

LAW AND GOSPEL
IN THE CHURCH TODAY

Handling the Word of Truth

JOHN T. PLESS

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Chapter One

TWO DIFFERENT DOCTRINES

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])

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 (Thesis IV [Walther, 60])

Critics of Christianity have long tried to discredit the faith by attempting to locate differences between various biblical authors. However, they have missed the supreme difference within the Scriptures that Walther points to in his first thesis. God speaks in two fundamentally different ways. He speaks a word of Law that threatens sinners with divine punishment, delivers wrath, and brings death and condemnation. Yet He also speaks a word of Gospel that promises grace to undeserving sinners, bestows forgiveness of sins, and delivers life and salvation. The distinction between these two words of God is nowhere better summarized than in Romans 3 where the apostle Paul writes:

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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)

The purity of the Gospel’s proclamation hinges on the distinction between Law and Gospel. James Nestingen observes:

When Law and Gospel are improperly distinguished, both are undermined. Separated from the Law, the Gospel gets absorbed into an ideology of tolerance in which indiscriminateness is equated with grace. Separated from the Gospel, the Law becomes an insatiable demand hammering away at the conscience until it destroys a person.

When Law and Gospel are properly distinguished, however, both are established. The Law can be set forth in its full-scale demand, so that it lights the way to order and through the work of the Spirit drives us to Christ. The Gospel can be declared in all of its purity, so that forgiveness of sins and deliverance from the powers of death and the devil are bestowed in the presence of our crucified and risen Lord.¹

To distinguish Law from Gospel, one must know how they are different.

Walther observes that Law and Gospel differ in six ways. First, the Law differs from the Gospel by the manner in which it is revealed. The Law is inscribed in the human heart, and though it is dulled by sin, the conscience bears witness to its truth (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, 8). That is why the moral teachings of non-Christian religions are essentially the same

as those found in the Bible. Yet it is different with the Gospel. The Gospel can never be known from the conscience. It is not a word from within the heart; it comes from outside. It comes from Christ alone. "All religions contain portions of the Law. Some of the heathen, by their knowledge of the Law, have advanced so far that they have even perceived the necessity of an inner cleansing of the soul, a purification of the thoughts and desires. But of the Gospel not a particle is found anywhere except in the Christian religion" (Walther, 8). The fact that humanity is alienated from God, in need of cleansing and reconciliation, is a theme common to many belief systems. It is only Christianity that teaches that God Himself justifies the ungodly.

Second, the Law is distinct from the Gospel in regard to content. The Law can only make demands. It tells us what we must do, but it is impotent to redeem us from its demands (Galatians 3:12–14). The Law speaks to our works, always showing that even the best of them are tainted with the fingerprints of our sin and insufficient for salvation. The Gospel contains no demand, only the gift of God's grace and truth in Christ. It has nothing to say about works of human achievement and everything to say about the mercy of God for sinners. "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" (Walther, 9).

Third, the Law and the Gospel differ in the promises that each make. The Law offers great good to those who keep its demands. Think what life would be like in a world where the Ten Commandments were perfectly kept. Imagine a universe where God was feared, loved, and trusted above all things and the neighbor was loved so selflessly that there would be no murder, adultery, theft, lying, or coveting. Indeed, such a world would be paradise. This is what the Law promises. There is only the stipulation that we obey its commands. Do the Law and you will live, says Holy Scripture

(Leviticus 18:5; Luke 10:25–28). The Gospel, by contrast, makes a promise without demand or condition. It is a word from God that does not cajole or manipulate but simply gives and bestows what it says, namely, the forgiveness of sins. Luther defined the Gospel as “a preaching of the incarnate Son of God, given to us without any merit on our part for salvation and peace. It is a word of salvation, a word of grace, a word of comfort, a word of joy, a voice of the bridegroom and the bride, a good word, a word of peace.”² This is the word that the church is to proclaim throughout the world (Mark 16:15–16). It is the message that salvation is not achieved but received by grace through faith alone (Ephesians 2:8–9). The Gospel is a word that promises blessing to those who are cursed, righteousness to the unrighteous, and life to the dead.

Fourth, Law and Gospel are distinct when it comes to threats. Walther puts it simply: “The Gospel contains no threats at all, but only words of consolation. Wherever in Scripture you come across a threat, you may be assured that that passage belongs in the Law” (Walther, 11). The Law threatens sinners with punishment, pronouncing a curse on all who fail to live up to its requirements (Deuteronomy 27:26). The Gospel announces forgiveness for those crushed by the threat of the Law, for Christ Jesus came into the world to rescue the unrighteous (1 Timothy 1:15).

Fifth, the effects of Law and Gospel are different. Walther summarizes the threefold effect of the Law: (1) It demands but does not enable compliance. (2) It hurls people into despair, for it diagnoses the disease but provides no cure. (3) It produces contrition, that is, it terrifies the conscience but offers no comfort. Walther echoes the early Lutheran hymn writer Paul Speratus, who captured the biblical teaching of the Law’s lethal effectiveness:

What God did in his Law demand
 And none to him could render
 Caused wrath and woe on ev’ry hand
 For man, the vile offender.
 Our flesh has not those pure desires
 The spirit of the Law requires,

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And lost is our condition.

It was a false, misleading dream
That God his Law had given
That sinners could themselves redeem
And by their works gain heaven.
The Law is but a mirror bright
To bring the inbred sin to light
That lurks within our nature.³

Public debates have raged over whether or not the Ten Commandments should be displayed in courtrooms and classrooms. Sometimes well-meaning people have argued that placards containing the Ten Commandments would have a positive effect on public morality. Actually, the Scriptures teach that the Law makes matters worse, not better. Knowledge of the Law does not entail the ability to keep it. The Law not only identifies sin but also, like a swift kick to a sleeping dog that arouses the animal to bark and bite, the Law stirs up the power of sin (Romans 7:7–9). The Law brings death, not life, for it is a letter that kills (2 Corinthians 3:6). Without the Gospel, the Law can only be the cause for grief, as it was in the case of the rich young man who thought himself capable of keeping the Law (Matthew 19:22).

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. "[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).

Sixth, Law and Gospel are to be distinguished in relation to the persons who are addressed. “The Law is to be preached to secure sinners and the Gospel to alarmed sinners” (Walther, 17). The secure sinner is the person who glories in his own self-righteousness. In the words of Lutheran theologian Gerhard Forde, the secure sinner is “addicted either to what is base or to what is high, either to lawlessness or to lawfulness. Theologically there is not any difference since both break the relationship to God, the giver.”⁴ Addicted to that which is base, secure sinners will excuse or rationalize their sinful behavior. They will live, to use the words of the confessional prayer, “as if God did not matter and as if I mattered most.”⁵ They will assert that their body and life and that of their neighbors are theirs to do with as they please. Or secure sinners might be addicted to that which is high. Like the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable (Luke 18:9–14), secure sinners will trust in their own righteousness, their self-made spirituality. The sinners who are snug in their own righteousness rehearse the Ten Commandments and conclude that they, like the rich young man in the Gospel narrative, have kept all of these rules and are deserving of God’s approval. To those ensnared in either of these securities, blind to God’s demand for total righteousness, the Law is to be proclaimed full blast so all presumption might be destroyed.

To those who have been crushed by the hammer blows of the Law, no longer secure in their lawlessness or self-righteousness, there is only one word that will do. That is the word of the Gospel. The Gospel is not a recipe for self-improvement. It is that word of God that declares sins to be forgiven for the sake of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. It is all about Christ and what He has done for us. “Law is to be called, and to be, anything that refers to what we are to do. On the other hand, the Gospel, or the Creed, is any doctrine or word of God which does not require works from us and does not command us to do something, but bids us simply accept as a gift the gracious forgiveness of our sins and everlasting bliss offered us” (Walther, 19).

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When Law and Gospel are muddled or mixed, the Holy Scriptures will be misread and misused. Without the right distinction of the Law from the Gospel, the Bible appears to be a book riddled with contradiction. At one place it condemns and at another it pardons. One text speaks of God's wrath visited upon sinners, while another declares His undying love for His enemies. Throughout both the Old and the New Testaments, the Scriptures reveal both God's wrath and His favor. The Scriptures show us a God who kills and who makes alive. This God does so through two different words. With the word of His Law, sinners are put to death. It is only through the word of the Gospel that spiritual corpses are resurrected to live in Jesus Christ. Unlike the Law, the Gospel speaks of Christ's own righteousness that comes not as our accomplishment but as His freely given gift received by faith. According to the Formula of Concord:

The distinction between law and gospel is a particularly glorious light. It serves to divide God's Word properly (cf. 2 Tim. 2:15) and to explain correctly and make understandable the writings of the holy prophets and apostles. Therefore, we must diligently preserve this distinction, so as not to mix these two teachings together and make the gospel into a law. For this obscures the merit of Christ and robs troubled consciences of the comfort that they otherwise have in the holy gospel when it is preached clearly and purely. With the help of this distinction these consciences can sustain themselves in their greatest spiritual struggles against the terror of the law.⁶

Without this distinction, the radiance of the Scriptures is rendered dim, and we are left in doubt about God's mercy for sinners.

The Law tells us about ourselves. What it shows us is not good. It diagnoses the sickness of our sin and puts death before us. The Gospel, on the other hand, shows us the pure grace and favor of God in Jesus Christ. It shows us a God who is not against us but for us, even to the point of death on the cross.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Read Romans 3:19–28. What does Paul tell us about the scope and purpose of the Law? What does Paul tell us about the scope and purpose of the Gospel?
2. How was the Law revealed? Where is the Gospel revealed?
3. How are the Law and Gospel different according to both content and effect?
4. Tolerance has become the chief and perhaps only virtue of the early years of the twenty-first century. How does uncritical tolerance confuse Law and Gospel?
5. Read Matthew 19:16–22. How did the rich young man misuse the Law? Was his problem lawlessness or lawfulness? How did Jesus use the Law to expose this man's sin?
6. Read 2 Timothy 2:15. How are the Scriptures misunderstood without the proper distinction of Law and Gospel? List contemporary examples of erroneous readings of the Bible that fail to distinguish Law and Gospel.
7. Reflect on these words from the Formula of Concord: “For since the proclamation of the law alone, without Christ, either makes presumptuous people, who believe that they can fulfill the law with their outward works, or drives people into total despair, Christ took the law into his own hands and interpreted it spiritually (Matt. 5:21–48 and Rom. 7:6–24). He thus revealed his ‘wrath from heaven’ upon all sinners and how great it is” (Solid Declaration V, 10 [K-W, 583]). Read Matthew 5:21–48 and Romans 7:6–24. How do these passages tell us about the scope and power of the Law?

NOTES

1. James Arne Nestingen, “Distinguishing Law and Gospel: A Functional View” *Concordia Journal* 22 (January 1996): 27.
2. LW 31:231.
3. *Lutheran Worship* 355:2–3.
4. Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 27.
5. *Lutheran Worship*, p. 310.
6. Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration V, 1 (K-W, 581).