

The Right Division and Application of Law and Gospel

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"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth." (2 Timothy 2:15)

My dear friends in Christ!

It was in the Autumn of 1983 at Concordia Theological Seminary, in Fort Wayne, Indiana. I just finished my 10-week summer intensive Biblical Greek course. Now I was in my first preaching class with Professor Gerhard Aho. Interestingly, his father served as pastor years back in the STLK. Now here was his son. Before hearing one word about preaching, he began the class with a study on C.F.W. Walther's book, "The Proper Distinction Between LAW AND GOSPEL." And if that were not enough, he gave us a very difficult assignment. Before we could study how to preach, he wanted us to know how to rightly use the Law and Gospel. He told the class that he will have a test and we are to memorize verbatim, word for word, all 25 theses, and then write them down on the test!

Only later did I see the wisdom in Professor Aho's assignment. To use Walther's words, "Only he is an orthodox teacher who . . . rightly distinguishes Law and Gospel from each other. That is the final test of a proper sermon. The value of a sermon depends not only on this, that every statement in it be taken from the Word of God and be in agreement with it, but also this, whether Law and Gospel have been rightly divided." It is in this way that a pastor can gladly, faithfully, and confidently, as a servant of God, rightly handle the Word of truth. He doesn't have to be ashamed before God and man. Sadly, there are those who do not have a love for "the Word of truth" because they do not hold to the inerrancy of Scripture. Or, that they do not believe in the "sufficiency of Scripture." Such men have been found in the Lutheran Church. Professor Aho wanted his students to rightly handle the truth of God's Word above all things and believe in it with all their hearts. Indeed, how can any pastor rightly handle the Word if he believes that it is not truth, but rather ascribes truth to himself? Such a man makes God out to be liar. Such a one does not see that he has set himself up as an idol in his own heart, thinking that he knows better than God. Nevertheless, distinguishing between the Law and Gospel is the way the Word of God, the word of truth can enable us to know the truth, the truth that sets us free as our Lord tells us in John 8.

But why is Law and Gospel such a big deal? Is it really so important? Without distinguishing the Law from the Gospel and knowing when and how to use them, the Bible remains a

closed or sealed book. Many read the Bible, but only gathering from it positive things, such as “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want” (Psalm 23:1), while ignoring the voice of the Law, such as, “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment... But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment.” (Matthew 5:21-22). Such people wallow in carnal security, they do not see their sins and have no need for a Saviour and they continue in their sins. On the other hand, there are many who live in despair and struggle with angry feelings toward God. They fail to see God as forgiving for Christ’s Sake. Because the Bible is a closed book, they do not see the gospel. They read the Scriptures and experience the Law, and how it forces its way into their heart. The heart will strain with all its might against God, says Walther. A person will even become so angry with God because He demands such impossible thing from him. Such a one will even curse God in his heart. He would slay God if he could. He would thrust God from His throne if that were possible. The effect of preaching the Law, then, is to increase the lust for sinning... The Law uncovers to man his sins, but offers him no help to get out of them and thus hurls him man into despair... [The Law] conjures up the terrors of hell, of death, of the wrath of God. But it has not a drop of comfort to offer the sinner.”¹

This was, indeed, Martin Luther’s struggle. He knew that he and all men are sinful and weak. He lived in terror of God. Reading the Bible at times would make the hairs on his head stand on end. He did all his duties as a monk. He prayed, he fasted, he confessed his sins and performed his penance, but the Bible remained a “closed book” to him. He did not know how to rightly handle God’s Word. It was only until the Holy Spirit opened his eyes and enabled him to see what the prophet Habakkuk had written: “The righteous will live by his faith” (Habakkuk 2:4). From this Luther concluded that life must come from faith; a person becomes righteous by faith. That opened the whole Bible to him—even heaven itself! To rightly handle God’s Word of truth, one must HAVE true saving faith and not thoughts that he has made up in his mind that he calls faith. Faith is the work of God, that one “may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing [he] may have life in his name.” (John 20:31). The Law must show an individual his sins, his inability to save himself, and how utterly powerless he is to change his heart. The Law demands perfect works from a perfect love of God and one another. But it won’t give what it demands. Through the gospel, that glorious message of Christ Jesus and His grace, “The Gospel does not require anything good that man must furnish: not a good heart, not a good disposition, no improvement of his condition, no godliness, no love either of God or of men... [The Gospel, the good news of Jesus and his life, suffering, death, and glorious resurrection, that wonderful message of forgiveness of sins and full justification] it plants love into his heart and makes him capable of good works. It demands nothing but gives all. Should not this fact make us leap for joy?”

¹The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel by Walther, C.F.W.; Dau, W. H. T., translator, Concordia Publishing House, Saint Louis, MO, pg. 14.

Thus says C.F.W. Walther. Through means of the Law and the Gospel we can rightly and joyfully hand “The Word of truth”.

Sadly, people question why they need to hear Law, not only God’s demands of what we must do, but also of God’s anger wrath if we don’t do it. From birth, we are born with the Law written in our hearts, NOT THE GOSPEL!!! Yes, there are some that like to hear the law and what they must do, thinking that they can do it, as did the Pharisees in Jesus’ day. Man loves the law when he thinks he can do it and thus atone for his sins, or live a holy life, even if he can contribute just a little to his salvation. But such a person is spiritually blind.

Firstly, there are many who think they don’t need the law, they even flee from it. “Understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners...” (1 Timothy 1:9). “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” (1 John 1:8). It is not only saying that we have no sins, as the Scripture says, but we also deceive ourselves when we think **our** sins are either not so bad... or that they are too bad for God to pardon. Again, one may struggle with carnal security, or in despair, running from the voice of the Law.

In his truly marvellous treatise, “Concerning Christian Liberty” (*Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen*), Luther writes about the clear distinction between the Law and the Gospel and its application. He wrote: “... It is to be noted that the whole Scripture of God is divided into two parts: precepts [that is, Law] and promises [namely, the Gospel].² The precepts [the Law] certainly teach us what is good, but what they teach is not forthwith done. For they show us what we ought to do, but do not give us the power to do it. They were ordained, however, for the purpose of showing man to himself, that through them he may learn his own impotence for good and may despair of his own strength.”

“For example, “Thou shalt not covet,” is a precept by which we are all convicted of sin, since no man can help coveting, whatever efforts to the contrary he may make. In order therefore that he may fulfil the precept, and not covet, he is constrained to despair of himself and to seek elsewhere and through another the help which he cannot find in himself; as it is said, “O Israel, thou hast destroyed thyself; but in Me is thine help” (Hosea 13. 9). Now what is done by this one precept is done by all; for all are equally impossible of fulfilment by us.”

“Now when a man has through the precepts been taught his own impotence, and become anxious by what means he may satisfy the law—for the law must be satisfied, so that no jot or tittle of it may pass away, otherwise he must be hopelessly condemned—then, being

²“The doctrinal contents of the entire Holy Scriptures, both of the Old and the New Testament, are made up of two doctrines differing fundamentally from each other, viz., the Law and the Gospel.”—C. F. W. Walther (Thesis I [Walther, 6])

truly humbled and brought to nothing in his own eyes, he finds in himself no resource for justification and salvation.”

“Then comes in that other part of Scripture, the promises of God, which declare the glory of God, and say, "If you wish to fulfil the law, and, as the law requires, not to covet, lo! believe in Christ, in whom are promised to you grace, justification, peace, and liberty." All these things you shall have, if you believe, and shall be without them if you do not believe. For what is impossible for you by all the works of the law, which are many and yet useless, you shall fulfil in an easy and summary way through faith, because God the Father has made everything to depend on faith, so that whosoever has it has all things, and he who has it not has nothing.”

“Now, since these promises of God are words of holiness, truth, righteousness, liberty, and peace, and are full of universal goodness, the soul, which cleaves to them with a firm faith, is so united to them, nay, thoroughly absorbed by them, that it not only partakes in, but is penetrated and saturated by, all their virtues... In this way therefore the soul, through faith alone, without works, is from the word of God justified, sanctified, endued with truth, peace, and liberty, and filled full with every good thing, and is truly made the child of God, as it is said, "To them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name" (John I. 12).³

Rightly did Walther teach: “The true knowledge of the distinction between the Law and the Gospel is not only a glorious light, affording the correct understanding of the entire Holy Scriptures, but without this knowledge Scripture is and remains a sealed book.”—C. F. W. Walther.⁴

But is Law and Gospel just something that Luther and Walther devised? No! Luther and Walther wrote what they did on the basis of God’s Word, the Word of Truth! If we look at Saint Paul’s Letter to the Romans, Chapter 3, we find a clear example of how to rightly distinguish between the Law and Gospel. “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in His sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood, to be received by faith.” (Romans 3:20–25a).

³Luther, Martin. Concerning Christian Liberty (pp. 13-14). Kindle Edition.

⁴Thesis IV [Walther, 60].

Indeed, these verses from Romans rightly show how the content of Holy Scripture is made up of Law and Gospel, that God speaks to man in two fundamental ways. The Law threatens sinners with God's punishment. It proclaims wrath and leaves one condemned in sin and unbelief. To the alarmed sinner, even if one, as Walther taught, has wandered about in fleshly security, not having a care for his salvation and one's mortal soul. To those who have sought above all else, money and goods, having a comfortable life, caring nothing at all for Jesus, even to those who have been His bitter enemy, if such a one recognizes that he cannot be saved, and through the Law's preaching he is anxiously asking "What must I do to be saved?" God extends grace and forgiveness through the Gospel. And, with the proper distinction of Law and Gospel, the Scriptures give a right understanding and ability to handle the word rightly, because the human soul has been first handled by the Word, the Word of Law and Gospel.

Before I bring this paper to a close, I would like to add a few points from Walther's theses on Law and Gospel that I have not touched upon. To rightly handle the "Word of Truth" we need to know how the Law and Gospel are different, and that they should never be mixed.

Firstly, the Law differs from the Gospel by the manner in which it is revealed. The Law is written in a person's heart, but not the gospel. However, the law in our heart is dulled by sin, yet our conscience bears witness to its truth: "For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves:

Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another." (Romans 2:14-15). "The Ten Commandments were published only for the purpose of bringing out in bold outline the dulled script of the original Law written in men's hearts" (Walther, pg. 8). Thus, the Gospel can never be known by means of the conscience. The gospel must be preached to us. It comes from Christ alone. I always love it the way Luther put it: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel." (Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation, p. 15)."

The Law prepares us for the hearing of the gospel. The Law must lay the conscience bare and show it its sins, but only through the Gospel are we drawn to God, enabled to believe in God and receive his grace and forgiveness. Such Law and Gospel preaching, teaching, reading enables us to rightly handle the Word of truth.

I have already spoken of how the Law makes demands, and how the gospel makes no demands. The Gospel reveals what God has done through His Son, Jesus Christ. The Law speaks of works that we must do but we are not given the strength to do them. The Gospel

speaks and draws us to the great works of God in Christ! Again, listen to Luther: “Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation; the soul is full of sin, death, and condemnation. Let faith step in, and then sin, death, and hell will belong to Christ, and grace, life, and salvation to the soul. “For, if He is a Husband, He must needs take to Himself that which is His wife's, and at the same time, impart to His wife that which is His. For, in giving her His own body and Himself, how can He but give her all that is His? And, in taking to Himself the body of His wife, how can He but take to Himself all that is hers?”⁵

We should never mix the Law and Gospel. Take for example the colours “blue” and “yellow”. Two DISTINCT colours. But mix them together and you have totally different colour “green.” Mixing the Law and Gospel give you something totally different... It lessens the message of sin, it dulls some of the terrors over God’s wrath, while at the same time it destroys the message of God’s pure love and grace through Christ, that is received through faith alone. Human works, good works cannot receive the things of God, His mercy, love and forgiveness. They can only be appropriated by faith that is preached and given to us in and through the Gospel and the Holy Sacraments.

“At each point, the Gospel is completely different from the Law. While it is only through faith that we receive the benefits of the Gospel, the Gospel itself creates faith (Romans 1:16; Ephesians 2:8–10). Rather than provoking terror of conscience, anguish of heart, and fear of condemnation like the Law, the Gospel stills every voice of accusation with the strong words of Christ’s own peace and joy guaranteed by the blood of the cross. The Gospel does not set in place requirements of something that we must do or contribute. [And I will say this again, as it is what we Lutheran live for!] “[T]he Gospel does not require anything good that man must furnish: not a good heart, not a good disposition, no improvement of his condition, no godliness, no love either of God or men. It issues no orders, but changes man. It plants love into his heart and makes him capable of all good works. It demands nothing, but it gives all. Should not this fact make us leap for joy?” (Walther, 16).⁶

⁵Luther, Martin. Concerning Christian Liberty (p. 16). Kindle Edition.

⁶Pless, John T. Handling the Word of Truth: Law and Gospel in the Church Today (Kindle Locations 165-172). Concordia Publishing House. Kindle Edition.