

# Properly Dividing the Word of Truth

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*Rev. Wilhelm Walther Petersen<sup>1</sup>*

For through Law  
comes recognition of sin.

But now God's righteousness has been revealed  
apart from Law.

I wish to dedicate this essay to the memory of Dr. C. F. W. Walther, the first president of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America and who has also taught us so well the art of properly dividing between Law and Gospel.

## Defining Law and Gospel

The two chief doctrines of the Bible are the Law and the Gospel. These doctrines are as opposite from each other as night is from day and they serve a completely different function. According to our Catechism "the Law is that Word of God which tells us how we are to be and what we are to do and not to do" while "the Gospel is that Word of God which tells us of the salvation Christ has won for all men." The Catechism goes on to explain the difference between these two doctrines in these words: "The Law teaches us what we are to do and not to do; the Gospel teaches us what God has done, and still does, for our salvation. The Law shows us our sin and the wrath of God; the Gospel shows us our Savior and the grace of God. The Law must be preached to all men, but especially to impenitent sinners; the Gospel must be preached to sinners who are troubled in their minds because of their sins." (*ELS Catechism*)

For a more comprehensive definition of the Law and the Gospel we go to our Confessions where we read:

We unanimously believe, teach, and confess that, strictly speaking the law is a divine doctrine which reveals the righteousness and immutable will of God, shows how man ought to be disposed in his nature, thoughts, words, and deeds in order to be pleasing and acceptable to God, and threatens the transgressors of the law with God's wrath and temporal and eternal punishment. The Gospel, however, is that doctrine which teaches what a man should believe in order to obtain the forgiveness of sins from God, since man has failed to keep the law of God and has transgressed it, his corrupted nature, thoughts, words, and deeds war against the law, and he is therefore subject to the wrath of God, to death, to temporal miseries, and to the punishment of hell-fire. The content of the Gospel is this, that the Son of God, Christ our Lord, himself assumed and bore the curse of the law and expiated and paid for all our sins, that through him alone we reenter the good graces of God, obtain forgiveness of sins through faith, are freed from death and all the punishments of sin, and are saved eternally. For everything which comforts and which offers the mercy and grace of God to transgressors of the law strictly speaking is, and is called, the Gospel, a good and joyful message that God wills not to punish sins but to forgive them for Christ's sake. (SD V, 561-562)

Martin Chemnitz explains the difference between Law and Gospel as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> President, Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary; Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

I. The Law is to some extent known by nature. Ro 2:14. But the Gospel is a mystery hidden to reason, which God has revealed only through His Word. Mt 16:17; 1 Co 2:7; Eph 1:9; Ro 16:25-26.

II. The Law is a mystery pointing out, censuring, and rebuking sins, and pronouncing all men worthy of eternal death because of them; but the Gospel is a ministry that points to true righteousness before God through Christ and through it offers and bestows life eternal to all that apprehend it by faith. 2 Co 3:7,9; Ro 1:16-17.

III. The Law indeed itself so speaks of righteousness and salvation, but it has respect to us, and it seeks and requires to perfection that righteousness in us, in our nature, actions, and works, if we want to be saved by it. But since that cannot be rendered by us because of our corrupt nature, therefore the Gospel sets Christ before us, who by His obedience, passion, and death has purchased for us the true righteousness before God that is imputed and given to us freely, without our merit, solely for the sake of Christ and through faith. Ro 1:4; Gal 3:24. (MWS, p. 72)

From this we see that both Law and Gospel are the Word of God and that both apply to all people for all time, as Dr. Francis Pieper states: “As the Word of the Law, ‘ye shall be holy, for I am holy,’ imposes a duty on the king and the beggar, the cultured man and the barbarian, so, too, there is not a man in all the world for whom the Word of the Gospel, releasing all men from guilt and damnation, is not intended.” (*Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. III, p. 224)

Law and Gospel also have this in common that they are to be taught side by side in the church up to the last day. “We believe and confess that these two doctrines must be urged constantly and diligently in the church of God until the end of the world, but with due distinction, so that in the ministry of the New Testament the proclamation of the law and its threats will terrify the hearts of the repentant and bring them to a knowledge of their sin and to repentance.” (SD V, p. 562)

Dr. Walther in the first theses of his classic book *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* states, “The doctrinal contents of the entire Holy Scriptures, both of the Old and the New Testaments of the entire Holy Scriptures, are made up of two doctrines differing fundamentally from each other, viz., the Law and the Gospel” and explains that the true points of difference between the Law and the Gospel are the following:

1. These two doctrines differ as regards the *manner* of their being revealed to man;
  2. As regards their *contents*;
  3. As regards the *promises* held out by either doctrine;
  4. As regards their *threatenings*;
  5. As regards the *function* and the *effect* of either doctrine.
  6. As regards the *persons* to whom either the one or the other doctrine must be preached;
- (All other differences can be grouped under one of these six heads) (*Law and Gospel*, p. 7)

We would briefly summarize what Walther says about each point of difference. Law and Gospel differ as regards the *manner* of their being revealed in this that man was created with the Law written in his heart; whereas “the Gospel is a mystery hidden to reason, which God has revealed only through His Word.” St. Paul points out in Romans 2:14-15 that even blind pagans bear the Moral Law with them in their heart and conscience. The Ten Commandments were given only for the purpose of bringing out in bold outline the dulled script of the original Law written in men’s hearts. On the other hand, as the same apostle points out in Romans 16:25-26, the Gospel was given by revelation and became known only through an act of the Holy Spirit who inspired men to write its message.

Law and Gospel also differ as regards their *contents*. The Law tells us what we are to do; it gives commands and demands; whereas the Gospel makes no demands whatever, it only offers and gives. The Gospel contains nothing but grace and truth, as the evangelist John says, “The Law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.” (Jn. 1:17)

Law and Gospel also differ by reason of their *promises*. The Law promises salvation, but on the condition that we fulfill it perfectly. Walther observes that “the Law offers us food, but does not hand it down to us where we can reach it.” The Gospel, on the other hand, promises us forgiveness and salvation without any condition whatsoever. We have an unconditioned Gospel.

In this connection we would do well to be reminded that the dogmaticians distinguish between *legal conditional clauses* and *evangelical conditional clauses*. The former denotes a human accomplishment, e.g.: “If you keep the Law, you will obtain eternal life” while the latter denotes the mode and manner of appropriation, e.g. “If you believe, you will be saved,” believing does not denote a product or work of man, but merely the manner in which it is appropriated. The sense of the sentence: “If you believe, you will be saved,” is not: “If you furnish the faith, you will be saved,” but rather “by way of faith, without any goodness or accomplishment of your own, you will be saved.” In this regard Gerhard points out: “The particle ‘if’ is either etiological or syllogistic; it names either the cause or the result. In legal statements: If you do that, you will live, the particle ‘if’ is etiological, since the obedience is the cause because of which eternal life is given to those who observe the Law; but in evangelical promises: ‘If you believe, you will be saved,’ the particle ‘if’ is syllogistic, for it denotes the divinely constituted mode of the application for which faith alone is fitted.” (Pieper, Vol. II, p. 36)

So far as *threats* are concerned the Gospel contains no threats at all, but only words of comfort. The Law, on the other hand, is nothing but threats.

The fifth point of difference between the Law and Gospel concerns the *effects* of these two doctrines. The effect of the Law is threefold: First the Law tells us what to do, but does not enable us to comply with its demands; it rather causes us to become more unwilling to keep the Law, the effect being that it increases the lust of sinning. Secondly, the Law reveals our sin, but offers no help in overcoming it; rather it leaves us in despair. In the third place, the Law produces contrition, but it offers no comfort to despairing sinners.

The effects of the Gospel are of a different nature. They consist in this that the Gospel, when demanding faith, offers and gives us the faith that it demands. The gospel, then, is not only an invitation but a transportation. Still another effect of the Gospel is that it removes fear and anguish and fills the heart with peace and joy in the Holy Ghost. In the third place, the Gospel does not require anything good that man must do; it gives no orders, but quietly changes man.

Finally, there is a sixth point of difference between the Law and the Gospel; it relates to the *persons* to whom either doctrine is to be preached. The Law is to be preached to secure sinners and the Gospel to alarmed sinners. Inverting this order means confounding both, and by confounding them, is commingling both in the most dangerous manner. To make a crushed sinner the subject of Law-preaching is spiritual tyranny; such a one needs the comforting Gospel.

### **Chief Legacy of the Reformation Heritage**

Dr. Walther correctly observes that “since the days of the apostles there has not been a more glorious teacher of this art than Luther.” It is therefore fair to say that the proper distinction between Law and Gospel is the chief legacy of our Reformation heritage. Walther also makes this observation: “The birth of the Reformer dates from the moment Luther understood this distinction.” (*L & G*, p. 63) And Francis Pieper notes that “the Christian doctrine of justification is virtually identical with the discrimination between Law and Gospel.” (Pieper, Vol. III, p. 244) Walther also quotes Chemnitz as saying about the same thing when he affirms that the central doctrine of Christianity, justification by grace through faith in Christ, is properly maintained when the true distinction between Law and Gospel is carefully maintained.” (*L & G*, p. 66)

Dr. J. A. O. Preus in an article in the October 1989 issue of the Concordia Journal entitled “Chemnitz on Law and Gospel” points out that Chemnitz who had been influenced by Luther and Melancthon gives a thorough treatment of Law and Gospel in his *Loci Theologici*. Chemnitz was

perhaps the greatest student of patristics and observed that the early church fathers were weak in this area. Walther agrees with this assessment when he writes, "In the writings of the Church Fathers we find hardly anything concerning the distinction between Law and Gospel." (*L & G*, p. 20)

Preus goes on to say:

Thus, we probably are correct in asserting that the doctrine of the proper distinction between Law and Gospel is a doctrine which developed almost entirely and only on Lutheran soil, as was the case also with the concept of *sola scriptura*, the universal priesthood of believers, the peculiarly Lutheran doctrine of the Lord's Supper, and several other points. As a person traces the development of this doctrine in early Lutheran history, he will quickly note that the concept of Law and Gospel developed along with several other doctrinal points, in which we can observe that Luther made several advances and improvements in his theology, that he and Melancthon in the early years worked closely together and supplemented one another, and that in certain points not often noted by Lutherans who have always had trouble with Melancthon the fact is that Melancthon often influenced Luther in very salutary directions, and ideas which at first were most firmly asserted by Melancthon came in time to be even more strongly promoted by Luther. Such is the case also with what we today, with Luther, hold to be one of the cornerstones of Lutheran theology: namely, the doctrine of the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. The Lutherans were at odds with the enthusiasts over this question from the outset, and Calvin has no locus on the subject in his *Institutes*, and the doctrine has been largely unknown or ignored in Reformed circles to this day. (*Concordia Journal*, October 1989)

It should also be noted that the Reformation not only rediscovered the Gospel, but also the Law of God. Some of the results of this are Articles IV, V, and VI of the Formula, on Good Works, Law and Gospel, and The Third Use Of The Law. These came about as a result of controversies created by antinomianism on the one hand, and pietism and synergism on the other hand. The above articles grew out of these controversies because some said too much and others not enough. Preus contends that "this is the basic reason why orthodox Lutheranism must always oppose legalism, pietism, the charismatic movement and subjectivism of every kind which obscures the Gospel and prevents it from truly being the Gospel or in any way contribute to confusion of Law and Gospel in preaching, teaching, or parish practice. And it is also the reason why we must oppose secular humanism which is merely the old raven of antinomianism floating in the new gravy of libertinism." (*Ibid.*)

Our Confessions clearly distinguish between these two doctrines as follows: "These are the two chief works of God in men, to terrify and to justify and quicken the terrified. One or the other of these words is spoken of throughout the Scriptures. One part is law, which reveals, denounces, and condemns sins. The other part is the Gospel, that is, the promise of grace in Christ." (Ap, Art XII, par. 53, p. 189)

Richard Warneck in an article on *Law and Gospel Preaching* correctly observes, "The Law is God's first sermon to sinful man. The Law, however, is not God's farewell sermon. God speaks his second sermon, the Gospel. In the Gospel God is the God of grace. He gives and sets before us many promises." (*Concordia Journal*, April, 1989, p. 101) Many of our hymns strikingly set forth the distinction between Law and Gospel. There is one hymn in particular that I would like to share with you. It is found in an old Australian hymnal and it is entitled *The Word of God*. (cf. *Addendum*)

### **The Importance of Properly Distinguishing between Law and Gospel**

Walther points out that "the primary requisite for a salutary knowledge of the Holy Scriptures is the correct understanding of the distinction between the Law and the Gospel" and that "without this knowledge Scripture is and remains a sealed book." (*L & G*, p. 60) He goes on to say: "But the moment we learn to know the distinction between the Law and the Gospel, it is as if the sun were rising upon the

Scriptures, and we behold all the contents of the Scriptures in the most beautiful harmony. We see that the Law was not revealed to us to put that notion into our heads that we can become righteous by it, but to teach us that we are utterly unable to fulfill the Law. When we have learned this, we shall know what a sweet message, what a glorious doctrine, the Gospel is and shall receive it with exuberant joy.” (*Ibid.*, p. 62) And Holsten Fagerburg in his book *A New Look At The Lutheran Confessions* states that “the Confessions have provided us with a key to the interpretation of Scripture by their distinction between Law and Gospel. The entire Bible, both the Old Testament and the New, can be studied from the point of view of Law and Gospel.” (*Ibid.*, p. 35)

The Apostle Paul emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between the Law and the Gospel when he writes to his younger co-worker Timothy in the well-known words, “Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” (II Tim. 2:15) And in his second epistle to the Corinthians he speaks of the contrast between the “ministry of condemnation” and the “ministry of righteousness” pointing out that God who gives us the competency to be good pastors says that he “hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life. (II Cor. 3:6)

Shortly before his ascension Jesus spoke these words, namely “that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations.” (Luke 24:46) It is through the preaching of the Law that the Holy Spirit effects true repentance. Through the Law he reveals our sin problem and our inability to solve it by ourselves. The law also reveals God’s wrath against sin and works sorrow and terror in our hearts. “The chief function or power of the law is to make original sin manifest and show man to what utter depths he has fallen and how corrupt it has become. So the law must tell him that he neither has nor cared for God or that he worships strange gods—something that he would not have believed before without a knowledge of the law. Thus he is terror stricken and humbled, becomes despondent and despairing, anxiously desired help but does not know where to find it, and begins to be alienated from God, to murmur, etc. This is what is meant by Rom. 4:15, “The law brings wrath,” and Rom. 5:20, “Law came to increase the trespass.” (SA, p. 303)

St. Paul says that the law is to be preached in such a way that “every mouth may be stopped, and all the world become guilty before God.” (Rom. 3:19) Yes, the law puts us all in our place and shows us that “before his bar all guilty stand” and that we stand condemned in God’s sight.

We have examples of pointed law preaching in the Scriptures. On Pentecost Day the Apostle Peter preached in such a way that his hearers “were pricked in their hearts” and asked, “men and brethren, what shall we do?” Nathan was very specific when he pointed to David who was guilty of adultery and murder and said, “Thou art the man” so that he (David) exclaimed, “I have sinned against the Lord.” And the Savior turned the searchlight of the law in the heart and life of the woman at the well which revealed her sordid past.

The same law of God exposes us for what we really are. It opens the book of our lives and lays bare every thought, word, and deed. Any cover-up on our part is as ridiculous as it is futile; we only deceive ourselves. Nothing lies hidden before the all-seeing God. It is true as the hymnist writes,

The law is but a mirror bright  
That brings the inbred sin to sight,  
That lurks within our nature.

and

The law reveals the guilt of sin  
And makes man conscience-stricken

*Hymnary 205 vv. 3 & 9*

The importance of proper law preaching is also brought out by Christ who says, “They that be whole need not a physician but they that are sick.... I am not come to call the righteous but sinners to

repentance.” And our Confessions say, “hearts that do not feel God’s wrath in their smugness spurn consolation.” (Art. XIII, p. 189) Dr. Koren, a theological leader in the Norwegian Synod, put it this way: “If we preached only concerning forgiveness of sin (righteousness) but not concerning repentance, then that doctrine would neither be understood, nor would it bear fruit. For without repentance there is no faith and consequently no justification by faith . . . and to such souls justification by faith will be only an empty phrase or a soft pillow – oftenest both.” (*Faith of Our Fathers*, p. 70) No, as long as one does not realize his lost condition he will have no interest in the Savior of sinners. Just as one will not appreciate food unless hungry, water unless thirsty so he will not realize the need for the “bread of life” and the “water of life.” It is only

When sinners see their lost condition  
And feel the pressing load of sin  
And Jesus cometh on his mission  
To heal the sin-sick heart within  
All grief must flee before his grace  
And joy divine will take its place.  
*Hymnary 173, v. 1*

Dr. Walther in a letter to a pastor emphasized the importance of preaching the law in these words:

From all your remarks I can see with joy that through the sweet Gospel you have opened the hearts of many to your message. It is necessary that I should remind you that you must also diligently apply the salt of the law. I do not mean that you must engage in legalistic diatribes, scolding and making of demands, but that you explain the great demands of the law and unlock the Law’s profound meaning and point out its spirituality as well as emphasizing its seriousness in its threats, so that hearers may be brought to the point that they view the Gospel not merely as a palliative for some painful sores, but view it as the cure for cleansed wounds. If the Law is not sharply in focus (which can be achieved in a quiet way without table pounding and boisterous presentations), then eventually the joy of the Gospel will be lost and the seed is sown on stony ground and the time will arise when the believers, meeting temptations and tribulations, which the world, the flesh, and Satan will never permit to be absent, will fall from the trees like unripe wormy fruit and perish.

On this point Luther is a splendid model. As comfortingly as he preaches, each of his sermons is also a storm warning over all outward Christians, which one first notices when one really begins to actualize Luther’s hearers in a lively way. At our last district convention we saw again, with joy, how profoundly Luther also grasps the Law and how carefully he thought it through, and we are encouraged also in this to follow him as well as we poor inadequate teachers are able to do. (*Selected Letters*, p, 151-152)

So we are not to confuse law preaching with moralizing and tirading against the evils of the day. That type of preaching will only fuel the *opinio legis* in a person and make hypocrites out of people, causing the hearer to think that because he doesn’t do those abominable things that he is not as sinful as others, and may even be tempted to pray as did the Pharisee in the temple, “God, I thank Thee, that I am not as other men are.”

No, the law is spiritual and it gets to the heart of the problem, which is the heart. The Bible describes our sinful heart as being “deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.” (Jeremiah 17:9) Jesus says that it is “out of the heart that proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies, etc.” (Matt. 15:19) Jesus preached pointed law when he said, “whosoever

looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.” (Matt. 5:28) St. Paul confessed, “I had not known lust except the law said, Thou shalt not covet.” (Rom. 7:7b) Who of us can say that we have even come close to measuring up to the demands of God’s holy law! And in case we might be tempted to think that we are doing pretty well, then heed what the apostle says, “Whosoever shall keep the whole law and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.” (James 2:10) Or as we sing in one of our hymns,

What God doth in his law demand  
No man to him doth render  
Before His bar all guilty stand  
His law speaks curse and thunder  
The law demands a perfect heart  
We were defiled in every part  
And lost was his condition  
*Hymnary 205, v. 2*

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Effective law preaching is something that should concern us. It is easy to preach about the law, but to preach the law so that it really convicts is another thing. Elmer Kettner, in an article entitled “Are We Really Preaching the Gospel?” emphasizes the importance of proper law preaching if we are to appreciate the Gospel. He says, “To preach the Gospel effectively does not mean that we shall abandon the law. The seed of the Gospel can germinate only in soil that has been tilled with the sharp blade of the Law. Very often the Gospel is not received because the hearer doesn’t feel any need of it.” (*CTM*, May 1953, p. 326) Dr. Walther puts it this way, “Without the law the Gospel is not understood; without the Gospel the Law benefits us nothing.” (*L & G*, p. 6) Kettner goes on to say: “Preaching the Law is not scolding, it is calling attention to sins of which the hearers are not unusually conscious. To prepare the soil properly the plow must go down deep. Too many sermons just scratch the surface ... general condemnation of sin will not convict anyone. The story of the fall of Adam and Eve, told over and over again may explain the origin of sin, but it will not make many people conscience-stricken nor receptive to the Gospel. We must be more specific than that.... Unless we uncover specific sins, name them, describe them, point to their consequences in the lives of the sinner and his fellow men and to the fact that these very sins nailed Jesus to the cross, the Holy Spirit will not convict many hearers of their sins.” (*CTM*, May 1953, p. 326)

Carl Braaten opines:

If preaching is sick today, it is because we do not know how to preach the law. We are lulling people to sleep with the gospel when they should be roused by means of the law. August Tholuck, preacher and theologian in Germany in the last century said: “If by any chance a peddler of indulgences were to appear among us, he would not do a good business; for nobody has a disquieted and alarmed conscience.” Braaten goes on to say: “If the gospel is not placed in bold relief against the background of the demonic, sin, wrath and hell, it degenerates into a saccharine-sweet message of civilizing aphorisms. When Jesus Christ is pictured in the confessional writings, he is the fulfiller of the law, the appeaser of wrath, the victor over Satan, the conqueror of death, the atoner of sin—all concepts which have suffered an erosion of meaning in our monistic universe of discourse. (*Principles of Lutheran Theology*, pp. 111-112)

Some years ago a brother pastor in our ELS delivered a paper to the General Pastoral Conference on *Sermon Preparation and Productive Preaching*. In preparation for this paper he sent this question to about fifty people, mostly lay people: “What, in your opinion, is a good productive sermon?” In

response to this question he stated in his paper, “It is reassuring that our people understand the Law-Gospel concept. Regarding law preaching they said they wanted the law preached in sermons not merely in a general way, ‘we are all sinners,’ ‘we all come short’ – but wanted law preaching that ‘catch me in my sins in my home, in my marriage, in my relationship with my kids, my dealings in the market place, at the bank, at the gas station.’” Another responded by saying that the law should be preached in such a way “that it unmasks me, gets behind my pretensions, diagnoses the terminal disease of the soul with which I’m afflicted.” Another: “Preach the law so that it stings the conscience.” Still another: “It seems our pastors generally seem unwilling to get very specific in the matter of sin. What has happened to hell? We don’t hear it mentioned much anymore.”

The respondents also made it clear that they were concerned that the Gospel be preached in all of its saving beauty and power. Here are some of the responses: “After having my sins pointed out to me, then what I need is to have my ears filled with my Savior. I need to be told that all of my embarrassing memories, the sordidness of my own words and actions, the shames of my guilty conscience that I carry inwardly, have been set right, have been expunged from God’s recollection by the heroic work of Jesus. When Christ is preached to me like this, in a setting of life-after-death, of heaven, of eternal joy and peace, only then am I comforted. Then the preaching is ‘getting through,’ and I must have that kind of preaching. Nothing less will do.” Another: “No sermon dare be without the Gospel. We need to know that all our sins have been forgiven in Jesus Christ.”

This is no doubt what Dr. Walther had in mind when he said that “the Gospel is to have a general predominance in our preaching.” He goes on to advise his students: “Do not stand in your pulpits sad-faced, as if you were bidding men to come to a funeral, but like men that go wooing a bride or announcing a wedding. If you do not mingle Law with the Gospel you will always mount your pulpit with joy. People will notice that you are filled with joy because you are bringing the blessed message of joy to your congregation.” (*L & G*, p. 406)

These concerns about Law and Gospel preaching are certainly in keeping with the Scriptures and the Confessions. Law preaching—important as it is—is as our Confessions say “a foreign work” and its purpose is to lead us to Christ’s “proper work,” which is the proclamation of forgiveness to the penitent sinner. Luther said it so clearly: “Where the law exercises its office alone ... there is only death and hell, and man must despair like Saul and Judas as St. Paul says, the law slays through sin. Moreover the Gospel offers consolation and forgiveness in more ways than one, for with God is plenteous redemption.” (*SA*, p. 304) If we only had the ministry of the law, then we would only have sorrow, misery, despair, and condemnation.

But Jesus says that remission of sin is also to be preached. Remission of sin is the heart and center of the Gospel and it is to predominate in our preaching and teaching. The Gospel is the only solution to our problem of sin and death. Through the Word of the Gospel this treasure is brought to us and made our own. Yes, God is “surpassingly rich in his grace,” as Luther reminds us, and brings this grace to us in various ways, through the spoken Word, Baptism, Lord’s supper, the Keys, and mutual conversation and consolation of brethren as Luther says in the Smalcald Articles. (*SA*, p. 310) While the law, then, is to be preached in such a way as “to drive the greatest saint to despair” so the Gospel must be preached so as “to give the greatest sinner hope.” (Walther)

Daniel March in his classic description of the Bible says among other things, “It is strict enough to denounce the very shadow and semblance of sin, yet it is liberal enough to save the chiefest of sinners.” Therefore we are to open the floodgates of the Gospel and not be vague or condition it in the least, not even upon our faith. No, personalize it, as the Scriptures do. “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, with your God Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned; for she hath received of the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.” (Is. 40:1,2) Yes, “Where sin abounded grace did much more abound.” (Rom. 5:20) Therefore, say to the penitent as did Jesus, “Be of good cheer, *thy* sins are forgiven.” Say, as did Nathan to a repentant David, “The Lord also hath put away *thy* sin.” Say, as the angel who proclaimed to the frightened



shepherds on Bethlehem's plain, "Fear not: for behold I bring *you* good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto *you* is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord." Tell penitent sinners that where they have failed in their lives—and who of us hasn't failed miserably!—they have a Savior who led a perfect life in their stead and that this counts as though they had kept it perfectly. Preach the active obedience of Christ. Heed what Walther says, "Do not be stingy with the Gospel. (*L & G*, p. 240)

Elmer Kettner states that "praising the Gospel is not preaching the Gospel." He correctly observes that to preach the Gospel clearly we must continually present Christ in his active as well as his passive obedience. He says: "Juxtaposition is a good word to remember in sermon preparation. Put the individual alongside of Christ. Then describe them as they trade places, the sinner as though he had done all that Christ did, and Jesus as though He had done all that the sinner did. Let us not merely refer to the Gospel, but dwell on it, develop it, repeat it, emphasize it, and apply it that our hearts may catch it." (*CTM*, May 1953, p. 322)

Here we have Luther as a model. In a letter to a troubled friend, an Augustinian friar by the name of Spenlein who was experiencing the same spiritual agony that he had gone through, wrote:

Therefore, my dear friar, learn Christ and him crucified, Learn to praise him, and despairing of yourself, say, "Lord Jesus, you have taken upon yourself what is mine and have given to me what is yours. You have taken upon yourself what you were not and have given to me what I was not." Beware of aspiring to such purity that you will not wish to be looked upon as sinner, or to be one. For Christ dwells among sinners. Meditate on this love of his and you will see sweet consolation. For why was it necessary for him to die if one can obtain a good conscience by our works and afflictions? Accordingly you will find peace only in him and only when you despair of yourself and your own good work. Besides, you will learn from him that just as he received you, so he has made your sins his own and has made his righteousness yours."

(*LW* Vol. 48, p. 12)

Dr. Walther commenting on this letter says, "What Luther wrote to his troubled friend was the most beautiful Gospel that can be preached. It is sterling gold and pure honey, for it declares that Christ has come in behalf of everyone, that he has borne every man's sins, that he calls all to believe on him, to rejoice and rest assured that his sins are forgiven and that in the hour of death he will depart saved." (*L & G*, p. 111)

Kettner emphasizes the importance of Gospel preaching in these words: "If there is one message that predominates in the Scriptures, it is this, that God laid all our sins on Jesus. Our Savior bore the punishment of sins for us. Those thoughts of envy and covetousness, those angry words spoken in the heat of argument yesterday—God has forgiven them, wiped out the record of them, if you have repented of them and laid them down at the feet of Jesus. He loves you just as though you had never done them, yet, more! He loves you as though you were His only begotten, pure, innocent Son. Jesus said, 'Thou hast loved them, as thou hast loved me.' With that joy you can return to your homes today knowing that before God you are as spotless as one of the holy angels!" (*CTM*, May 1953, p. 324)

In a sermon on New Year's Day 1532 Luther preached a sermon based on Galatians 3:22-24, entitled "The Proper Distinction Between the Law and the Gospel" in which he shows his keen perception of the difference between these two doctrines when he says,

When you find yourself under attack, with the Law threatening to damn you, know that God has not given only the Law, but also a far higher word, the blessed Gospel of Christ. If the two of them, the Law and the Gospel, now come into confrontation, and the Law finds me, a sinner, and accuses and condemns me, while the Gospel says (Matt. 9:2), 'be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven; you shall be saved': which one should I follow? Both are God's Word. St. Paul teaches

you the answer: 'Now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian.' So this is where the Law stops. For it shall and must be that the lesser word yields and gives way to the Gospel. Both are the Word of God: the Law and the Gospel. But they are not both alike. One is lower, the other higher. One is weaker, the other stronger. One is less, the other greater. If they now wrestle with one another, I follow the Gospel and say good-bye to the Law. It is better not to know the Law, than to lose the Gospel.

In that same sermon Luther says, "Dear Law, if I have failed to do your works, you do them. I am not going to allow myself to be tortured to death on your account and be taken captive and held under you, and thereby forget the Gospel. Whether I have sinned, done wrong, or not done wrong, I leave that for you, Law, to worry about. Be gone with you and leave my heart in peace; in this matter I do not know you. If you want to demand and have it that I live a godly life here on earth, I will gladly do so. But if you want to climb up and break in on me so that I lose what has been given me, then I would much rather not know you at all than lose the gift."

### **The Difficulty of Properly Distinguishing between Law and Gospel**

It is easy in theory but difficult in practice. Walther devotes an entire theses to this very point. It reads: "Rightly distinguishing between the Law and the Gospel is the most difficult and the highest art of Christians in general and theologians in particular. It is taught only by the Holy Spirit in the school of experience." Any catechumen can recite the difference between the Law and the Gospel, but applying it and using it is another matter and can be learned only in the school of experience. The practical application of this doctrine presents difficulties which no man can surmount by reasonable reflections. Yes, the proper distinction between Law and Gospel is the highest art which a person can learn. That is why Luther says, "Place any person who is well versed in this art of dividing the Law from the Gospel at the head and call him a Doctor of Holy Writ."

This difficulty is brought out in passages such as I John 3:20 which reads, "For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart." When our heart does not condemn us, it is easy to distinguish between Law and Gospel. But there are times when our heart does condemn us, and know this that Satan is a master of conjuring up past sins in our lives and on top of that the Law accuses and condemns us. It is at such times that we are seized with a terrible fright.

Luther understood the difficulty of properly distinguishing between the Law and the Gospel. In one of his sermons he says, "In your tribulations you will become aware that the Gospel is a rare guest in men's consciences, while the Law is their daily and familiar companion." That is why we are more inclined to give ear to the Law than the Gospel. We must admit that we are far oftener troubled and worried than comforted. There is only one explanation and that is because the Law is a constant guest in our hearts. Therefore, it is vital that we learn to look outside of ourselves, to the Gospel and listen to the soothing voice of the Gospel which is greater than our heart and which says, "Be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven."

Here I would call attention to something that Dr. Sigurd Ylvisaker, one time vice president of the Synodical Conference, wrote on the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. He says that "the preaching of the Law is a terrible thing, for the Law terrifies, drives us away from God, destroys hope, kills without mercy, demands its cruel pound of flesh, leads to the brink of hell and thrusts us down into its eternal despair. The law puts before man an impossible perfection, reveals the holiness and justice of God, and robs us of every merit and worthiness. It reveals God in his glorious majesty, but leaves us in that dark night out from which we see as from a deep pit of misery and defeat." On the other hand, he writes about the gospel: "The Gospel opens wide the glory of heaven, clothes the meanest sinner with the righteousness which Christ has wrought as a heavenly garment – unsullied, seamless, pure, bright, fit for heaven. The gospel breathes hope as a life-giving breath, and causes the water of life to spring forth

among men to refresh and renew to eternal life.” Ylvisaker goes on to say, “To preach the gospel, then is more than talking about it. It is more than an objective statement of the doctrines involved, no matter how carefully exact, orthodox and Biblical each statement may be. The gospel *is* that green pasture of which the Bible speaks. It is that banquet table of Christ, that living water with which Christ identifies Himself – in other words, to preach the gospel is to preach Christ.”

Indeed, the distinction between the Law and the Gospel is properly learned only in the school of the Holy Spirit, in tribulation.

One of the books which I have my students read for homiletics class is *Hammer of God* by Bo Giertz, former bishop in the State Church of Sweden. He writes about a curate named Dr. Savonius who had graduated from the school of theology at the University of Upsalla. The first night in his parish he was called to minister to a dying man, Johannes, who was almost at the point of despair over his sins. The poor curate stood at his bedside not knowing what to say; he simply could not cope with the situation. Finally a neighbor lady, named Katrina, happened to stop by. She not only knew her Bible, but also knew the distinction between Law and Gospel. Here is a brief presentation of how she responded to this despairing man:

Johannes: “I am a great sinner.”

Katrina: “Then your repentance is as true as it can be in a corrupt child of Adam.”

Johannes: “But what shall I believe?”

Katrina: “The Word of God: But to him that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly his faith is counted to him for righteousness. Do you have sin in your heart?”

Johannes: “Yes, much.”

Katrina: “Then it is clear that God has not forsaken you. Only he can see his sin who has the Holy Spirit.”

Johannes: “Could it be a work of God that my heart is so unclean?”

Katrina: “Not that your heart is unclean, but that you see that it is.”

Johannes: “Then why have I not received a clean heart?”

Katrina: “That you might learn to love Jesus. If you have received a clean heart and trusted in that to earn your salvation, to what end would you need a Savior?”

Katrina: “Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world.”

Johannes: “Do you mean that He takes away sin that dwells in my unclean heart?”

Katrina: “Yes, He atoned for all sin.”

Johannes: “But I have it with me still.”

Katrina: “Yes, just as surely as Paul had it with him. He said:

I know that in me, that is in my flesh dwelleth no good thing. For to will is present with me but how to perform that which is good I find not.”

Johannes: “Give me one more word, Katrina, and I will believe it.”

Katrina: “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

Johannes: “Amen. I believe.”

Katrina: “Now ask the pastor to give you communion.”

Dr. Savonius did this.

*(Hammer of God, pp. 28-29)*

## Conclusion

We conclude this paper by reminding ourselves again of the importance of preserving the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. Our Confessions sum up this importance by saying that this 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.” (SD, V, p. 558) And again: “We believe and confess that these two doctrines must be urged constantly in the church of God until the end of the world, but with due distinction.” (SD, V, p. 562) If the proper distinction between these two doctrines is not maintained the results are disastrous for the Christian; the Gospel is made into a new Law, the merits of Christ are obscured, and troubled consciences are robbed of the comfort of the Gospel promises.

True Law and Gospel preaching is becoming more of a rarity in our day. Instead of Law preaching we hear much moralizing and tirading against the evils of the day. But the Law is spiritual and it must be preached in such a way that “every mouth is stopped and all the world become guilty before God” as Paul says in Romans. Luther says somewhere that if you were to go up to a heathen and tell him that his sins were forgiven, without first showing him his need, he would stare at you like a cow stares at a new barn door; he wouldn’t know what you were talking about.

The Gospel is the only solution to man’s problem of sin and death and therefore we cannot emphasize enough the importance of preaching the good news of forgiveness and eternal life in Christ. While the Law must be preached in all of its sharpness and severity, the Gospel must always predominate. Walther said it so well: “So preach the law that it drives the greatest saint to despair; so preach the Gospel that it gives the greatest sinner hope.” True Law and Gospel preaching must always be a top priority for a Lutheran pastor. Then God will be glorified and His people edified!

## Addendum

### The Word of God

70 8 linen (95)

Melchior Teachner, 1615

*arr. by Kuehnau*

265 *Valet will ich dir geben*

1. God's holy Law and Gospel-  
Free gifts from God on high,-  
Reveal His will and pleasure,  
Lest in our sins we die.  
Law and Gospel differ  
In essence and in aim:  
The Gospel tells God's mercy.  
The law our sin and shame.
2. But none can know this difference,  
Unless God grants them light,  
Until His Holy Spirit  
Illume their nature's night.  
Yet both by man are needed  
Throughout his earthly course,  
And lead, if duly heeded,  
To life's trite Fount and Source.
3. The Law's demands and precepts  
Are written in man's heart  
For God at the Creation  
The knowledge did impart.  
The teaching of the Gospel  
Man never could have known,  
Had God not in His mercy  
Revealed it by His Son.
- 4 The Law prescribes our duty:  
To do what God commands;  
"Love God and love thy neighbor,"  
These are its strict demands.  
The Gospel tells of Jesus,  
Of His unfathomed love,  
Who came to save, and lead us  
To our blest home above.
5. The Law's conditional blessing  
God con to none impart,  
Unless they keep His precepts  
With all their mind and heart.  
The Gospel's blessed promise  
God freely doth bestow  
To all who cry to Jesus  
To save from sin and woe.
6. The Law proclaims God's anger  
And curse, because of sin;  
Convicting mind and conscience,  
It leaves no peace within.  
The Gospel offers pardon,  
And calms the guilty soul;  
Through Jesus' blood and merit  
It makes the sinner whole.
7. The Law's terrific threatenings  
For stubborn hearts are meant,  
Who, trifling with God's goodness,  
Of sin will not repent..  
The Gospel's balm of healing  
To sinners doth apply  
Who, all their burdens feeling,  
Fur grace and pardon cry.
8. The Law's work is accomplished  
When sinners feel their need,  
When at the feet of Jesus,  
Their hearts for mercy plead.  
The Gospel's work commences  
When sinners sue for peace,  
It then confers salvation,  
From sorrow sweet release.
9. This difference, blessed Saviour,  
Lead me to understand,  
That by Thy Law and Gospel  
I reach the promised land.  
Thy Law, O may it show me  
Thy wrath, my sin, and woe,  
And may Thy blessed Gospel  
Thy grace and peace bestow.
10. Grant also by Thy Gospel  
The power to do Thy will,  
And in my life and station,  
My duty to fulfill.  
All sin and evil holing,  
May I servo Thee alone,  
And, when life's course is ended,  
Rejoice before Thy throne.-Amen.

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