them were forgiven. He asked, "What shall I do with him?" to which I answered, "Why don't you thank God for him?" But it seems to me that Wisconsin Synod college students are not nearly as likely to be surprised as though they were hearing for the first time that God has really already forgiven the sins of all men.

As pastors and teachers who are fully committed to the doctrine of universal justification, we should find it relatively easy to avoid the mistake of mixing law and Gospel which make forgiveness dependent on either our contrition or on faith. In other words, when we proclaim the Gospel, it should be pure Gospel.

We ought not, for example, to say that God will forgive us if we are sorry, as though our contrition were the price we pay for God's forgiveness. The *opinio legis*, which is native to the human heart, makes it all too easy to view contrition as a feeling we produce in ourselves. But true contrition is produced by God in us through the preaching of the law. Luther's remark that contrition is believing the law should also be helpful here.

Instead of viewing contrition as a cause of forgiveness that moves God to pity us when He sees our tears, we ought to bear in mind always that contrition is important to make us see our need of help. Until we believe that we are damned sinners in the sight of God we cannot possibly see any need of forgiveness nor believe that our sins are forgiven nor accept Christ as our Savior from sin. Healthy people don't need a doctor, as Jesus said.

In the same way, we must guard constantly against viewing faith as a cause of forgiveness. God does not forgive us because we believe or when we believe. He simply forgives us and tells us in the Gospel that He has done so. This message we accept by believing it. It was true long before we came to faith and even long before we were born, but we find hope and comfort and eternal joy in the message only if we believe it. This, too, Luther understood with keen insight. In his explanation of the Fifth Petition in the Large Catechism he writes, "He has given us the Gospel, which is pure forgiveness before we prayed or ever thought of it." (L.C., III, 88). It may help to remind ourselves that forgiveness comes first and then comes faith. We must preach the Gospel as a full and free message of forgiveness which is intended to arouse faith, and not demand faith first as a condition on the basis of which we are willing to announce God's forgiveness.

It seems to me that many of our young people draw a wrong conclusion from both our baptismal form and from our communion liturgy. We need to call the attention of our people to the phrase in the order of baptism, "to signify what God in and through baptism works in him." All that they seem to remember is that we asked the child whether it believed before we baptized it, and they conclude from this that faith must be confessed before forgiveness is offered.

A similar conclusion is drawn from our communion liturgy. Because we ask people first whether they are sorry and believe and intend to amend their sinful lives before we announce forgiveness, people seem to have a tendency to view contrition and faith and a desire to amend as conditions to be fulfilled before forgiveness is offered. That they were sinners deserving of hell was true long before they confessed it. That their sins were forgiven by God was true long before the pastor told them about it. But the Gospel message is intended for afflicted people, not for secure sinners. If a man tells me he is not a sinner, I will retain his sins by telling him again what God's judgment on him is. If a man tells me that he is afraid of going to hell because he is a sinner, I will tell him that the Lord Jesus has taken all his sins away and that they are forgiven. The message of the Gospel is meant for penitent sinners not because they have become worthy of forgiveness by their penitence, but because penitent people are the kind of people who can be benefited by the message of the Gospel, whereas impenitent people still need the law.

Because all of us are still prone to self-righteousness and lacking in humility, forgetful of what we would be without Christ, we need to hear the law in all its severity again and again. Because we are lacking in faith and confidence, because we are inclined to fear and despair, we need the daily message of forgiveness. And how important both law and Gospel are might

become a little clearer to us if we would remember Luther's dictum that despair is the closest step to faith. Roland Bainton would probably call that another of Luther's stupefying irrationalities, but for those who understand the distinction between law and Gospel, this seeming nonsense is part of the foolishness of God that is wiser than men. May God give us the wisdom necessary to proclaim them both in such a way that we rightly divide the Word of truth for Jesus' sake. Amen.