

LAW AND GOSPEL

From the Series "A Lutheran Understanding"

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“The distinction between the Law and the Gospel is a particularly brilliant light. It serves the purpose of rightly dividing God’s Word and properly explaining and understanding the Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles.”¹ (SD V)

Martin Luther believed that the key to understanding the Holy Scriptures lay firmly in the understanding of Law and Gospel. Luther writes, “...whoever knows well this art of distinguishing between Law and Gospel, him place at the head and call him a doctor of the Holy Scripture”.² Likewise, the Book of Concord, the collection of Lutheran confessions, contains this same understanding. Philip Melanchthon writes in his response (apology) to the Roman theologians, “All Scripture ought to be distributed into these two principal topics: the Law and the promise. For in some places Scripture presents the Law, and in others the promises of Christ” (Ap IV).³ However, as important as the distinction between the Law and the Gospel is for properly understanding God’s revealed, written Word, many people have a difficult time comprehending the difference. This difficulty is not only a modern day problem, but also existed during the very formation of the Lutheran Confessions. For instance, only thirty years after Luther’s death in 1546, the authors of the Formula of Concord began addressing the controversies arising among followers of Luther concerning the understanding of Law and Gospel.⁴ Why is the Lutheran hermeneutic so difficult for theologians and lay people to understand? Why do Lutherans, to this very day, continue to debate over the understanding of what God has told His people in His Word? The authors of the

¹ Paul Timothy McCain, ed., *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions, A Reader's Edition of the Book of Concord*, Second Edition, Translated by William Hermann Theodore Dau and Gerhard Friedrich Bente, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 552.

² Martin Luther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel: Thirty-Nine Evening Lectures*, Edited by F. W. Walther, Translated by William Hermann Theodore Dau, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1986).

³ (McCain 2006, 83)

⁴ The Formula of Concord Solid Declaration, Article V addresses the Law and Gospel disagreements among theologians of the Augsburg Confession.

Lutheran confessions understood that theologians must first agree on the definition of terms. What is exactly is *the Law* and *the Gospel* Luther wrote about so affectionately?

LAW

Ask five people the definition of God's *Law* and you may receive five different answers.

Is *the Law* defined as only the Ten Commandments, or possibly the whole Old Testament? In order to understand the Law and Gospel distinction, the definition for *the Law* must first be addressed. Lutheran theologians will agree that God gave to His people many laws in the Old Testament, some of which were universal and perpetual, and some which were temporary.⁵ These laws are grouped into the following categories: Ceremonial Law, Judicial Law, and Moral Law.

The Ceremonial Law is the command of God that bound His people to a certain form of external worship and sacrifices.⁶ Within the Ceremonial Law, God regulated the rituals and symbolic actions of worship from His people. He commanded who would be the priests (Lev 21) and the construction requirements for the worship facility (Exo 26). The Old Testament contains these regulations and requirements, with special emphasis in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament. In 70 AD, a siege of Jerusalem by the Romans destroyed the Jewish temple, ceasing the sacrifices and Aaronic line of priests. In addition, the author of the book of Hebrews indicates that these ceremonies and worship facility were only a pattern, or copy, of that which was to come in the future. God was preparing His people for the Mediator of the better

⁵ Heinrich Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Third Edition, revised, Translated by Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 511.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 512.

covenant, His Son Jesus Christ (Heb 8:5-6). Although the priests and the sacrifices of the Old Covenant were divine in origin, they were imperfect and could not take away sin. Only the Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). These ceremonial laws were temporary and ceased with the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. When Luther and the authors of the Lutheran Confessions write of the Law and Gospel distinction, they are not defining *the Law* as having anything to do with the adherence to the Ceremonial Law.

The Judicial Law is the command of God, by which He bound the Israelites in the times of the Old Testament, and through Moses prescribed to them a form of political government, so that external discipline might be preserved in civil society.⁷ The Judicial Law governed and kept order among the Israelite people. Several examples of these Judicial Laws are the laws concerning personal injury (Exo 21) and the laws concerning personal property and social responsibilities (Exo 22). Since Moses received these laws for the benefit and observance of the Israelite nation, they would not be laws structured for people living outside of that nation. Therefore, when Luther and the authors of the Lutheran Confessions write of the Law and Gospel distinction, they are not defining *the Law* as having anything to do with the Judicial Law of the Israelites.

The Moral Law, is the command of God, repeated from the beginning of the world and reduced to writing at Sinai, distinctly teaching what is right and forbidding what is wrong.⁸ This is a divine command, which promises eternal life to those who are able to fulfill completely its requirements and promises eternal torment to those who fail to meet

⁷ *Ibid.*, 512.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 513.

the requirements of perfect obedience. Although the Moral Law was firmly etched into stone on Mount Sinai, Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden knew it. God revealed the Moral Law to them directly from His voice and told them "...but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (Gen 2:17). Luther and the authors of the Lutheran Confessions define *the Law* in this way, the Moral Law. This definition is further solidified by Melanchthon in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession. In Article V, Melanchthon writes, "...by Law we mean the Ten Commandments, wherever they are read in the Scriptures. We say nothing as present about the ceremonies and judicial laws of Moses."⁹

The Law, as defined by the Moral Law, is a divine Doctrine of Works. It is divine because its institution and command come from the Holy God. It is a Doctrine of Works because the promise of the reward of eternal life comes to the one that can perfectly obey the commands. Adam had the ability to live the perfect life and remain obedient to the Law. However, Adam failed and threw himself and all of his descendants into despair. Since Adam's failure, no mere man is able to obey perfectly the Law. Therefore, *the Law* can save no mere man who attempts to follow its rule.

Since no mere man can obey *the Law* perfectly, what is its purpose? *The Law* is a curb, a mirror, and rule. As a curb, *the Law* maintains discipline and decency against people – it keeps order. As a mirror, *the Law* brings about the knowledge of sin to a person. Lastly, as a rule, *the Law* establishes a fixed rule which people may live and walk

⁹ McCain, *Concordia*, 83.

according to God's good plan (SD VI).¹⁰ The Lutheran Reformation restored the proper Biblical understanding of the chief purpose of the Law.¹¹ The Law reveals the fruits of original sin and demonstrates the corrupt nature within mankind. Paul writes in Romans that he knows what he should do, but continues to do what he should not (Rom 7:21-24). This is the Law at work in Paul and reflects the inner-war that rages on inside all people. Man becomes an enemy of God and *the Law* helps him to realize that, if only perfect obedience to *the Law* promises eternal life, we are doomed to torment and Hell. *The Law* brings about a sudden realization that, we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.

GOSPEL

Again, ask five people the definition for *the Gospel* and you may receive five different answers. The authors to the Lutheran Confessions also experienced this problem since they documented two of the prevalent definitions in the Solid Declaration, Article V. Sometimes, *the Gospel* is defined as the entire doctrine of Christ, which He proclaimed in His ministry on earth. This definition would then include His exposition of the Law and repentance. Other times *the Gospel* is defined as only the preaching of God's grace.¹² Lutheran theologians differ on their naming of these two understandings of *the Gospel*. Some refer to the former as the wide or general sense of *the Gospel* and the latter as the narrow or specific sense of *the Gospel*.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 557-558.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 271. Of course, the Lutheran Reformation restored a proper Biblical understanding to all three uses of the Law, but the jewel is to reveal original sin.

¹² The distinction here is that *the Law* is excluded from the second definition.

In the wide or general sense, *the Gospel* designates the whole doctrine of the New Testament, taught by Christ and the Apostles.¹³ The Gospel of Mark begins with “The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). In this sense, the word *Gospel* is referring to all of Christ’s teachings. Mark also records Christ’s preaching as He entered into Galilee saying, “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15). Here again, the word *Gospel* is referring to a succession of acts: repentance and faith. The book of Acts also records the use of the word *gospel* in this manner by Paul while he speaks with the Ephesian elders. Paul testified to the Jews and Greeks that they must turn toward God in repentance and faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 20:21). Although this definition of *the Gospel* is clearly Biblical, Luther and the authors of the Lutheran Confessions do not have in mind this definition when discussing *the Law* and *the Gospel* distinction.

In the narrow or specific sense, *the Gospel* identifies the doctrine of grace and the gratuitous remission of sin obtained by faith in Christ alone, whether proposed in the Old or the New Testament.¹⁴ This is a doctrine preached across the pages of Holy Scripture from Genesis to Revelation. There is no preaching of repentance within this doctrine. Man has nothing to offer to the gracious gift given by God. Paul writes in Romans, quoting from Isaiah, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news” (Rom 10:15). Paul is referring here to *the Gospel* that brings freedom and is contrasted with the bondage brought forth from *the Law*. This is a message that is wonderfully expounded from the pulpit. Yet, not everyone who hears these joyous words comprehends and accepts the effect they bring. Sometimes the words fall on deaf ears.

¹³ Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology*, 517.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 517.

The author of the book of Hebrews writes, “For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith” (Heb 4:2). Luther firmly grasped this definition of *the Gospel* when he wrote, “Anything that preaches about our sins and God’s wrath, that is all a preaching of the Law. Again, the Gospel is such a preaching as shows and gives nothing else than grace and forgiveness in Christ.”¹⁵ It is clear that Luther and the authors of the Lutheran Confession¹⁶ defined *the Gospel* in this, specific, narrow sense when they write of the Law and Gospel distinction.

The Gospel is a divine Doctrine of Grace. It is divine because its institution and command come from the Holy God. It is a Doctrine of Grace because it is a teaching that demonstrates that Christ paid for and made satisfaction for all sins.¹⁷ Christ has gained and acquired for an individual forgiveness of sins, righteousness before God, and eternal life – without any merit or assistance from whom it has been given. Man becomes justified by the blood of Christ and saved from God’s wrath (Rom 5:9). *The Gospel* becomes a teaching that shows what a person who has not kept the Law (and is therefore condemned by it) is to believe.¹⁸ *The Gospel* comforts hearts and minds from the terrors of the Law. It is a joyful message proclaiming the love of God for His people and the lengths He will go to bring them back into His arms.

¹⁵ Martin Luther, WA 22:87, 3-18

¹⁶ Luther’s quote was included in The Formula of Concord Solid Declaration, Article V

¹⁷ McCain, *Concordia*, 484.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 484.

LAW AND GOSPEL

When contemplating the distinction between *the Law* and *the Gospel*, it is important to recognize that they are not synonymous with the Old and New Testament. *The Law* is preached throughout the Old as well as the New Testament. Paul writes on *the Law* throughout his epistles to the churches. For instance, in Romans 7:12 Paul writes, “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.” In addition, Jesus Christ taught *the Law* as recorded in the Gospel of Luke. In Luke’s Gospel, an expert of the Law questioned Christ and asked Him, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” The expert knew the teaching of *the Law*. He knew that perfect obedience to *the Law* would gain him eternal life. Christ responded to the man, “Do this and you will live” (Luke 10:28). *The Gospel* is also preached throughout the Old as well as the New Testament. This is most evident in the protoevangel (literally, “first gospel”) of Genesis 3:15 where the gospel is first revealed. Other presentations of *the Gospel* are witnessed in Abraham’s seed, David’s son, and Psalm 110.

There are similarities to the effects of *the Law* and *the Gospel*. As Schmid recognized in his book *Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, they effect 1) repentance of sinners, 2) renovation of a justified person, and 3) preservation of the renewed man. In repentance of sinners, *the Law* produces contrition in the converting man whereas *the Gospel* enkindles faith in the regenerate man. As Schmid comprehends the Law and Gospel distinction, he acknowledges their mutual effect of repentance. In renovation of a justified person, *the Law* prescribes what is to be done and omitted, while *the Gospel* furnishes strength to enable man to walk in the ways of God. Therefore, Schmid concludes that the Law and Gospel produce one Holy act of

renovation in the regenerate. Lastly, in the preservation of the renewed man, *the Law* moves the renewed man to suppress his carnal desires, while *the Gospel* consoles his mind that grieves under a sense of imperfect obedience.¹⁹

CONCLUSION

The Law and *the Gospel* have always been taught alongside each other in God's church with proper distinction.²⁰ If one preaches too much of *the Law*, the unregenerate (unsaved) people will despair and the regenerate (spiritually born again) people will become terrified of their salvation. If one preaches too much of *the Gospel*, the people will not see the sin in their lives and realize that they must run and cling to Christ. They will lose sight of *the Law* as a rule in their life to assist them in walking in the ways of the Lord. When *the Law* and *the Gospel* are properly taught as distinct and yet similar in their final result (i.e. salvation of man), *the Law* will not lead a man to Christ directly, but indirectly such as a disease will bring man to the knowledge of his inability to heal himself and, thus lead him to a physician – the only one who has the power to heal him.²¹

Luther and the authors of the Lutheran Confessions understood this distinction between *the Law* and *the Gospel*. As Lutherans, it is important for us also to comprehend the similarities and differences between the Doctrine of Works and the Doctrine of Grace, Law and Gospel. This understanding will assist in our interpretation of Holy Scripture and in our discussions concerning God's revealed will. In addition, the study of these

¹⁹ Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology*, 519.

²⁰ McCain, *Concordia*, 556.

²¹ Paraphrased from Hollazius, exact reference unavailable.

two binding revelations from God will bring all Christians into the arms of a loving Lord, Christ Jesus and a desire to live for Him alone.