

From author

The paper I will read today is an insight into the theme of this conference. Basically it is an introduction, which is more addressed to the congregation than to theologians. All others who will speak after me, will speak about more specifically themes.

Introduction into the teaching of the Law and the Gospel

“Fight to the death on behalf of truth,
and the Lord God will fight for you.” (Sirach 4:28)

The Scriptural teachings concerning the Law and Gospel are so important, that it is not superfluous to set forth them under a special head, because the two teachings are continually mingled into each other and the Biblical way of salvation is seemingly obscured to the human reason.

Confessional Lutheranism, on the other hand, regards the “distinction between the Law and the Gospel as a special brilliant light, which serves to the end that God’s Word may be rightly divided, and the Scripture of the holy prophets and apostles may be properly explained and understood (Formula of Concord, V, 1). As the Law and the Gospel are in opposition, we have to be clear, what is the right place of them within the plan of Salvation. That is the only correct way of resolving the difficulties, with which we are confronted in explaining these two opposing teachings in the light of the Bible. This is the main reason why there is such an important place for that question in orthodox dogmatics (J. T. Mueller).

Epitome of the Formula of Concord gives us a brief definition:

The Law in its narrow sense is “properly a divine doctrine, which teaches what is right and pleasing to God, and reproves everything that is sin and contrary to God’s will.”

At the same time that same Confession defines the Gospel in its narrow sense as “properly such a doctrine as teaches what man who has not observed the Law, and therefore is condemned by it, is to believe, namely, that Christ has expiated and made satisfaction for all sins, and has obtained and acquired for him, without any merit of his [no merit of the sinner intervening], forgiveness of sins, righteousness that avails before God, and eternal life.” (FC Epitome V)

Part 1

Thesis 1

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.

Even though the Law and the Gospel are two very different doctrines, none of them is abolished and both are divine, or God-given. **Thus, we ought to be diligent in our study and application of them** so that we do not confuse them, **otherwise** they will not fulfil their functions, or even they will bring big damage to listeners.

Without the Law the Gospel is not understood; without the Gospel the Law benefits us nothing. Nor can this naïve, yet quite current, distinction be admitted, that the Law is the teaching of the Old while the Gospel is the teaching of the New Testament.

Nor do the Law and the Gospel differ as regards their final aim, as though the Gospel aimed at men's salvation, the Law at men's condemnation.

Both have for their final aim: man's salvation.

Only the Law, ever since the Fall, cannot lead us to salvation; it can only prepare us for the Gospel. Furthermore, it is through the Gospel that we obtain the ability to fulfil the Law to a certain extent.

Both teachings stand in mutual harmony and does not speak against each other. If somebody does not think so, then it is not due to that there are contradictions in the Holy Scriptures (there aren't such), but it is due to his incapability of understanding what is written. If someone forsakes one of those teaching, he ceases to be a Christian.

Speaking about the differences:

In the first place, then, Law and Gospel differ as regards the manner of their being revealed to man. Man was created with the Law written in his heart. True, in consequence of the Fall this script in the heart has become quite dulled, but it has not been utterly wiped out. The Law may be preached to the most ungodly person and his conscience will tell him, that is true. But when the Gospel is preached to him, his conscience does not tell him the same. The preaching of the Gospel rather makes him angry. Why is this? Because the Law is written in his heart. The situation is different when the Gospel is preached. The Gospel reveals and proclaims nothing but free acts of divine grace; and these are not at all self-evident.

God gave the Ten Commandments 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 it is impossible to discover the Gospel. It became known only through an act of the Holy Spirit.

This distinction is very important. All religions contain portions of the Law, even atheism. But of the Gospel not a particle is found anywhere except in the Christian religion.

Nor could we convert any person by preaching the Gospel to him unless **the Law is preached** to him first. It would be impossible to convert any one if the Law had not been written in men's hearts.

The second point of difference between the Law and the Gospel is shown by the contents of either. The Law tells us what we are to do. No such instruction is contained in the Gospel. On the contrary, the Gospel reveals to us only what God is doing. The Law is speaking concerning our works; the Gospel, concerning the great works of God.

The Law has nothing to say about forgiveness, about grace.

The Law issues only commands and demands. The Gospel, on the other hand, only makes offers. It means, not to take anything, but only to give. Accordingly we read, John 1:17:

“The Law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.” The Gospel contains nothing but grace and truth!

If nothing else were told **to** us but the Law, then we would live in constant and deep despair or in arrogant pride, because we are not capable of fulfilling it according to the demands of God.

Law and Gospel differ, in the third place, by reason of their promises. What the Law promises is just as great a boon as what the Gospel promises, namely, everlasting life and salvation. But at this point we are confronted with a mighty difference: all promises of the Law are made on certain conditions, namely, on the condition that we fulfil the Law perfectly. By the way, we are not to think that to those who do the will of God, salvation must come as a reward of their merit. By no means; their salvation, too, would be owing to the goodness of God.

On a certain occasion, when the Lord wished to instruct the disciples as to what they must preach, He said: Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved. Mark 16:15-16. This shows that no condition **whatsoever** is attached to the Gospel; it is a promise of grace. Furthermore, we read Rom. 3:22-24: There is no difference; for 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. Again, Eph. 2:8-9: By grace are ye saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast.

Unconditional promises of grace and salvation — that is what we find in the Gospel. That is as if Christ would have said: “Go in peace! I have done everything on your behalf!” But Christ’s work most often is denied and belittled. This is done by open enemies, but that is done also by “hidden”, **such as false brethren** – they think: “I am an abominable man; there is no forgiveness for me.” Such people reject the Gospel — reject Christ. Such people can be found everywhere, no wonder, if also among us.

The fourth difference between the Law and the Gospel relates to threats. The Gospel contains no threats at all, but only words of consolation. Just mentioned differences create illusion, that it can be noticed even by children, but not in vain Martin Luther stressed, that the one who is able to do that, is doctor of theology. The Holy Spirit produces this knowledge wherever it exists. Without Him this knowledge cannot be attained.

However, we are not to imagine that the Gospel makes men secure because it has no threats to hurl at men. On the contrary, the Gospel removes from believers the desire to sin.

Deut. 27:26 God says through Moses: “Cursed be he that confirmeth not all the words of this Law to do them. And all the people shall say, Amen.” Indeed, man is invited by the Law to pronounce a curse upon himself. Only a person engulfed by infernal darkness can believe that the Law will give him no trouble.

The Gospel proceeds in an entirely different fashion. Paul says, 1 Tim. 1:15: “This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.” Hence even the foremost among sinners is not made to hear threats, but only the sweetest promise.

The fifth point of difference between the Law and the Gospel concerns the effects of these two doctrines.

The Law tells us what to do but does not enable us to comply with its commands; it rather causes us to become more unwilling to keep the Law. The effect of preaching the

Law, then, is to increase the lust for sinning (Romans 7:8). The Law uncovers to man his sins but offers him no help to get out of them and thus hurls man into despair.

The effects of the Gospel are of an entirely different nature. They consist in this, that, in the first place, the Gospel, when demanding faith, offers and gives us faith in that very demand. Any person not wilfully resisting obtains faith.

Paul asks Galatians: "This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the Law or by the hearing of faith?" (Gal 3:2)

From the words of Christ, John 7:37: "If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink," Luther offers this comment: "These are the two subjects on which we preach. The Law produces thirst; it leads the hearer to hell and slays him. The Gospel, however, refreshes him and leads him to heaven."

II part

IV THESIS

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.

We looked at this theme already speaking about the first thesis.

Turning the **pages** of the Holy Scriptures while still ignorant of the distinction between the Law and the Gospel, a person receives the impression that a great number of contradictions are contained in the Scriptures; in fact, the entire Scripture seem to be made up of contradictions. Those are so many, that I will not try to mention the examples, otherwise all my lecture would consist only of them.

For a man who has had almost no connection with the Christianity like as a passer-by on the street, there can arise grounded questions. For example, how can we believe and trust in God, if He even in one sentence can radically change His mind to the opposite?

Very often an opinion is heard, that the Old Testament reveals a wrathful, the New Testament a gracious God, or that the Old Testament teaches salvation by a person's own works, the New Testament, by faith. No; we find both teachings in the Old as well as in the New Testament. 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]. All of a sudden 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 on the contrary – so that we could see that we are utterly unable to fulfil the Law, to see our weakness and our state of slavery to the sin. Only then we shall know the true meaning of the Gospel. Only then we can depart from Sinai on our way to Golgotha.

The Formula of Concord, in the Epitome (Mueller, p. 533; Triglot Concordia, p. 801), says: "We believe, teach, and confess that the distinction between the Law and the Gospel is to be maintained in the Church with great diligence as an especially brilliant light, by which, according to the admonition of St. Paul, the Word of God is rightly divided." And as well in the Declaration of Art. V (Mueller, p. 633; Triglot Concordia, p. 951) as follows: "we must guard it with especial care in order that these two doctrines may not be mingled with

one another or a Law be made out of the Gospel, whereby the merit of Christ is obscured.”

The Law has not been abolished. The Law remains in force. But we have another message besides that of the Law. God does not say: “By the Law is righteousness,” but: “By the Law is the knowledge of sin.” And in the Epistle to the Romans we read: “To him that ... believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.” (Romans 4:5) Hence when we accept that we cannot by our own strength believe in God and trust in Him, the moment we are convinced that we are ungodly, we are on the right way to salvation.

“If the Gospel is not fundamentally and plainly set apart from the Law, it is impossible to keep the Christian doctrine unadulterated.” (M. Luther)

In the epistle to Romans it is written, “For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they, being ignorant of God’s righteousness and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness to everyone that believeth.” (Rom. 10:2–4). To what ignorance of the Jews does the apostle refer in this passage when he says, “not according to knowledge”? It means – mixing the Law with the Gospel, our own works, that is, works of the Law, are made to be the main and decisive factor, Christ is seen as a new Law-giver and the Holy Scriptures remain **a closed book**.

Part III

XIII THESIS

The Word of God is not rightly divided when one makes an appeal to believe or at least help towards that end, instead of preaching faith into a person’s heart by laying the Gospel promises before him.

This thesis does not score as an error the demand on the part of the pastor, be it ever so urgent, that his hearers believe the Gospel. That demand has been made by all the prophets, all the apostles, yea, by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. When demanding faith, we do not lay down a demand of the Law, but issue the sweetest invitation, **thus** saying to our hearers: “Come; for all things are now ready.” Luke 14:17.

The error against which this thesis is directed is this, that man can produce faith in himself. Such a demand would be an order of the Law and turn faith into a work of man. That would be plainly mingling Law and Gospel.

In Latvia there are a lot of sects, who **endlessly remind** their hearers to believe, or to accept Christ. In Latvia such trends are found **among** Baptists, Adventists, Methodists, **Pentecostals** and other new sects, they **envy the so-called megachurches, like those in America, with all the glory of what God will do if one will just make “a decision” and ask Jesus into his heart.** The only difference is the amount of listeners.

No one can accept Christ by **his own power and strength**. Actually **it is** quite opposite – only Christ can choose, can predestine and can add to His faithful group those, who have arrived to **His** eschatological meal in rich apparel (Zach 3:4) [or wedding

clothes (Matt. 22:12]. Remember what happened to the guest, who came in casual clothes. Also nowadays, or more precisely – almost always, especially during the great feasts of the church year, a lot of people come dressed in casual clothes; they are not hoping for salvation, because they themselves refuse it. Some are looking for positive feelings and some spirituality, forgetting that even the prayer becomes a sin for them.

Such searches do not have the smallest connection with the faith. As well as the admonitions like: "You have to accept Christ. You can. **You just have to let Him into your heart!**"

But when the listener hears [the message of the Gospel] and thinks: "That is about me" and "That is for me", then he suddenly has realised, that he just had to receive what is being given as a gift.

When the listener hears [with **an** open heart and mind] about Christ's cross, His Resurrection and that everything is fulfilled, fulfilled for him and on behalf of him, then the listener rejoices, because now the end has come to all his fears, unrest and all worrying about the tomorrow, – he is redeemed, he is atoned before God and belongs to the saved ones. Along with the knowledge of these facts, the listener **has** received the gift of faith.

The Law is written in the heart, covered with dust or hardly readable, but still a man knows at least something of it. The Gospel, on the other hand, is God's hidden knowledge, which is revealed in a special revelation, that a man cannot know by himself, he cannot get to know by himself, and he cannot earn it himself. A man is not and cannot be an active participant in receiving faith.

If for a longer time, it is preached that it is necessary to believe, then the listener may start to see it as a request, or even more – as an irreconcilable precondition. As man by its nature is a merchant, he always thinks what he must do to gain the necessary thing – in this case "the necessary true faith". **No one can believe by himself, but anyone who has come to understand that he is to freely receive and appropriate what is offered to him by God. Faith is the gift and work of God.** To be saved by faith means to acquiesce in God's plan of salvation by simply accepting it.

Lastly, I would like to point out that the one who serves Jesus Christ has several difficult tasks. The hardest one without doubt is to hold to the pure teaching of the Gospel of Christ and to preach it, but as well to refute all that is contrary to it. It is not in vain that confession of faith consists of two parts – from positive and from negative aspect. "We teach" and "we condemn". Even if "we condemn" is not a separate article, then it actually is included in "we confess" part. Christ warned us: "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword." (Mat. 10:34) It is common that if the true teaching is taught, then peace among people cannot be maintained. As soon as this Word is preached, people become divided into two camps: ones accept it with joy, the others – become angry and hate it. Figuratively speaking – the Church here on earth is located in the devil's **territory**; therefore, the Church, the true Church always is a militant church, and so it will be until the end of the world.

The knowledge that religion means true faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who is revealed in the Holy Scriptures, that is because of vicarious atonement of the Saviour of the world and the complete reconciliation between God and man, is right. It seems simple and so it is known and confessed. **But it is not right to think of the Church as consisting of a lot of denominations.** We do so, but it is not a correct solution, because that only complicates the situation. One faith, one Baptism, one God and Father. There is one

doctrine. To think differently means, that **one** actually does not know what he believes in. As well it is wrong to think that his own denomination is one denomination among **other so-called** denominations. The truth is a singular word, all other - human opinions, assumptions, administration and fantasies.

Individualism is not ruling the Church, but theocracy. Confessing his faith in every situation, a man puts himself in the context of the Church. In order not to promote departures from the teaching, one must clearly be aware about the comprehensive meaning of distinguishing the Law and the Gospel. If it is not so, then there is no context of the Church.

Written according by Holy Scripture, Carl F. W. Walther, John Th. Mueller as well as Book of **Concord** for the Conference in Steeden 2018.