The Lutheran Difference
An Explanation & Comparison of Christian Beliefs

General Editor
Edward A. Engelbrecht

Contributing Editors
Robert C. Baker • John P. Hellwege Jr.
Rachel C. Hoyer • Charles P. Schaum

Writers
Armand J. Boehme • William M. Cwirla
Alfonso Espinosa • Korey Maas • Thomas Manteufel
Angus Menuge • Michael Middendorf
Steven P. Mueller • Patra Pfotenhauer
Robert Rossow • Gregory Seltz • Bret Taylor

CONCORDIA PUBLISHING HOUSE • SAINT LOUIS
Contents

List of Comparisons xi

Prefaces xiii

Abbreviations xx

Overview of Christian Denominations xxvi

Overview of the Lutheran Confessions xxvii

I Believe According to the Scriptures

1 God’s Word

Engaging This Topic 3 • Lutheran Facts 4 • And God Said . . . (Proclamation) 5 • Now That’s Inspired! (Inspiration) 10 • God’s Pen Is Mightier Than All! (Authority) 19 • You Have My Word on It! (Inerrancy) 24 • The Word and the Word Made Flesh (Christ-centered) 31 • Lutheran Summary of God’s Word 37

2 Law and Gospel

Engaging This Topic 40 • Lutheran Facts 41 • God’s Word: The Law 42 • God’s Word: The Gospel 48 • Distinguishing Law and Gospel 54 • Applying Law and Gospel 63 • Law, Gospel, and Justification 71 • Law, Gospel, and Sanctification 76 • Lutheran Summary of Law and Gospel 83

I Believe in One God, Father, Almighty

3 God the Father

Engaging This Topic 87 • Changing Views of God 87 • The Unique Teaching of Jesus 88 • Our Father 89 • Lutheran Facts 89 • The Lord Is One! 90 • God of Promise 94 • Our Maker 98 • Our Provider 102 • Our Preserver and Protector 106 • The Mission of God 110 • Lutheran Summary of God the Father 116

4 Creation

Engaging This Topic 119 • Lutheran Facts 120 • Creator and Creation 121 • Creation Out of Nothing 125 • Creation in Six Days 131 • Creation That Is Orderly and Distinct 136 • Creation Fallen from the Creator 142 • Creation and the Gospel 146 • Lutheran Summary of Creation 150
5 Angels and Demons

Engaging This Topic 153 • Lutheran Facts 154 • Angels and Their Beginning 154 • Who and What Are Angels? 158 • Ranks and Numbers of Angels 162 • Good and Evil Angels (Demons) 166 • What Do Evil Angels Do? 171 • The Fall and Original Sin 177 • What Do Good Angels Do? 179 • Lutheran Summary of Angels and Demons 183

6 Marriage and Family

Engaging This Topic 185 • Lutheran Facts 186 • Foundation in Creation 186 • Unique and Distinct 191 • Biblical Intimacy 195 • Exercising Faith and Love 199 • More than Romance 204 • Leaving a Legacy 209 • Homosexuality and Biblical Teaching 214 • Lutheran Summary of Marriage and Family 215

I BELIEVE IN ONE LORD JESUS CHRIST

7 God the Son

Engaging This Topic 219 • Humility and Faith 220 • Lutheran Facts 220 • Eternal God and Promised Messiah 221 • God Became Flesh 225 • Sinless Savior 231 • Sin-Bearer 234 • Theology of the Cross 237 • Risen Savior, Living Lord 239 • Head of the Church and Coming King 243 • Lutheran Summary of God the Son 247

8 Justification and Sanctification

Engaging This Topic 249 • Lutheran Facts 250 • The Curse and the Cure 251 • Stumbling Stone and Cornerstone 256 • Just Words 261 • Creeds, Deeds, and Needs 266 • Dying to Live 271 • Holy, Wholly, Holy 275 • Lutheran Summary of Justification and Sanctification 280

9 Predestination

Engaging This Topic 281 • Lutheran Facts 282 • Chosen from Eternity 283 • For Jesus’ Sake 287 • Not a Dark Cloud 291 • By Grace Alone 294 • Predestination by Lamplight 298 • Lutheran Summary of Predestination 302

I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY SPIRIT

10 The Holy Spirit

Engaging This Topic 307 • Lutheran Facts 308 • The Spirit Speaks 308 • The Spirit of God 313 • Life-giving Spirit 317 • The Spirit of Holiness 321 • Baptized with the Spirit 326 • The Fruit and Gifts of the Spirit 330 • Church, Unity, and Fellowship 334 • Lutheran Summary of the Holy Spirit 337
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11 Daily Prayer</td>
<td>341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging This Topic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran Facts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Father Is Holy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God’s Reign</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Daily Bread</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiveness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God’s Protection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran Summary of Daily Prayer</td>
<td>363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Baptism</td>
<td>367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging This Topic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Headwaters of Baptism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A New Covenant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran Facts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Is Baptism?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Baptism Bestows</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Baptism Does</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why Baptize Infants?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living the New Life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran Summary of Baptism</td>
<td>387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Confession</td>
<td>389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging This Topic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran Facts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repent!</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absolution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keys of the Kingdom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Guilty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Kindest Way to Handle Accusations</td>
<td>411</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran Summary of Confession</td>
<td>413</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 The Lord’s Supper</td>
<td>415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging This Topic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excommunicated by the Pope</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Covert Calvinists</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Agende Controversy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ecumenical Movement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran Facts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Ancient Meal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miracle of Miracles</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Given for You</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fellowship Divine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communion Means Union</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare the Way</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close Communion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Fight for the Church Keys</td>
<td>446</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Priesthood and Ministry</td>
<td>451</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging This Topic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran Facts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptism and Priesthood</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Priesthood at Worship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Priesthood in the World</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Office of the Holy Ministry</td>
<td>466</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualities and Tasks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Call and Ordination</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran Summary of Priesthood and Ministry</td>
<td>483</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Vocation</td>
<td>486</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging This Topic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran Facts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Called to Be Christ’s</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redeemed into Service</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruler of the Realms</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordered by Design</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Great Dance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God at Work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran Summary of Vocation</td>
<td>518</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 Worship</td>
<td>521</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging This Topic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran Facts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The God We Worship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The People Who Worship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Way of the Church</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elements of Christian Worship</td>
<td>536</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When Scripture Is Silent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Bible in Worship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Psalms in Worship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran Summary of Worship</td>
<td>554</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
18 End Times

Engaging This Topic 556 • Prophecy Buffs 557 • Lutheran Facts 559 • The Mysterious Veil 559 • Recognize the Signs 563 • Love His Appearing 567 • The Millennial Reign 571 • Judgment Day 575 • Heaven or Hell? 579 • Lutheran Summary of the End Times 582

BERGENDOFF’S CHURCH OF THE LUTHERAN REFORMATION 587

1 Rediscovery of the Gospel 589

Introduction 589 • Luther’s Early Life and Education 589 • In the Erfurt Monastery 590 • Lecturer at the University of Wittenberg 590 • Righteousness by Faith 591 • The Ninety-five Theses 591 • Excommunication from Rome 593

2 Steps toward Reform 594

The Bible for Everyone 594 • A Pleasant Rebellion 595 • Visitation in the Parishes 596 • The “Loci” and the Catechisms 596 • From Worms to Augsburg 597 •

3 Breakup of Church and State 599

Problems of the Empire 599 • Formation of Alliances 600 • The Victory of Charles and the Interim 600 • Lutheran Victories at Passau and Augsburg 602

4 The Church Anew, beyond Germany 603

Bohemia 603 • Hungary 603 • Poland 604 • Riga, Latvia, Estonia 604 • Denmark 605 • Norway and Iceland 606 • Sweden 606 • Finland 608

5 The Constitution of the Lutheran Church 609

Melanchthon 609 • Corpus Doctrinae 610 • The Book of Concord and Its Acceptance 611

6 The Appeal to Arms 613

The Thirty Years’ War 613 • Gustavus Adolphus 614 • Devastation and Peace 615 • Lutheran Lands 615

7 The Universal Priesthood and Pietism 617

Devotional Literature 617 • Spener and Franke 617 • Pietism in Germany 618 • Pietism in Denmark, Norway, Iceland 619 • Sweden and Finland 620 • Pietism in Eastern Europe 621 • Zinzendorf 622 • Radical Pietism 622 • Fruits of Pietism 622
8 New Ideas of Man and Society
  Rationalism and Biblical Faith 624 • The Enlightenment in Denmark 625 • The Enlightenment in Norway and Iceland 626 • The Enlightenment in Sweden 626 • The Enlightenment in Finland 627

9 Mission and Migration
  Roman Catholic and Protestant Missions 629 • Swedish Missions—Lappland and on the Delaware 630 • Lutheran Migration to North America 630 • Danish Missions in India and West Indies 630 • Eastern Europe—Hungary 631 • Austria 632 • Prussia 632 • Poland 633 • Russian Lands 633 • A Missionary Church 634

10 The Quest for Freedom
  Introduction 635 • The Prussian Union 636 • Opposition to Union 636 • Württemberg 637 • Bavaria 638 • Lay Movements 638 • The Danish Church 639 • The Church in Sweden 640 • The Church in Norway and Iceland 642 • The Church in Finland 643

11 New Plantings on Five Continents
  The Missionary Movement 644 • Scandinavian Missions 645 • The American Field—The General Synod 647 • Lohe’s Missionaries and the Missouri Synod 647 • The Iowa Synod 648 • The Buffalo Synod 648 • Norwegian Synods 648 • The Augustana Synod and Danish Synods 649 • Finnish and Icelandic Synods 649 • The Slovak Synod 650 • Americanization and Movements toward Unity 650 • American Overseas Missions 651 • South America 651 • Australia 652 • Mission and Unity 652

12 The Shaking of the Foundations
  Years of Crises 653 • The Church and Hitler 654 • Dietrich Bonhoeffer 655 • Lutherans on Eastern Borders 656 • Lutherans in Baltic Lands 656 • The Scandinavian Churches 657 • Mergers in American Lutheranism 658 • American Lutheran Conferences 659 • The National Lutheran Council 659 • Lutherans in Asia 660 • Lutherans in Africa 661 • Lutherans in South America 661 • Lutherans in Australia 662
13 Global Lutheran Fellowships

The General Lutheran Conference 663 • The Evangelical Federation 664 • The Lutheran World Convention 664 • The Lutheran World Federation 664 • The VELKD and the EKD 665 • Minority Churches in the East 665 • Scandinavian Churches 667 • Further Mergers in the USA 667 • Autonomy and Fellowship 669

14 Ecumenical Efforts and the Future Lutheran Church 671

National Christian Councils and the World Council of Churches 671 • Confessions and Ecumenicity 672 • Lutherans and Vatican Council II (1962–65) 672 • Late Twentieth Century Movements and Mergers 673 • Confessional Renewal 674 • Epilogue 675

Glossary 677

Scripture Index 695
List of Comparisons

Absolution 399
Angels 157, 171
Atonement 233, 237
Baptism 96, 329, 373, 377, 380, 383
Bread, Daily 353
Christ 223
Church and State 502, 529
Confirmation 386
Conversion 275
Counseling 410
Creation 101, 135
Creeds, Historic 93, 229, 524
Death 561
Doctrine, Source of 8
End Times 246, 566, 570, 574
Ethical Systems 140
Evolution 145
Faith 362
Gifts, Spiritual 334
God 123
Heaven and Hell 582
Holy Spirit 317, 320, 535
Justification 255, 260, 270, 297, 320, 491
Keys, The 404, 502
Kingdom of God 350
Law and Gospel 46, 52, 61, 69, 75
Lord’s Supper 421, 426, 430, 434, 437, 441
Prayer 347, 356, 359, 552
Predestination 286, 290, 297
Priesthood and Ministry 456, 461, 465, 472, 477, 482
Providence 105
Repentance 394
Resurrection 242, 578
Sanctification 82, 279, 325, 359
Scripture 18, 23, 36, 265, 312
Vocation 109, 516
Works, Good 497
Worldviews 30, 149
Worship 540, 546
Preface to the Reformation Anniversary Edition

“I thought she was going to kiss me,” said my teenage son after we visited a Roman Catholic mass.

In the midst of the service, the congregation paused for the Greeting of the Peace and, unlike my son’s experience at our home church, he noticed that couples around the sanctuary were actually kissing one another on the lips rather than just shaking hands. When a middle-aged woman turned to greet him, he experienced a moment’s panic. However, she simply extended her hand and wished him God’s peace—what a relief! Only afterward did he recognize that the persons kissing one another were married couples, and that everyone else was just shaking hands.

Visiting other churches is a remarkable learning experience; it can not only relieve a person from misunderstandings, but also amplify the sense of just how differently Christians may believe and practice their faith. To prepare this Reformation anniversary edition of The Lutheran Difference, I led my family on a pilgrimage to other churches in our area and then discussed with them the differences we experienced. (It only seemed fair to actually visit other Christians before writing about them; it’s amazing how much you learn from talking with people directly, listening to them, and setting aside your assumptions.) My wife and I were so grateful for the kind welcome we received at each church and for the fact that the Scripture and the Gospel were likewise proclaimed. In this preface, I will share a few of our experiences.

Denominations and Change

A church’s teaching remains the most important factor in affecting whether a person will join or leave (Barna Group, “Three Major Faith and Culture Trends for 2014,” online article). Yet those studying the sociology of American churches are also concluding that differences between denominations are declining. They believe that segments of American churches are becoming more and more like one another.

For example, after surveying churches for core beliefs, the Barna Group concluded that the differences between Roman Catholics and
mainline Protestants are growing smaller and are almost negligible. On a different note, as our family visited a variety of liturgical churches, we were also struck by the number of common elements in the services, and even common texts and tunes as denominational hymnals influenced one another. Also, the organ prelude at the Catholic basilica was by J. S. Bach—a serious Lutheran; several of the Protestant churches sang the same popular Christian song that we heard broadcast on a local Christian radio station. However, one experience revealed a shocking difference. When attending an Episcopal service, we listened as the priest and the congregation recited together the Apostles’ Creed and the Lord’s Prayer. To our surprise, persons seated around us substituted the word “God” for “Father” and “God’s only Son” for “His only Son,” etc., avoiding the use of any masculine references to God. Even as conservative liturgical trends and Christian radio might influence congregational practices, liberal theology might chip away at core texts of the faith.

Although researchers suggest that what a church believes is the most important factor in whether or not people attend and stay there, I would suggest that practice is at least as important as doctrine. Doctrine and practice, of course, intertwine. But what churches profess and what they practice can also be quite different. I find that the laity especially identify churches by their practices while remaining less conscious of differences in belief. People will say things like, “Roman Catholics kneel when they pray; Protestants don’t.” This is not true, of course, but is easily concluded if you have limited experiences with other Christians. Musical choice is a huge factor in congregational practice. As we visited other churches, we most often heard them sing to piano and organ, guitar and drums. Yet the Coptic Christians used a small set of cymbals and a triangle to accompany their chants, which sounded so incredibly Near Eastern to our American ears. And sometimes Christians do the same or similar things for very different reasons. The Pentecostals were kicking off their shoes so they could more easily dance; the Copts kicked off their shoes to go to the Sacrament (shoes in Near Eastern culture are considered unclean; cf. Exodus 3:5!).

In 2001, the Barna Group noticed a trend toward similarities among Pentecostal, Charismatic, and nondenominational Christians who increasingly share similar beliefs. They also noted that people are picking and choosing what they want to believe, leading to “an age of theological anarchy” as broader influences reach individual members (“Religious Beliefs Vary Widely by Denomination,” Barna Group, June 25, 2001 online article).

Among advocates of church growth, other factors are increasingly more important than one’s denominational heritage. For example, Dr. Timothy Keller, founder and senior pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, writes in “Leadership and Church Size Dynamics” that the differences between how large and small churches work may
be much greater than differences between denominations (2010 online article, www.sermoncentral.com). He suggests that when a church staff member moves from a small church to a large church, the change may feel like entering a different denomination.

In contrast, the Barna Group concluded that people’s expectations and experiences are very similar no matter what kind of church they attend or how large the congregation is. They are looking to connect with God, transform their lives, gain spiritual insights, feel cared for, and help those less fortunate than themselves (See “What People Experience in Churches,” Barna Group, January 9, 2012 online article). Such sociological approaches search for the views of individuals rather than focus on their affiliation with a denomination; these short surveys likely homogenize the views they explore.

**Denominational Distinctives**

Despite the surveys and observations of sociologists, churches are retaining their denominational or tradition-specific differences. For example, we witnessed the following on our visits:

The Armenian Apostolic Orthodox had their Badarak service—in Armenian, no less!

The Baptists carried their Bibles to church and had an altar call.

The Coptic Orthodox prayed in English, Coptic, and Arabic, requesting the blessings of the saints more than anyone else we visited. The men sat on one side and the women on the other.

The Episcopalians used the Book of Common Prayer and accommodated various theologies.

The Lutherans calmly preached Law and Gospel and had the shortest Greeting of Peace among the Protestants.

The megachurch did everything pop-culture big and had a group dancing to a Michael Jackson song (I am not kidding!).

The Methodists just prayed to experience the love of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The pastor began his sermon by decrying the social gospel, which influenced them deeply.

The Pentecostals worshiped ecstatically, danced, and spoke in tongues. Their worship leader was rockstar talented.

The Presbyterians prayed for their hearts to ascend to heaven and commune with Jesus’ presence there.

The Roman Catholics said mass in a grand setting, prayed to the saints, and even chanted a little bit in Latin.

The fact that many of the large Protestant churches were using big screens to display lyrics for their songs did not blunt their differences in
belief and emphasis. The fact that all the liturgical churches had some form of the Greeting of the Peace hardly made them all the same, as my son is sure to tell you. Although North American denominations may grow more alike in some respects, anyone visiting them or interacting with their members will need some account of how and why Christians are different, which is why *The Lutheran Difference* became such a popular Bible Study series and a book.

500 YEARS OF REFORMATION AND COUNTING

Without question, congregations and denominations of the twenty-first century are different from those of the sixteenth century when the Reformation was so needed. The ecumenical movement during the twentieth century increased dialogue among Christians worldwide. Vatican II (1962–65) brought substantive changes to Roman Catholic practice and attitudes, which is evident when you visit their services. Such changes have led some to wonder whether the Reformation still matters 500 years later.

The Reformation still matters for many of the same reasons it did so many years ago, in particular because there is an ever-pressing need to keep the Gospel of forgiveness and new life in Christ at the center of the Christian faith. The experience of ancient Israel should inspire Lutheran vigilance. Throughout biblical history, we see how Israel experienced reform only to fall back into beliefs and practices that drew them away from the Lord. God’s people needed ongoing reform as the biblical books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles powerfully attest. Although I may write with joy that our family repeatedly heard other Christians confess their faith in Christ as the Savior from sin whenever we visited other denominations, I may also attest that the message of Christ was not always central. Churches are always tempted to make other things—authority, healing, prosperity, popularity, relevance, unity, emotion, or tradition—the center of their mission and message. The Reformation cuts through all these and lays the focus upon Christ and reconciliation through Him as the mission of the Church. What hinders reconciliation to the Lord requires reform, no matter how dear it may be to our prevailing culture.

CONCLUSION

As you study this Reformation anniversary edition, pray for personal reform as well as ongoing reformation for your church. Through faith, hope, and love, the Lord dearly wants to transform our lives and our life together so that the Gospel prevails and prospers among us (1 Corinthians 13:13). Love and celebrate your church as you listen to and interact with other Christians. Lutherans have so much to share with the world in 2017 and beyond.
Preface to the First Edition

On Believing and Living
as a Lutheran Christian

I ask that men make no reference to my name; let them call themselves Christians, not Lutherans. . . . But if you are convinced that Luther's teaching is in accord with the gospel . . . then you should not discard Luther so completely, lest with him you discard also his teaching, which you nevertheless recognize as Christ's teaching. You should rather say: Whether Luther is a rascal or a saint I do not care; his teaching is not his, but Christ's.

—Martin Luther, 1522 (AE 45:70–71; 36:265)

In an age that encourages nondenominationalism, using the name “Lutheran” may seem out of place. Some might even charge that it is wrong or sinful to use the name. But to my thinking, it is important to say clearly what you believe about Jesus Christ and His Word. The name “Lutheran” is shorthand for getting to those facts. It simply means, “I agree with Luther,” whose teaching has been well-known for nearly five hundred years.

Calling yourself “nondenominational” became popular in the late twentieth century. But the idea stems from nineteenth-century movements that encouraged people to call themselves simply “Christians” in the hope of uniting all of Christendom. Those efforts failed and actually resulted in an increased number of denominations!

Ironically, nondenominationalism is likewise causing an increase in the number of denominations. Ed Stetzer, director of Lifeway Research, notes that as today’s nondenominational churches grow, they form memberships and associations that have many of the characteristics of existing denominations (e.g., the Willow Creek Association, the Association of Related Churches, and the Acts 29 Network).1 Stetzer also points out that nondenominational churches may undergo rapid changes in doctrine, noting an example of a megachurch in Tulsa, Oklahoma, that quickly turned from charismatic beliefs to unitarian beliefs. While emerging

---

denominations are going through these changes, liberal denominations
and organizations that formed from mergers in the twentieth century are
now going bust. With all these changes, people today want the facts about
Christianity, and they want to know why those facts matter. That is what
this book is all about.

FROM SERIES TO BOOK

This book began as a popular Bible Study series. We originally planned
to cover some basic topics of Christian doctrine but found that people
were so excited about the content and presentation that we extended the
number to eighteen booklets. In this new work, we gather together all the
rich content of the series, order it around the Nicene Creed, and present it
in one accessible volume so readers can access the facts they need based on
actual church documents compared with the teachings of Scripture.

As Lutherans interact with other Christians, they often find them-
selves struggling to explain their beliefs and practices. Although many
Lutherans have learned the “what” of the doctrines of the Church, they do
not always have a full scriptural foundation to share the “why.” When con-
fronted with different doctrines or denominations, they sometimes cannot
clearly state their faith—much less understand the differences.

Because of insecurities about explaining particular doctrines or prac-
tices, some Lutherans may avoid opportunities to share what they have
learned from Christ and His Word. *The Lutheran Difference* identifies
how Lutherans differ from other Christians and shows from the Bible
why Lutherans differ. Such information will prepare Lutherans to share
their faith clearly; it will help non-Lutherans understand the Lutheran
difference.

LUTHERAN FOCUS

The first church built on the basis of Luther’s teaching from Scripture
provides a powerful illustration of the Lutheran difference: the Castle
Church at Torgau, Germany. The Reformation stands at the end of the
medieval or Gothic period, when most churches were ornately decorated
as though the designers were trying to fill every surface with illustration or
ornament. The churches often had numerous altars dedicated to a variety of
saints. The Baroque era follows the Reformation with a similar florid style.
These styles give the eye and mind little rest. In stark contrast, iconoclasts
of the sixteenth century hacked away the medieval designs, destroyed the
imagery, and tore out the organs. They went from one extreme to the other.
Amid these extremes, Luther gave instructions for the design of the Torgau church. The ornamentation is focused on the pulpit and the altar from which one learns of Christ in the words of Scripture and in the blessed Sacrament of His body and blood. The eye and mind can focus and rest on Christ and His Word. The design is brilliant in simplicity and emphasis. This became characteristic of Lutheran devotion and art.

**Lutherans Confess Christ**

All who worship the Holy Trinity and trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins are regarded by Lutherans as fellow Christians, despite denominational (or nondenominational!) differences. This is an exciting time to be Lutheran, given the remarkable growth of our churches in South American and Africa and the growing strength of traditional Lutheran bodies in the International Lutheran Council, which formed at a 1993 meeting in Antigua, Guatemala. Philip Jenkins, who is the Edwin Earle Sparks Professor of History and Religious Studies at Pennsylvania State University, has noted this rapidly increasing number of new Lutherans in *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. Jenkins highlighted changes in East Africa, where Lutheran groups have grown by 9 to 15 percent each year.² How exciting to see these new Lutherans boldly confessing Christ!

Lutheran churches first described themselves as *evangelisch* or “evangelical churches” (literally, “Gospel churches”). Opponents of these churches called them “Lutheran” after Dr. Martin Luther, the sixteenth-century German Church reformer. The general populace began to use the name too. It became so common and widespread that our churches have used the name *Lutheran* ever since. However, Lutherans are not disciples of Dr. Martin Luther, but disciples of Jesus Christ. They are, as Dr. Gene Edward Veith puts it, “the first evangelicals.”³ They proudly accept the name *Lutheran* because they agree with Dr. Luther’s teaching from the Bible, as summarized in Luther’s Small Catechism (1529), which is the most widely and continuously used summary of Christian teaching since the ancient creeds.

In Christ,

Rev. Edward A. Engelbrecht, STM

Senior Editor of Professional and Academic Books and Bible Resources

Concordia Publishing House

---

# Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AC</td>
<td>Augsburg Confession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ap</td>
<td>Apology of the Augsburg Confession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESV</td>
<td>English Standard Version of the Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FC Ep</td>
<td>Formula of Concord, Epitome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FC SD</td>
<td>Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KJV</td>
<td>King James Version of the Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LC</td>
<td>Large Catechism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LCMS</td>
<td>The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIV</td>
<td>New International Version of the Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SA</td>
<td>Smalcald Articles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC</td>
<td>Small Catechism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tr</td>
<td>Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overview
of Christian Denominations

The following outline of Christian history will help you understand where the different denominations come from and how they are related to one another. This outline may be used in connection with the “Comparisons” sections found throughout the book. Statements of belief for the different churches are drawn from their official confessional writings.

This outline and the “Comparisons” sections are based on documents such as the Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent and The Westminster Confession of Faith. How can these older texts still characterize today’s denominations? First, many of these documents have not been repealed and therefore remain in force. They define the long-standing doctrinal positions of today’s churches. Second, many of these documents have served as conversation partners for the Book of Concord, the doctrinal confessions of the Lutheran Church. Awareness of such conversations helps Lutherans better understand their own beliefs.

The documents quoted in the “Comparisons” sections may cause people to wrestle with possible differences between personal beliefs and the publicly stated beliefs of their church body. Yet God calls His people to believe the Gospel and His truth revealed in Scripture. That remains the final standard of all comparisons shown here.

The Great Schism

Eastern Orthodox: On July 16, 1054, Cardinal Humbert entered the Cathedral of the Holy Wisdom in Constantinople just before the worship service. He stepped to the altar and left a letter condemning Michael Cerularius, patriarch of Constantinople. Cerularius responded by condemning the letter and its authors. In that moment, Christian churches of the East and the West were severed from each other. Their disagreements centered on what kind of bread could be used in the Lord’s Supper and the addition of the filioque statement to the Nicene Creed. This addition says the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father “and the Son.”
THE REFORMATION

Lutheran: On June 15, 1520, Pope Leo X wrote a letter condemning Dr. Martin Luther for his Ninety-five Theses. Luther’s theses had challenged the sale of indulgences, a fund-raising effort to pay for the building of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. Luther’s challenge struck directly at the papal teaching concerning the authority of Scripture, the nature of the sacraments, the suppression of the Gospel in favor of church regulations, and the papal claim that doctrines absent from Scripture remain necessary for salvation. The pope’s letter charged Luther with heresy and threatened to excommunicate him if he did not retract his writings within sixty days. Luther replied by publicly burning the letter. Leo excommunicated him on January 3, 1521, and condemned all who agreed with Luther or supported his cause.

Reformed: In 1522 the preaching of Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich, Switzerland, convinced people to break their traditional Lenten fast. Also, Zwingli preached that priests should be allowed to marry. Zwingli claimed that Word and Sacraments have a mere symbolic value. He said that God uses only the direct action of the Holy Spirit in the heart and divine providence. When local friars challenged these departures from medieval church practice, the Zurich Council supported Zwingli that the Bible should guide Christian doctrine and practice. Zwingli influenced Reformed churches in Switzerland and laid the foundation for John Calvin. Calvin and other Reformed theologians admitted that Word and Sacraments are more than just symbols, but they still differed greatly from Lutherans on the Lord’s Supper and predestination. Churches of the Reformed tradition include Presbyterians and Episcopalians.

Anabaptist: In January 1525, Conrad Grebel, a follower of Ulrich Zwingli, rebaptized Georg Blaurock. Blaurock began rebaptizing others and founded the Swiss Brethren. Their insistence on adult believers’ Baptism distinguished them from other churches of the Reformation. Anabaptists attracted social extremists who advocated violence in the cause of Christ, complete pacifism, or communal living. Mennonite, Brethren, and Amish churches descend from this movement.

THE COUNTER-REFORMATION

Roman Catholic: When people call the medieval church “Roman Catholic,” they make a common historical mistake. Roman Catholicism as we know it emerged after the Reformation. As early as 1518, Luther and
other reformers had appealed to the pope and requested a council to settle the issue of indulgences. Their requests were hindered or denied for a variety of theological and political reasons. Finally, on December 13, 1545, thirty-four leaders from the churches who opposed the Reformation gathered at the invitation of Pope Paul III. They began the Council of Trent (1545–63), which established the doctrine and practice of Roman Catholicism.

**Post-Reformation Movements**

**Baptist:** In 1608 or 1609, John Smyth, a former pastor of the Church of England, baptized himself by pouring water over his head. In Holland, because of English persecution during the reign of James I, he formed a congregation of English Separatists who opposed the rule of bishops and infant Baptism. This marked the start of the English Baptist churches, which remain divided doctrinally over the “no-will” predestination theology of John Calvin (Particular Baptists) and the “free-will” theology of Jacob Arminius (General Baptists). Arminius influenced the Wesleys (see below). In the 1800s, the Restoration Movement of Alexander Campbell, a former Presbyterian minister, adopted many Baptist teachings. These churches include the Disciples of Christ (Christian Churches) and the Churches of Christ.

**Wesleyan:** In 1729, John and Charles Wesley gathered with three other men to study Scripture, receive Communion, and discipline one another according to the “method” laid down in the Bible. Later, John Wesley’s preaching caused religious revivals in England and North America. As among the Baptists, both Calvin and Arminius have left their legacies among Methodists, Wesleyans, Nazarenes, and Pentecostals that form the Wesleyan family of churches.

**Liberal:** In 1799, Friedrich Schleiermacher published *Addresses on Religion* in an attempt to make Christianity appealing to people influenced by rationalism. He argued that religion is not a body of doctrines, provable truths, or a system of ethics, but it belongs to the realm of feelings. His ideas did not lead to the formation of a new denomination, but they did deeply influence Christian thinking. Denominations most thoroughly affected by liberalism are the United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, and Unitarianism.
Overview of the Lutheran Confessions

For nearly five hundred years, Lutherans have used the eight documents and the three creeds gathered into the Book of Concord, popularly known as “the Lutheran Confessions,” as a public witness and testimony of what the Bible teaches. These statements of faith provide clear, unambiguous, and certain witness to the Christian faith. Throughout The Lutheran Difference, reference is made to these documents. The following provides a brief introduction and historical context for the documents. For more information, see Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia, 2006).

The Creeds

Historic Christianity confesses the faith through the words of three ancient creeds: the Apostles’ (the baptismal creed), the Nicene (confesses the equality of the persons of the Trinity), and the Athanasian (confesses the teaching of the Trinity and the person and work of Jesus Christ). Lutherans speak these creeds in their worship and use these texts to frame their discussion of the faith. The inclusion of these three ancient creeds in the Book of Concord demonstrates that Lutherans are not a sect but confess the orthodox Christian faith.

The Augsburg Confession of 1530

Holy Roman Emperor Charles V invited the Lutheran princes and theologians to a gathering in the German city of Augsburg to discuss settling the religious controversy arising from Dr. Martin Luther’s writings. The resolution was considered necessary to ensure the Lutheran princes would help with the military effort to keep the Turks out of Europe. Philip Melanchthon, a lay associate of Dr. Luther, wrote the Augsburg Confession to clarify what the Lutherans believed. Melanchthon summarized Lutheran teaching from the Bible, addressed the controversies of the day, and identified the abuses that the Lutherans corrected. This confession remains a standard of Lutheran teaching.
OVERVIEW OF THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS  xxv

APOLOGY OF THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION
Published in 1531, the Apology (or defense) was also written by Philip Melanchthon. It was prepared as a response to the Romanist theologians Confutation (or reply) to the Augsburg Confession. The Apology defends the Lutheran position as defined in the Augsburg Confession and further explains Lutheran beliefs.

THE SMLCALD ARTICLES
On June 4, 1536, Pope Paul III announced that a council of the church would be held in Mantua in 1537 to address the issues raised by the Protestants. The elector (or prince) of Saxony asked Luther to prepare some articles for discussion at this council. Although they were never used at the council, Lutherans recognized the value of these talking points as statements of belief on which they would stand fast. The articles also identify areas of churchly practice in which compromise might be possible.

THE TREATISE ON THE POWER AND PRIMACY OF THE POPE
Philip Melanchthon also prepared this document, which was originally presented as a treatise at the same gathering at which the Smalcald Articles first appeared. It is actually an appendix to the Augsburg Confession, and it states the Lutheran perspective on the office of the pope.

SMALL CATECHISM AND LARGE CATECHISM
Luther wrote his Small Catechism, or little manual for Christian instruction, in 1528. His intention was to give heads of households, normally fathers, a booklet for teaching the basics of the Christian faith to all those under their care. The Large Catechism is actually a collection of sermons preached by Luther in 1528. These sermons were edited into book form and expand the topics of the Small Catechism. Both Luther’s Small and Large Catechisms were first published in 1529 and have been used by the Lutheran Church in the instruction of youth and adults for nearly five hundred years.

FORMULA OF CONCORD
Following Luther’s death in 1546, confusion disrupted the Lutheran churches. Some wished to compromise on matters of doctrine in order to attain greater peace and unity with Calvinists and Roman Catholics.
Others claimed to be true Lutherans but strayed from Luther’s teaching. In 1576, Elector August of Saxony called a conference to clarify the issues. The result was the Formula of Concord (concord means “harmony”), published in 1580. The Solid Declaration is the unabridged version; the Epitome is an abridged version intended for congregational study.

**General Lutheran Facts**

Although all Christian churches use Holy Scripture, Lutherans emphasize that Scripture is the final and only certain judge of doctrine and practice (sola scriptura)—not human traditions, reason, or churchly authority.

Lutherans confess the three ecumenical creeds (Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian) as correct summaries of biblical teaching.

Lutherans form the largest family of Protestants, numbering more than sixty million worldwide.

Today, Lutheran churches are growing fastest in Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Papua New Guinea.

Among Protestant denominations, Lutherans tend to have greater unity. For example, there are fourteen Lutheran denominations in North America. In contrast, other denominational families (Reformed, Anabaptist, Baptist, etc.) have at least twice that number.
I BELIEVE
ACCORDING TO THE SCRIPTURES
Engaging This Topic

“If there is only one Bible, why are there so many different denominations?”

“Why do churches agree on some points and disagree on others?”

“Which interpretation of this Bible verse is correct?”

We rely on assumptions to interpret, or understand, any form of writing. The same is true for the Bible. We use what we already believe to help us understand God’s Word. For example, if we believe our God can and does accomplish miracles in the created world, we accept the biblical stories of Jonah and Lazarus as historically true. However, if we believe God cannot or does not work this way, we may assume these accounts to be fictional stories created by authors trying to prove some spiritual point. If we hold that Jesus is both fully divine and fully human, we accept His death on the cross as the sacrificial atonement for our sins. On the other hand, if we believe that Christ was simply a remarkable human being, we may suppose this teaching to have been developed by pious Christians in order to preserve the collective memory of the Master.

Lutherans maintain assumptions in interpreting the Holy Scriptures. In the Scriptures, Christ points to the truthfulness, reliability, and perfection of God’s Word (see Matthew 4:4; 5:17; Mark 12:24–27; Luke 4:21; 24:27, 44; John 5:39; 10:35; 17:17). Because the Holy Spirit gives faith in Christ as our Savior, and because He directs us to God’s Word, Lutherans seek to

---

1 This chapter adapted from The Lutheran Difference: God’s Word, written by Michael Middendorf, with contributions by Robert C. Baker. Copyright © 2004 Concordia Publishing House.
interpret the Bible with humility, relying on the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit as He leads us to Christ.

Lutheran assumptions in biblical interpretation can be summarized as follows:

1. God’s Word, because it is His Word, is without error (John 10:35; 17:17, 2 Timothy 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:21). This means that the Bible cannot lie or deceive (Psalm 19:7; 119:7; John 10:35; 17:17; Romans 3:4; 2 Timothy 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:21) and that God’s Word is the only rule for faith and life (Psalm 119:105; 1 Corinthians 4:6; Galatians 1:6–9).

2. Christ is the heart and center of God’s Word (John 5:39; Acts 10:43). This means the doctrine of justification by God’s grace through faith in Christ is the chief doctrine of the Scriptures (John 3:16–17; Galatians 4:4–5; Hebrews 2:14–17; 1 Timothy 1:15). Also, Christians should carefully distinguish Law and Gospel (John 1:17; 2 Corinthians 3:6).

3. The Holy Spirit helps us to understand God’s Word (Psalm 119:73; John 14:26; 1 Corinthians 2:14). This means difficult passages of Scripture are to be interpreted by other, clearer passages (Acts 17:11). Also, as we read Scripture, in humility we derive the plain meaning of words from their literal sense, unless clearly directed otherwise by context (2 Timothy 3:15).

Sometimes it is difficult to understand why, if everyone is using the same Bible, there are different teachings among denominations. The differences do not reside in the written text, that is, the shapes formed by ink on paper. Rather, the differences lie primarily in the assumptions made by the readers. The Lutheran Difference will compare and contrast the Lutheran assumptions of biblical interpretation with those of other church bodies and with your own personal assumptions.

**Lutheran Facts**

Lutherans believe the Bible is God’s inspired and inerrant (without error) Word. The Book of Concord refers to the “unchanging” and “infallible” truth of God’s Word, which “cannot and will not fail us” (Preface to the Book of Concord 20; FC Ep XI 14; Concordia, pp. 9, 499). In his Large Catechism, Luther confesses: “God’s Word cannot err” (LC IV 57; Concordia, p. 429). He urges us to believe the Scriptures, because “they will not lie to you” (LC V 76; Concordia, p. 439).

The Word of God permeates Lutheran worship services. The liturgy is full of direct quotations from Scripture. Hymns, if not quoting the Bible
directly, paraphrase passages and themes. Sermons are based on specific texts of God’s Word.

Lutherans also emphasize teaching God’s Word to children and adults. Memorization of Bible passages is emphasized in Lutheran schools, Sunday schools, adult Bible studies, and at home.

Lutherans believe that God’s Word exposes the deepest thoughts and desires of the human heart (Hebrews 4:12). At the same time, it powerfully gives new birth through the Gospel (1 Peter 1:23). Because of this, Lutherans believe that God’s Word of Gospel is a Means of Grace.

**AND GOD SAID . . .**

Marcellus: “Shall I strike at it with my [long, heavy sword]?”
Horatio: “Do, if it will not stand.”
Bernardo: “’Tis here!”
Horatio: “’Tis here!”
Marcellus: “’Tis gone!”

—William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 1

The ghost of Hamlet’s father disappears at will and reappears, only to have his son avenge his murder. Like the ghost, the gods of most religions seem interested in humanity only when it suits their own purposes. Selfish and self-serving, they enter and exit the stage of human history at their convenience.

Is there a God? How do we know? How can we know what God is like? How does God relate to people in general and to me specifically? Questions such as these are at the heart of almost every religion, including Christianity. The answers to these questions also form the heart and basis of our lives.

We often hear: “Actions speak louder than words,” but do they really? Consider your own interactions with family members, co-workers, or friends. Do you learn more about people from what they say or by what they do? Now consider your own words and actions. Do they always agree? In the case of the God of the Scriptures, His words often speak louder than, or at least as loud as, His actions.
If God had not spoken to us through Scripture, would we know there is a God? The apostle Paul tells us in Romans 1:19–20 that God’s existence, eternal power, and divine nature are clearly seen in the creation around us. Thus even though God does not speak in words that we hear with our ears, the heavens and skies declare God’s glory (Psalm 19:1–4). Both of these passages emphasize that the natural world reveals that there must be a God—and every human being is exposed to this reality. But we have more than just visual clues in nature to tell us that there is a God.

Already in Genesis 1, God spoke. In fact, on each day of creation Scripture records that “God said,” and then things actually came into being (Genesis 1:1–3). And this pattern continues through the remainder of Genesis 1. Right from the beginning, God is revealed as the God who speaks words. And His words powerfully accomplish what He says.

We communicate with those around us in a number of ways—by what we say and don’t say and by what we do and don’t do. It has been said, “It is better to keep your mouth closed and let people think you are a fool than to open it and remove all doubt.” According to this proverb, the very act of speaking is an act of self-revelation!

Self-revelation through speech takes on two main forms: human and divine. Our inadequacies and our inconsistencies may remain hidden if we remain silent, but when we speak they become all too apparent. When God speaks, however, His words reveal to us more and more of His wisdom and goodness. In fact, it is only through God’s Word (the Bible) that we are able to know God personally and hear His plan of salvation. According to John 17:3, our salvation and the promise of eternal life are ours only by knowing (being in relationship with) the true God and His Son, Jesus Christ.

According to the Scriptures, God’s existence, along with His power and majesty, are revealed in nature (natural revelation or natural knowledge of God). However, Christians acknowledge that God more specifically reveals to us additional information about Himself in the Bible. For example, in Malachi 3:6 God reveals His unchanging nature; in Leviticus 19:2 He asserts His holiness; and Psalm 90:2 asserts God’s eternal or everlasting nature. God declares that He is a “jealous God” in Exodus 20:5, a statement that comes toward the beginning of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:3–17). While such a declaration may seem out of sync with our understanding of jealousy as a sin, the term in this context means “zealous.” As the people of Israel stand before God at Mount Sinai, the scene is reminiscent of a wedding ceremony uniting God and His people. God desires Israel for Himself and does not want to “share her” with other gods (Exodus 20:4–5). Thus He will be “jealous” and will punish those who break their commitment to Him. However, God’s “mercy triumphs over
judgment” (James 2:13), and in Exodus 20:6 He reveals that His “steadfast love” (Gospel) extends far beyond the bounds of His punishment (Law).

Even though God has revealed Himself to us in the Scriptures, we are unable to comprehend some of God’s ways and thoughts (Isaiah 55:8–9). While we cannot fathom why some people suffer and others succeed, we can trust God’s wisdom, knowledge, judgments, and paths (Romans 11:33–36). The doctrine of the “sufficiency of Scripture” asserts that God has revealed all that we need to know for our salvation, not that God reveals everything to us. These are reasons to have awe and respect for God and to praise Him for His glory.

Words are often necessary to explain actions, and, in the same way, actions can explain words. How do God’s words and actions come together as one? In Jesus Christ, we have God’s final and ultimate word: the fulfillment of the promised Word (John 1), who shares with us God’s words of life (John 5:39). In 2 Corinthians 1:18–20, Paul addresses his plans for visiting the Christians in Corinth. In that context, he makes a profound theological statement: “As surely as God is faithful” (v. 18), Paul says, God’s promises are all fulfilled or answered “Yes!”—and they are done so in Jesus Christ. Jesus was brought to the Corinthians through the proclamation of Paul, Silas, and Timothy. In response, the Corinthians are called to say “Amen” to the glory of God (v. 20). All of us have heard the same affirmative Word. All God’s promises have been fulfilled for us in Christ, and we are called to give the same “Amen” response. In 2 Corinthians 4:6, Paul reminds us that even as God’s speaking at creation was followed by action, so God’s speaking is fulfilled when His Word shines the light of Jesus Christ into our hearts.

**Where Do We Look?**

Consider the many ways people search for God, for meaning in life, and for spiritual truth. Some believe that they can find God by looking within themselves or that human reason or experience can provide answers to questions of ultimate importance. But our reason or experience cannot answer the important questions about God. Instead, the Bible is our only authoritative source for such knowledge. There God comes near and speaks about Himself in His own words. In Romans 10:8, Paul quotes Deuteronomy 30:14 to assert that God had spoken to the Israelites in His Word through Moses. The Old Testament prophets use the phrase “The word of the LORD came” more than seventy times to point out that God’s Word came to them, not vice versa. Finally, God has come to reveal Himself in the person of Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:1–2).
For those who chase after material possessions and earthly things as the zenith of human existence, Jesus tells us in Matthew 4:4 that we are to live on “every word that comes from the mouth of God” (see also Deuteronomy 8:3; John 4:34). In Romans 10:14–17, Paul clearly states that God continues speaking to His people through the oral proclamation of His Word. The apostle concludes that people cannot believe or be saved unless they hear the message “through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). When “the word of faith” is proclaimed, God still draws near to people in order to save them through the message of Christ’s death and resurrection. We live on God’s Word and in His Word as well.

**The People’s Voice**

People often try to describe and characterize God or to say what God would or would not do. Many have concluded there is no hell, that God is love and welcomes everyone, and that He would never send anybody to hell even if it did exist. As a result, people do not usually think of God as a judge or view Jesus as having wrath (see, for example, Revelation 6:16–17). On the other hand, the “particularity of the Gospel” (see especially John 14:6; Acts 4:12) is also a scandal to those who accept any and all religions as valid approaches to God. When we hear such unbiblical statements about God, we gently yet firmly read or recite specific Scripture passages. God’s own words carry more “authority” with people than trying to summarize the Bible’s or the church’s teaching. But to take such an approach means we must know the Scriptures well.

Finally, in contrast with God’s words, let’s take a look at our own words and what they may reveal to others. Are your words and actions consistent? The apostle James points out that “we all stumble in many ways” (3:2). As James proceeds to use various analogies to illustrate how we are unable to tame our tongue or to control the damage it causes (vv. 3–9), this is, in one sense, condemning Law. On the other hand, this is good third use of the Law, reminding us to match our actions and words. After hearing the gracious words of God spoken to us, we praise God with our lips and use our mouths to speak to others about His mercy.

**Comparisons**

Eastern Orthodox: “The most ancient and original instrument for spreading divine revelation is holy tradition. From Adam to Moses there were no sacred books. Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself delivered His divine doctrine and ordinances to His Disciples by word and example, but not by writing. The same method was followed by the Apostles also
at first, when they spread abroad the faith and established the Church of Christ. The necessity of tradition is further evident from this, that books can be available only to a small part of mankind, but tradition to all” (*The Longer Catechism of the Eastern Church*, question 21).

**Lutheran:** “We believe, teach, and confess that the only rule and norm according to which all teachings, together with all teachers, should be evaluated and judged [2 Timothy 3:15–17] are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testament alone. For it is written in Psalm 119:105, ‘Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.’ St. Paul has written, ‘even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed’ (Galatians 1:8)” (FC Summary 1; *Concordia*, p. 473).

**Reformed/Presbyterian:** “Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence, do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of His will, which is necessary unto salvation; therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal Himself, and to declare that His will unto His Church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the Church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God’s revealing His will unto His people being now ceased” (*The Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 1).

**Roman Catholic:** “The sacred and holy, oecumenical and general Synod of Trent—lawfully assembled in the Holy Ghost, the same Legates of the Apostolic See presiding therein . . . receives and venerates with an equal affection of piety, and reverence, all the books both of the Old and of the New Testament—seeing that one God is the author of both—as also the said traditions . . . preserved in the Catholic Church by a continuous succession” (*Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Session 24, Decree concerning the Canonical Scriptures; cf. CCC2, Part 1, article 3).

**Baptist:** “We believe that the Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired, and is a perfect treasure of heavenly instruction; that it has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth without any mixture of error for its matter; that it reveals the principles by which God will judge us; and therefore is, and shall remain to the end of the world,
the true center of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and opinions should be tried” (*New Hampshire Baptist Confession*, article 1).

**Wesleyan/Methodist:** “The Holy Scriptures contain all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man that it should be believed as an article of faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation” (*Methodist Articles of Religion*, article 5).

**Liberal Protestant:** “The facts of history have shown that Paul was in error in his teaching in 1 Thessalonians about the coming of the Lord in the clouds of heaven. It is a palpable infidelity to truth to affirm that this teaching was true; it is a double error to transfer it to the present time and reaffirm it for our own day. Some portions of his teachings about marriage and spiritual gifts, however adapted to meet the needs of the Corinthians, are impossible of reaffirmation today. Whether the preacher in the pulpit passes these things over in silence and limits himself to the things that have attested themselves as true by the test of human experience, as may often be his wisest course or the teacher finds it necessary to deal with them explicitly, honestly, and frankly, as he must if they come up for consideration at all, both the preaching and the teaching will be made more effective religiously and morally than when it is assumed that all the views of the New Testament writers are equally valuable” (Ernest DeWitt Burton in *A Guide to the Study of the Christian Religion*, ed. Gerald Birney Smith [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1916], pp. 236–37).

---

**Point to Remember**

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son. *Hebrews 1:1–2*

---

**Now That’s Inspired!**

What with the introduction of machines and of sudden inventions, millionaires cannot be helped. We might as well make the most of it.

—Gerard Stanley Lee, *Inspired Millionaires*
The year was 1908. The United States was recovering from a sharp economic downturn. Many working-class people saw the rich as immoral. Others like Gerard Lee saw the rich as a source for general public improvement. This debate continues to the present. Money certainly inspires some wealthy people to bend the rules, yet it can also inspire and enable others to aid society. Money often remains the goal of those who complain about the rich. For others whose focus is not money, inspiration toward action can come from another source. The promise of better benefits or shorter working hours may motivate someone to change jobs. The desire for a better appearance may encourage a dieter to remain faithful to the diet plan. Thoughts of sunny, windswept beaches may compel a family to save a few extra dollars each week for that much-needed vacation.

Someone may leave a concert, lecture, movie, or even worship service and say, “That was truly inspiring!” After looking at a beautiful sunset or mountain, someone may say, “That really inspires me!” These common uses of the word *inspire* mean “to animate, arouse, affect with feeling or thought, uplift,” and so on. But that is not what we mean when we use the term *inspired* to describe the Scriptures.

Unlike powerful people, God does not need any external “inspiration” to put His plan of salvation into action. God is the sole source of His speaking and acting; yet He has done much more than “inspire” His people with a “good story.” Scripture describes itself as “breathed out by God” (2 Timothy 3:16), from which the Church gets the term *inspired*. The doctrine of inspiration examines the question “Is the Bible man’s words or God’s Word?” Let’s look at some statements that try to answer this question.

1. God dictated His Word. Each author’s own personality was not involved.

2. God worked through the abilities, personalities, backgrounds, and training of various authors to speak His Word to people.

3. The words written in the Bible are the “words” of God.

4. God gave the authors thoughts; the authors put them in their own words.

5. The Bible merely *contains* the Word of God. Some words are God’s; some are simply human.

6. God revealed the basic Gospel message to the authors of Scripture. When they address other topics, they are giving their own thoughts and opinions.

7. The words in the Bible are basically human words, containing the personal biases and prejudices of the authors.
8. The Bible contains God’s Word to the people and churches of those days. God’s Word does not apply in the same way today.

9. The Bible is God’s words to the churches of today, and His words should all be applied literally.

10. The Bible gives specific directions from God to His people in the days they originally addressed. The teachings, doctrines, and principles still apply, but the applications in our day may differ.

Some of these statements may be disputable, but statements 2, 3, and 10 are true; the rest are false. Statements 6 and 7 reveal what has been called “Gospel reductionism” or reducing the inspired Scriptures to the motivational content of the Gospel message. Statement 9 falls flat because most churches do not encourage handling deadly snakes (Isaiah 11:8), nor do they require women to cover their heads in worship despite the clear instructions in 1 Corinthians 11:1–16. However, as statement 10 points out, the principle of “headship” (properly understood) is still relevant.

So is the Bible the words of man and/or God’s Word? Ultimately, the Church has concluded that the answer is “both/and.” Logically, it seems impossible for words to be both from men and from God. As a result, the Church calls this a “mystery” and a miracle of God that cannot be completely explained to our human reason. But when discussing this issue, theologians typically use the term inspiration.

**Divine Author/Human Authors**

In our quest to answer the question “Is the Bible man’s word or God’s word?” we turn to Scripture. In 2 Timothy 3:14–17, Paul says:

> But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

Here, when Paul says “all Scripture,” he refers specifically to the Old Testament since the New Testament was likely not yet completed and collected in Paul’s day. But what he says about it is important: “All Scripture is breathed out by God.” The phrase “breathed out by God” in verse 16 has also been translated “inspired” because the word for “breath” or “wind” in Greek and Hebrew is the same as the word used for “spirit” and the Holy “Spirit.” A connection with the Holy Spirit and inspiration is at least
implied here by Paul. God *breathed* or *spirited* the Scriptures. The use of the word *all* is also significant. When used in reference to inspiration, it means everything in the written Scriptures comes fully from the breath of God; nothing is excluded.

We can look to the apostle Peter for further explanation: “Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:20–21). As did Paul, when Peter talks about *Scripture*, he refers to the entire Old Testament. But what does Peter mean by the phrase “prophecy of Scripture”? People usually understand *prophecy* to mean “predicting the future.” However, the word *prophecy* in the Scriptures is much broader. It means speaking and applying God’s will in a variety of settings. Consider these examples.

1. Moses was the greatest prophet of the Old Testament.

2. In the Hebrew Bible, Moses’ writings are followed by the Former Prophets (Joshua through Kings) and then the Latter Prophets (Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah, and so on).

3. The prophets use the majority of their words to speak of the past and the present, not simply the future.

Prophecy is speaking for God and is God speaking. Notice again the exclusive terminology of Peter’s statement (“no prophecy”) for explaining plenary inspiration. This excludes either the view that the Scriptures are merely a human product (see statement 7 above) or what is called the “dictation theory” (see statement 1 above). The latter implies the authors were passive and uninvolved; it makes them seem robotic, automatic, or mechanical. The origin of Scripture is clearly God, but at the same time “men spoke from God.” Here is also a clear reference to the Holy Spirit carrying along those who “spoke from God.”

The Old Testament prophets use the phrase “Thus says the Lord” or something very similar more than 350 times! Why is this significant? By saying “Thus says the Lord,” the Old Testament prophets assert that the message they speak is directly from the Lord and spoken in His behalf, as described also by the apostle Peter. The words of the prophets are the Lord’s words! The prophets often spoke of the Word of the Lord coming to them and becoming a part of them. They then “had to” proclaim what the Lord revealed to them.

How did this process of inspiration work with specific Old Testament prophets and prophecy? Let’s look at several examples from the prophet Jeremiah.
Jeremiah 1:9: “Then the Lord put out His hand and touched my mouth. And the Lord said to me, ‘Behold, I have put My words in your mouth.’” Here the prophet declares that the Lord put His words into Jeremiah’s mouth.

Jeremiah 26:2: “Thus says the Lord: Stand in the court of the Lord’s house, and speak to all the cities of Judah that come to worship in the house of the Lord all the words that I command you to speak to them; do not hold back a word.” God commands Jeremiah to speak everything He had revealed to him.

Jeremiah 20:9: “If I say, ‘I will not mention Him, or speak any more in His name,’ there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.” This passage reveals that even when Jeremiah tried to hold in God’s Word, he could not.

Jeremiah 15:16: “Your words were found, and I ate them, and Your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by Your name, O Lord, God of hosts.” As opposed to trying to hold God’s words in, when Jeremiah received or “ate” the Word of the Lord, it was a great joy. This passage reveals how the Lord’s words became a part of the prophet who “ingested” them.

Similar language is used in Ezekiel 2:9–3:4:

And when I looked, behold, a hand was stretched out to me, and behold, a scroll of a book was in it. And He spread it before me. And it had writing on the front and on the back, and there were written on it words of lamentation and mourning and woe. And He said to me, “Son of man, eat whatever you find here. Eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel.” So I opened my mouth, and He gave me this scroll to eat. And He said to me, “Son of man, feed your belly with this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it.” Then I ate it, and it was in my mouth as sweet as honey. And He said to me, “Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with My words to them.”

Notice again how God’s words to Ezekiel are received, eaten, and then proclaimed.

We can also look to Isaiah’s vision of the Lord:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above Him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!” And the foundations of
the thresholds shook at the voice of Him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.” And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here am I! Send me.” And He said, “Go, and say to this people: ‘Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’” (Isaiah 6:1–9)

Isaiah’s call is “inspiring” just like those cited by Peter, Paul, and Jeremiah. After seeing God on His throne, Isaiah laments his unclean lips. After his mouth is touched with a coal from the altar, he is cleansed from sin. Then Isaiah is able to speak the Word of the Lord.

All these Old Testament passages establish that Scripture—the written Word—is God-inspired. But the phrase “thus says the Lord” doesn’t appear often in the New Testament. Instead, God gives us other clues that the New Testament books are His Word. Consider the following:

1. “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (John 6:63). When Jesus speaks, His words are from the Spirit of God (compare 2 Peter 1:20–21). They also have the power to give life.

2. “For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when He was betrayed took bread . . .” (1 Corinthians 11:23) and “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3). In these passages, Paul says he received “from the Lord” and “delivered to you.” These are technical rabbinic words for accurately and authoritatively receiving words directly or indirectly from the source and then faithfully passing them on just as received. Thus Paul states that he is writing the Word of the Lord.

3. “Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead—and all the brothers who are with me, To the churches of Galatia” (Galatians 1:1–2) and “For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man’s gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1:11–12). The apostle Paul based the
authenticity of his Gospel message on the fact that it came by direct revelation from the Lord Jesus.

4. “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers” (1 Thessalonians 2:13). When Paul taught in Thessalonica, the believers there did not simply receive his words. Rather, they comprehended that Paul truly spoke the Word of God to them.

5. “Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached? If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized” (1 Corinthians 14:36–38). In this passage, Paul explicitly asserts that he is writing the Lord’s command, not merely his own.

6. “For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer deserves his wages’” (1 Timothy 5:18). This passage quotes Deuteronomy 25:4 and then the words of Jesus recorded in Luke 10:7. Both quotations are introduced with the phrase “For the Scripture says.” This reveals that as Paul wrote to Timothy (around AD 65) Jesus’ words were already considered equal with the Old Testament Word of God.

7. “And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures” (2 Peter 3:15–16). Peter’s letter, written about the same time Paul wrote to Timothy, acknowledges that Paul’s writings were being collected, studied, misunderstood, and distorted shortly after they were written. Even more important, the end of verse 16 explicitly groups Paul’s writings together with “the other Scriptures.” This places his letters on the same level as Jesus’ words and the Old Testament.

8. “These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (John 14:25–26) and “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth, for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak, and He will declare to
you the things that are to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take what is Mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is Mine; therefore I said that He will take what is Mine and declare it to you” (John 16:12–15). In these passages from John’s Gospel, Jesus establishes another link between the Holy Spirit and the Word of the Lord. In John 14, the Holy Spirit teaches the disciples all things and reminds them of everything Jesus said. This explains how we received accurate and reliable written Gospels through the disciples Matthew and John. In addition, Mark’s Gospel is traditionally linked with the disciple Peter. Luke also received his information from those “who from the beginning were eye-witnesses and ministers of the word” (Luke 1:2). However, this is not to be limited merely to direct quotations from Jesus in “red-letter” Bibles. It includes all the words of the Lord. In John 16, the Spirit guides people into all truth by hearing from Jesus and then speaking His Word and will to us.

A GREAT AND HOLY HELPER

The apostle Paul makes a clear distinction about our ability to understand God’s Word:

For who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. “For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct Him?” But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Corinthians 2:11–16)

Paul asserts that it is only by receiving the Holy Spirit, who is freely given from God (v. 12), that we are able to understand the spiritual truths of God’s spiritual words. Notice that the uses of “spiritual,” the references to things that are “spiritually discerned,” and the description of a “spiritual” person all are related to the Holy Spirit. In our day, the word spiritual tends to have a much broader meaning than in this passage where it is a direct link to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit produced the Scriptures, but His work did not stop there. The Holy Spirit enables people to understand the truths of the Scriptures and even to know the mind of the Lord Christ (v. 16). In addition, Luke notes that Jesus had to open the minds of the first
disciples before they could understand that the spiritual truth of the Old Testament is that it foretold the Gospel message (Luke 24:45).

We need the Spirit before we can understand the Word of God. Yet Jesus says His words are “Spirit and are life” (John 6:63). So which comes to us first: the Word or the Spirit? This is not like the brain teaser “Which came first, the chicken or the egg?” The point is that we should not separate the Spirit from the Word. They come together as “Spirit-filled” words. The passage from 1 Corinthians above reasserts the link between Jesus’ words, the Holy Spirit who enables us to comprehend them, and the life given by the Spirit through those words.

**EVERY GOOD WORK**

The main purpose of Scripture in our lives is laid out in Paul’s second letter to Timothy:

> But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work. (3:14–17)

Although its main task is “to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (v. 15), the God-breathed Scriptures also strive to equip God’s people for doing good works (v. 17; see also Ephesians 2:10; the third use of the Law). The Scriptures do this by identifying which works are good in God’s eyes. In addition, by teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training, the Scriptures steer us away from evil and toward good. Yet the Gospel is the primary focus, which provides the proper motivation for what follows.

Look and listen for “inspired” words from God in your daily life. Any contact we have with the inspired Word of God from Scripture would qualify, whether it comes by directly reading the Bible, by hearing it read, or as it is used by other sources. Insofar as a pastor, teacher, book, song, or billboard quotes the Scriptures, those words are inspired since they repeat inspired words. However, this does not make the entirety of a sermon or hymn or song inspired.

**COMPARISONS**

*Verbal inspiration:* The Holy Spirit led the prophets, evangelists, and apostles to write the books of the Bible. He guided their writing, inspiring
their very words while working through their particular styles of expression. Therefore, the Bible’s words are God’s Word. Conservative Christian churches hold this view. Many also maintain that the original writings of the Bible were without error (the doctrine of inerrancy) but that some mistakes entered the text as the scribes copied, edited, or translated the Scriptures over the centuries.

**Partial inspiration:** Christians affected by theological liberalism hold different views of the inspiration of the Bible. For example, some would assert that the Bible is God’s Word but that the authors erred in some factual details. Others would say that the Bible *contains* God’s Word and that the Spirit leads people today to determine which parts of the Bible God wants them to follow. Still others would say that the Bible is one testimony to God’s Word, along with writings used in other religions.

**Inspired translations:** Some churches hold that God inspired certain translations of the Bible. For example, the Eastern Orthodox Church holds that God inspired the Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament. Some English-speaking Protestants hold that God inspired the King James translation of the Bible.

**Point to Remember**

But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. *John 14:26*

---

**God’s Pen Is Mightier Than All!**

Every man will read a book with more pleasure or even with more ease, if it is written in fairer characters.

—Epictetus, *Discourses*

The early second-century Stoic philosopher Epictetus believed that happiness was attainable only by living virtuously and taming one’s passions. His *Discourses*, possibly penned by Arrian, his disciple, praise the power of the human soul and the authority of human reason. Affected by ill health and misfortune throughout most of his life, Epictetus nevertheless sought well-being from within.
Epictetus’s pen has played a formative role in the study of philosophy. For some, his writings have encouraged self-denial and close introspection in order to obtain contentment. But do Epictetus’s words continue to have the power and authority they once did? Or have they, like the works of so many other philosophers, been relegated to the dusty shelves of history?

“The pen is mightier than the sword.” We understand this phrase to mean that written words are often more powerful than military might. Many times in history the power of words has stood up against and even defeated the power of the sword. The Reformation is clearly one of these cases since the printing press aided in the effort. One could say the writings of Dr. Luther, particularly the Ninety-five Theses, overpowered the strength of the Holy Roman emperor. The Declaration of Independence is another example where the strength of words provided the motivation to overcome superior military might.

God’s Word was probably originally written with a sharpened piece of reed or perhaps some type of quill. But we can say God “penned” His Word to us through various authors. So which is mightier, the penned Word of God or the sword? In Ephesians 6:17 Paul calls God’s Word “the sword of the Spirit.” If the sword of the Spirit is God’s Word, they are, at least in that analogy, one and the same. Thus God’s Word is the instrument of His Spirit and it wields considerable power.

Power and Authority

It is because the Scriptures are the inspired Word of God that they have power and authority. Genesis 1 revealed the power and authority of God’s Word. God “said” and created all that exists (see, for example, Genesis 1:3). Jeremiah tells us the Lord’s Word is like fire and a hammer that breaks rocks to pieces (23:29). In Jeremiah, we see the Law at work, bringing low and breaking down sinful hearts. Isaiah compares the Word of the Lord to rain or snow: “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be that goes out from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (55:10–11). Rain and snow come from the skies and produce fruitful, beneficial results. So it is with the Lord’s Word from heaven. It accomplishes the Lord’s powerful purpose in sending it.

Jesus uses an analogy similar to that found in Isaiah 55 when He speaks the parable of the sower. In Luke, we read that the Word of God is like a seed that can produce amazingly abundant fruit (Luke 8:8). Here the
analogy is to the growth and spread of God’s kingdom through the ministry of Jesus’ Word.

Hebrews 4:12 speaks of the Word of God as a two-edged sword. It is described as living, active, sharp, and penetrating. It also judges. God’s Word cuts through everything else and gets to the heart of the matter!

The power of God’s Word is proclaimed in both Law and Gospel. In John 12:48 Jesus says His Word will condemn those who reject both Him and His Word on the Last Day. This is the powerful Law. In fact, the Greek word translated as power in Romans 1:16 is *dunamis*, from which we also form *dynamite* and *dynamic*. There Paul stresses that the ultimate power of God is His power to save through the good news of the Gospel. This is an important passage to consider. We usually think of power and authority in terms of the Law because it forces, compels, and pushes down. But, as in the analogies of rain and seed, the power of God’s Word is the ultimate positive power. It gives life, produces fruit, nourishes, sustains, and saves.

**SEED THAT LastS**

The apostle Peter writes:

> You have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; for “All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.” And this word is the good news that was preached to you. So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. (1 Peter 1:23–2:3)

This passage says a number of things that relate the Word of God to our own lives. First, life apart from God perishes (v. 23). Peter also quotes Isaiah 40, which speaks of all humans and all human glory as flowers and grass. None of these last; all wither and fade. God’s Word, on the other hand, stands forever. Therefore, it powerfully gives imperishable life.

Second, phrases such as “born again” (1:23) and “newborn infants” (2:2) are probably references to Baptism. The Greek word *baptizein* simply means “to wash.” The bath or act of washing corresponds with the Greek word *baptisma*. There are many references in the Scriptures to Baptism in which that specific word is not present (e.g., John 3:3, 5; Ephesians 5:26). According to 1 Peter 1:25, God’s Word is proclaimed. But when God’s proclaimed Word is combined with water, it produces Christian Baptism. Martin Luther’s explanation of Holy Baptism in the Small Catechism agrees with Scripture (cf. *Concordia*, pp. 339–40).
Third, in the original Greek language, 1 Peter 2:2 calls us to desire the “pure spiritual milk of God’s Word.” Why are we to “crave” it? What does it seek to accomplish in our lives? The “natural” hunger of a baby is for milk; the “supernatural” hunger of a born-again (1 Peter 1:23) believer is for God’s Word. It not only gives imperishable life, it also nourishes that life and enables it to grow (2:2). According to 1 Peter 3:21, Baptism, the water and the Word, saves. But the Word then also enables us to grow up in that salvation (2:2). Some scholars also see a reference to the Lord’s Supper in 2:3 where the Lord’s goodness is tasted.

**Well-Armed**

One of Paul’s analogies for the Christian life is to describe us as soldiers of the cross in Ephesians 6:10–17:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Paul lists the opponents aligned against the believer: the devil’s schemes, rulers, authorities and powers of this dark world, and the spiritual forces of evil. With those foes against us, we surely need defensive armor: the breastplate of righteousness, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation. We are defended by the armor of truth, righteousness, faith, and salvation. But defense isn’t enough. Our main offensive weapon, described by Paul as “the sword of the Spirit” is the Word of God. God stands us up in the faith and equips us so that we are enabled to stay standing (vv. 13–14).

As the Christian reaches out with the sword of the Spirit, the world is often offended by the Law. Its assertion of an overarching, universal morality is offensive to many in our postmodern world. Recall the passage from Hebrews: “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (4:12). The exclusive claims of the Gospel (see John 14:6; Acts 4:12) are also offensive
to many in our day who see spiritual truth and legitimacy in almost any and every form of religion. If others are offended by Christianity, it should be God’s message of Law and Gospel that offends them, rather than the conduct or abrasiveness of Christians. Ephesians 6:15 says that in addition to our armor, we are also equipped with the readiness that comes from the Gospel of peace.

**Comparisons**

**Eastern Orthodox:** “We undoubtingly confess, as sure truth, that the Catholic Church cannot sin, nor err, nor utter falsehood in place of truth; for the Holy Ghost, ever working through His faithful ministers the fathers and doctors of the Church, preserves her from all error” (Missive of the Eastern Patriarchs on the Orthodox Faith, article 12, quoted in *The Longer Catechism of the Eastern Church*, answer 271).

**Lutheran:** “In this way the distinction between the Holy Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament and all other writings is preserved. The Holy Scriptures alone remain the judge, rule, and norm. According to them—as the only touchstone—all teachings shall and must be discerned and judged to see whether they are good or evil [1 Thessalonians 5:21–22], right or wrong” (FC Ep Summary 7; *Concordia*, p. 474).

**Reformed/Presbyterian:** “We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the Church to a high and reverent esteem of the holy Scripture; and the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man’s salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof, are arguments whereby it doth abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God; yet, notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth, and divine authority thereof, is from the inward Word of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts” (*The Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 1.5).

**Roman Catholic:** “The Roman Pontiff, when he speaks *ex cathedra* . . . is possessed of that infallibility with which the divine Redeemer wills that His Church should be endowed for defining doctrine regarding faith or morals” (First Vatican Council, *Pastor aeternus*, ch. 4, July 18, 1870; cf. CCC2 para. 891).

**Conservative Protestant:** These groups generally agree that the Holy Scriptures are authoritative in all areas of faith and life, and they
derive their doctrine and practice from their respective understandings of the Bible.

**Liberal Protestant:** These denominations vary in submission to the authority of God’s Word depending on their beliefs about its accuracy and inspiration. Viewpoints may range from seeing the Bible as a mere historical book irrelevant to modern theology and morality to regarding only the teachings about Christ as inspired and authentic.

---

**Point to Remember**

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. *Luke 24:27*

---

**You Have My Word on It!**

I shall return.

—General Douglas MacArthur, March 20, 1942

Douglas MacArthur’s military career was filled with many “firsts.” He was first in his class throughout his education. He was nominated twice for a Congressional Medal of Honor in World War I. He finally received the Medal of Honor in World War II, the first recipient whose father had also received that medal. These “firsts” gave a special quality to MacArthur’s words. When the Japanese had overrun his forces in the Philippines and Bataan, when hope seemed lost and he was in retreat, MacArthur promised to return and win the fight. From October 1944 to July 1945, he delivered on that promise and later signed the treaty to end the war on September 2, 1945.

How many times have you heard or said, “You have my word on it”? Sometimes a friend or colleague gives us his “word on it,” but his word proves to be untrue. That can change our image of the person. And when circumstances make us unable to keep our word, we are disappointed in ourselves. Keeping your word—or relying on someone else to keep his or her word—is a large part of our daily lives. But how we have looked at *truth* has changed over the years. The following offers a brief, historical review to set the stage for this section.
History progressed through the Middle Ages into the Renaissance, which heralded a “rebirth” of classical learning. The Renaissance began around 1450 and continued through the time of the Reformation (1500s). The Thirty Years’ War (1618–48) brought the politically “established” churches into disrepute and helped to create a climate of personalized religion known as Pietism. This same climate of individualism helped to popularize the Age of Rationalism that followed. The height of this time was the Enlightenment (1700s). Human reason and the modern scientific method governed public life, learning, and policy, which limited religion to private life. Later reactions that included Romanticism provided a role for human emotion and aesthetics to accompany and guide intellect (1760–1914). Many leading figures believed that human reason, aesthetics, and emotion could solve all problems and serve as the ultimate authority.

These developments had a dark side. It is true that mankind has always experienced violence and oppression in society. Rationalism and Romanticism tried to offer ways to put violence, oppression, war, poverty, and so on in the past. However, these modern movements could not account for the source of reason, the source of morality, and other aspects of life that give society its order and its moral compass. Socialism, Nihilism, and Communism arose as radical alternatives. Society had little place for God and the sanctity of human life. Many began to suspect that the world is fundamentally irrational, and the adherents of this perspective would be energized by the works of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer. Not only did these and other figures have profound effects on education, health care, and social policy in Europe and North America, but they also provided ideas that many world leaders would use to justify entering into World War I and that Adolf Hitler would use to conceive his “final solution.”

Rationalism has undergone many challenges during the twentieth century in science, politics, and religion. Romanticism and Rationalism collapsed after the First World War, while Socialism and Communism have spread their influence. Especially following the social upheavals of the 1960s, scholars and media figures often speak of our culture today with the term postmodern. Postmodernism tends to reject absolute truth because it sees absolutes as a means to enforce power. Postmodernism allows multiple “truths” to compete and coexist in the sciences, politics, the humanities, and religion. Nevertheless, it concedes that relationships of community and power define human society. Postmodernism can quickly turn “coexistence” into a “corrective” reversal of power where the former “victim” dominates the former “oppressor.”
Even the hard sciences have to concede different ways of looking at reality. The Age of Reason brought Newton’s laws of physics in the 1600s. The twentieth century brought two additional perspectives. Einstein’s theories of relativity explained the large-scale behavior of the universe and unlocked black holes and hydrogen bombs. Max Planck’s theories of quantum mechanics explained the chaotic world of subatomic particles. None of these three perspectives can be harmonized. In the same way, popular morality (e.g., situational ethics and gender issues), politics (e.g., “spin” or “might makes right”), and religion (e.g., New Age) have all embraced the idea that different perspectives can be right in their own way.

So, as Pilate asked, what is truth? Jesus said to the Father, “Your word is truth” (John 17:17). That statement can be a particular challenge for those in a postmodern culture to accept.

**One Book, Many Books**

Christians speak of the Bible as God’s Word of truth. However, we often view the Bible as if it were one book. Actually, the Bible is a collection or library of sixty-six different documents written over a period of more than a thousand years by at least thirty different human authors. How did these documents “become” the Bible? The technical term for this issue is “the canon.” *Canon* is a Greek word for a “reed” or “straight rod.” It came to be used like we use the term “measuring stick.” As a result, when the word *canon* is used of the Holy Scriptures, it expresses that these documents are the authoritative “measuring stick” for what we believe about God, the world, and ourselves.

Who decided that the sixty-six books in the canon were the divinely revealed “Truth” of God? The Old Testament books were regarded as authoritative as soon as they were given through Moses and the other authors. As a result, in practical use and understanding, an Old Testament canon existed throughout the history of Israel, beginning with Moses. However, the specific thirty-nine books in our Old Testament were not identified as such until around the time of Christ. A similar situation occurred with the twenty-seven documents we speak of as the New Testament. The early Church immediately used the words of Jesus and Paul and regarded them as authoritative (review “Now That’s Inspired!” beginning on p. 10). However, it was not until the late fourth century that the twenty-seven documents in the Bible were specifically listed as the New Testament canon.

It may seem troublesome at first to acknowledge that God never gave a specific list for the Old or New Testament; neither is the formation of
the canon a scientifically verifiable process. Rather, in regard to establish-
ing both the Old and New Testament collections, the circumstances were
similar. There was an ongoing, nearly unanimous acceptance of most of
the books as the divinely inspired Word of God. A few books that were
questioned by some (e.g., Esther, Daniel, Revelation) gradually came to be
included and then universally recognized by the Church. At the same time,
books about which there was dispute and uncertainty (e.g., Ecclesiasticus,
the Shepherd of Hermas) were excluded. Ultimately, the acceptance of
sixty-six documents as the Bible is a matter of faith in the God who gave
them, who preserved them for us, who handed them down to us, and who
continues to speak His Word of truth through them today.

The following verses tell us a great deal about the truth of God’s Word.

Psalm 12:6: “The words of the Lord are pure words, like silver refined in a
furnace on the ground, purified seven times.” God’s words are flawless
and pure, like metal that is perfectly refined.

Psalm 119:86, 89: “All Your commandments are sure; [the insolent] per-
secute me with falsehood; help me! . . . Forever, O Lord, Your word is
firmly fixed in the heavens.” Psalm 119 asserts again and again that
the Lord’s words, commands, precepts, and laws are true, trustworthy,
and eternal. This applies to the Law and its commands, which come
from God and do assert an absolute morality of right and wrong.
However, the Hebrew word Torah, which is translated as law, has a
broader meaning (“instruction” or “revelation”) that also encompasses
the Gospel. (See Psalm 119:138, 151, 160 for more examples.)

2 Samuel 22:31: “This God—His way is perfect; the word of the Lord proves
ture; He is a shield for all those who take refuge in Him.” God’s Word
is flawless; His ways are perfect. The Gospel content of the second half
of the verse proclaims that this perfect God is our shield and refuge.

John 10:35: “Scripture cannot be broken.” Once God has spoken, His
Word stands.

John 17:17: “Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth.” Jesus identi-
fies or equates God’s Word and truth.

These verses give clear indication that God’s Word is truth. But some
would argue that other parts of the Bible contradict this. Think about the
prophet Jonah. He was sent by the Lord to announce that in forty days
Nineveh would be destroyed (Jonah 3:3–4). However, that did not happen
(3:10). Was Jonah’s prophecy, and therefore God’s Word, untrue? We find
the answer in Jeremiah 18:7–10: “If at any time I declare concerning a nation
or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that
nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in My sight, not listening to My voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it.” This is called the contingency of prophecy. Lutherans have a good insight into these situations with the paradox between God speaking Law and speaking Gospel. The Jeremiah passage spells out in more detail how God is consistent in applying Law or Gospel depending on the circumstances. In Jonah, the Ninevites responded to the proclamation of the Law with repentance, and God relented, as He promises in Jeremiah 18. However, Jeremiah also reminds us that those who receive God’s grace and then turn away will rightly receive the condemnation of His Law. The marvelous assurance in all this is James 2:13: God’s “mercy triumphs over judgment.” God’s desire to save us through the Gospel is greater than His just determination to punish sinners. Both are true, however.

If God’s Word is truth, how does this relate to what Jesus says about Himself in John 14:6: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me”? If God’s Word is truth and Jesus is truth, then it may be proper to equate Jesus with God’s Word.

True to the Text

What is the purpose or role of God’s truthful Word in our lives? “Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth” (John 17:17). Jesus calls on His Father to sanctify Jesus’ followers by the truth. The verb sanctify means to “make holy” or to “set apart.” In John 17:19, Jesus hallows or sets Himself apart to accomplish His mission in order that He may make us truly holy: “And for their sake I consecrate Myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth.” (See also 1 Corinthians 1:30.) In John 17:17, the point is that God makes us holy; we cannot do it ourselves. This “making us holy” is related directly to the truth, which is equated to the Father’s Word. The primacy of the Gospel is once again stressed. The truth of God’s Word is that He desires to make us holy as He is holy.

How does holiness fit into God’s Word being truth? What does it reveal about the nature and purpose of God speaking to us? Two passages in Leviticus reveal God’s relationship to His Old Testament people: “Keep My statutes and do them; I am the LORD who sanctifies you” (20:8) and “For I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy” (11:45). As we read in John—that it is God who makes us holy, not we ourselves—so we see from Leviticus that the same was true in the Old Testament. God’s people were not supposed to try to become holy by keeping the Law; neither were they
able to do so. Rather, Leviticus 20:8 states that the Lord made them holy or sanctified them just as Jesus says in John 17:17! Leviticus 11:45 points out that the people’s motivation for trying to live holy lives was a response to the Gospel of the exodus and a desire to be like the God who had already saved them and made them holy.

So God’s Word is held up as the truth for God’s people, but as sinful human beings, we sometimes have difficulty leaving it at that. The tendency of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law was to equate their oral traditions with the Word of God. In Matthew 15:6, Jesus condemns them for setting aside or even nullifying the Word of God for the sake of their tradition. Throughout its history, certain segments of the Church have also exhibited a tendency to elevate tradition to the level of God’s Word or even higher. This creates disharmony among members and confuses the unbelieving world. Martin Luther fought the traditions of papal power by asserting “Scripture alone” as the sole source of authority in the Church. We must be careful to speak with the authority of God’s Word where God’s Word speaks but also make clear when that is not the case.

**Certain Truth**

In our life today, the truth of God’s Word is openly and frequently challenged. The creation account (Genesis 1–2), Noah’s ark and the flood (Genesis 6–9), the sun standing still in Joshua 10, and the miracles present in Jesus’ ministry and throughout the Scriptures are often dismissed by nonbelievers as good stories, but not truth. The Christian may respond that such events are supernatural since God’s intervention is directly involved. As a result, those events are logically contrary to the normal workings of nature and its laws. While it is impossible to prove such events, it is also impossible to disprove them. If God and the supernatural are excluded at the outset, some other explanation must be made (e.g., naturalistic evolution, the early Church made up the miracles, and so on). A Christian’s response will vary according to the circumstances. However, the Christian faith is just that: faith, which the writer to the Hebrews defines as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. . . . By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God” (11:1, 3).

Jesus says to the Father, “Your word is truth” (John 17:17). What is the difference between God’s Word being true and God’s Word being truth? In our day of competing truths or even a rejection of the existence of absolute truth in any form, it is vital that we look to the Scriptures. The conviction that the Scriptures are true or inerrant is properly a conviction of faith, as noted earlier. Any society with no absolute truths is headed toward chaos.
Civilization must have some overarching, moral truths. Even if these are not directly from or based upon Scripture, they can make decent order in a society (see Romans 2:12–16). This recognizes that there are other human sources of truth. For example, we have learned much about ourselves and the world around us through the fields of psychology, biology, anthropology, and so forth. Many of the “truths” discovered in these areas have supplemented the truths of the Scriptures, rather than competing against them. But the Scriptures do not simply assert themselves to be one truth among many other truths. They claim to be the Truth with a capital T. They reveal the truth about the one true God and His relationship with humanity.

**COMPARISONS**

Many philosophical ideas in our society compete for our attention and acceptance. In addition to rationalism and postmodernism (discussed earlier), other “-isms” jockey for position when we study the absolute and changeless truths of the Bible. Often Bible readers are not even aware that such ideas influence and color their interpretation of God’s Word.

**Rationalism:** “We can figure that out.” This philosophy rejects religious faith or dogma in determining truth, and relies solely on human reason and analysis. Secular humanism (which deifies the human person, human society and its achievements) and atheism (which denies that God exists) are philosophically related to rationalism.

**Relativism:** “Everything is relative.” There is no absolute reference for the values human beings place in their beliefs or behaviors. As a philosophical theory, relativism has two inherent problems: it is itself either relativistic (that is, subject to change) or absolutist (by claiming there are no absolutes).

**Moral relativism:** “There are no moral absolutes.” Morals arise from society’s agreed-upon customs, traditions, or etiquette. In contrast, moral absolutists believe that timeless norms are not culture-bound but are derived from natural law, human nature, religious sources, or a combination of these.

**Subjectivism:** “Perception creates reality.” There is no true reality apart from our perception. Objectivists, however, argue that there is an underlying reality to all things existing independently of our perception. Subjectivism tends also to conflict with everyday human experience.
Pragmatism: “Whatever works is right.” This notably American philosophical system sets goals as standards of reality and judges concepts by how well they help achieve those goals. Although this system is helpful in many situations, pragmatism’s chief weaknesses lie in determining the inherent value of the desired goals and deciding who or what makes those determinations.

Point to Remember

But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets. Acts 24:14

The Word and the Word Made Flesh

Lord, keep us steadfast in Your Word;
Curb those who by deceit or sword
Would wrest the kingdom from Your Son
And bring to naught all He has done.
—Martin Luther (LSB 655:1)

To Martin Luther the primary focus of the Scriptures was God’s grace, mercy, and forgiveness through Jesus Christ. The Bible served as a sort of manger, Luther said, in which the Christ Child was laid. Throughout his often tumultuous life, Luther would go to that manger to encounter his Savior. There a little Child could give him something the grown-up world could not: comfort and hope in the midst of every trouble.

Earlier we said “Actions speak louder than words.” With God there is no dichotomy between the two. God speaks and it happens. God promises and He fulfills. But there is even more here. The Scriptures teach that God’s Word became a person in Jesus of Nazareth. Scripture speaks of this as the doctrine of the incarnation, from the Latin word meaning “in-fleshed.”

Getting to the Point

Jesus says some very interesting things about the Scriptures, the written Word of God. Let’s look at several passages in which Jesus discusses the focal point of the Old Testament Scriptures.
John 5:39–40: “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about Me, yet you refuse to come to Me that you may have life.” The Old Testament Scriptures testify to Jesus. Note that Jesus does not contradict the conclusion that, at the same time, the Scriptures also point the way to eternal life.

John 5:46–47: “For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote of Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?” Jesus asserts that Moses “wrote about Me.” Believing in Moses (i.e., Genesis through Deuteronomy) would mean believing in Jesus as well.

Luke 24:44–47: “Then He said to them, ‘These are My words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.’ Everything the Old Testament said about the coming Messiah, or Christ, has been fulfilled in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus opened the minds of His disciples so they could see that He was the fulfillment of all that had been prophesied.

Other passages in the New Testament make a similar point about Jesus. The first chapter of the letter to the Hebrews begins by asserting that Jesus, God’s Son, is the final and ultimate way in which God has spoken to His people. First Peter 1:10–12 points out that the Old Testament writers wrote about and eagerly anticipated the salvation that has now come through the suffering and glory of Christ. While they did not fathom the exact when or how of the fulfillment, the Spirit of Christ was, nevertheless, pointing them ahead to Jesus.

In the Gospels, we read Jesus’ own words: “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (John 6:63; compare Deuteronomy 8:3). Later in that same chapter, Peter affirms: “You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that You are the Holy One of God” (6:68–69).

However, the relationship between Jesus and the Word of God is even more complete. How did God create all that exists? “God said” (Genesis 1:3), and all that exists came into being by God speaking His Word. John’s Gospel restates the message of Genesis 1: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him was
not any thing made that was made” (John 1:1–3). John identifies the Word as being present and active “in the beginning.” In fact, says John, the Word was God, and all things were created through that Word. Then John makes a most remarkable statement: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (1:14). This verse declares the incarnation in its most straightforward language. The Word became flesh in Jesus, the babe, the Son of Mary. The Word was God (John 1:1), and the Word-God became human flesh (1:14). This is the joyful message of Jesus’ conception and birth revealed in a dream to Joseph (Matthew 1:20–21) and to the Virgin Mary by the angel Gabriel (Luke 1:35) and fulfilled the night the angels sang above the Bethlehem hills (Luke 2:1–14).

John also begins his first letter with what was “from the beginning,” that is, Jesus Christ.

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. (1 John 1:1–4)

John again identifies Jesus as the Word of life who was from all eternity. In Jesus, the Word became flesh, a physical human being. As John and the other disciples heard, saw, looked at, and touched the human body of Jesus, they encountered “the Word of life” in the flesh. The purpose of the incarnation was to bring us into fellowship with the Father through the Son, and ultimately into fellowship with one another (1 John 1:3). Sharing this message so that others have fellowship with us makes our joy complete (v. 4).

Finally, in Revelation 19:11–16 John describes his vision of an individual on a white horse:

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on His head are many diadems, and He has a name written that no one knows but Himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which He is called is The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following Him on white horses. From His mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress
of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords.

The same author who wrote the Gospel and 1 John again pictures Jesus for us, but this time in the apocalyptic imagery of Revelation. Jesus is called “Faithful and True” (19:11; see also John 14:6). He judges and makes war (v. 11). He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood (v. 13). He has a sword coming from His mouth (v. 15; see also Revelation 1:16; Ephesians 6:13). On His robe and thigh is written the name “King of Kings and Lord of Lords” (v. 16). The end of verse 13 specifically identifies His name as “the Word of God” (see also John 1:1, 14).

**Finding the Center**

According to the number of words in the King James Version of the Bible, 76 percent of God’s words to us are in what we call the Old Testament. What impact does this statistic have on you? Consider what Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:16–17: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.”

As New Testament Christians, we often neglect the Old Testament in our devotions, our discussions, and our worship. Instead, we should eagerly “study the Scriptures” (John 5:39) as “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27).

If Jesus is the center of the Scriptures, what does this mean for how we read, interpret, understand, and apply the Old Testament Word of God? We now read the Old Testament through the events of the birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension, reign, and promised return of Jesus Christ. We view those Scriptures as fulfilled in Christ, but we also can see more in the Old Testament now that the bud of God’s plan of salvation has fully flowered (see 1 Peter 1:10–12). For example, one can perceive the three persons of the Trinity at work in Genesis 1:1–3. The Father created (v. 1); the Son was the Word (v. 3); the Spirit was hovering (v. 2). Hosea 11:1 can simply be a statement about the exodus of God’s people from Egypt, but now, in the fullness of time, it is more completely embodied in Jesus’ return from Egypt as described in Matthew 2:14–15, 19–21. God’s Old Testament people came out of Egypt, passed through the waters of the Red Sea, and spent forty years in the wilderness. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus comes out of Egypt, passes through the waters of His Baptism, and spends forty days in the wilderness (Matthew 2–4). “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” (Psalm 22:1) is David’s desperate cry; it is fully and absolutely experienced by Jesus on the cross (Mark 15:34). These are just a
few of the many examples of how the Old Testament points to Jesus as the fulfillment of Scripture.

As we look toward the end of the world, what does Jesus say about our response to those awesome and sometimes frightening events? As recorded in Luke’s Gospel, our Savior says: “And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (21:27–28) and “Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away” (21:32–33). Here Jesus assures us that when the world as we know it comes to an end, He is coming to take us home, and our redemption is drawing near (v. 28). If all else fails and falls apart, including the heavens and earth as we know them, His Word will never pass away (v. 33). Recall 1 Peter, which quotes Isaiah 40: ‘‘The grass withers and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord stands forever.’ And this word is the good news that was preached to you’’ (1:24b–25). This is the God-breathed Word of God that speaks to us today.

**Growing in the Gift**

In “God’s Pen Is Mightier Than All!” (see p. 19), we read 1 Peter 2:2, which states: “Like newborn infants, long for pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.” Salvation is a gift, yet it is also something we can “grow up into” according to Peter. How is this true? A baby is born alive and is no more or less alive as he or she grows from infancy through adulthood. In a similar manner, we are born again in Baptism through the power of God’s enduring Word (1 Peter 1:23; 3:21). We are alive in relationship with God and cannot become any “more” alive. But, just as a child grows, so we can grow up in our knowledge and our living out of the salvation God has bestowed upon us.

How can you personally resolve to grow up in your salvation by continuing to crave the pure, spiritual milk of God’s Word? Consider these ideas: start a new Bible class; join an existing Bible class; read through the Bible in a year; listen to the Bible regularly on tape or CD. This is not a legalistic “thou shalt” exercise, but a response to tasting the goodness of God’s Word and simply wanting more! This desire or craving is motivated by God’s Spirit and strives to allow God to draw us ever closer to Him as we are exposed to His holy and precious Word. “God’s Word is our great heritage And shall be ours forever; To spread its light from age to age Shall be our chief endeavor. Through life it guides our way, In death it is our stay.
Lord, grant, while worlds endure, We keep its teachings pure Throughout all generations” (*LSB* 582).

**COMPARISONS**

**Eastern Orthodox:** “Why, then, was holy Scripture given? To this end, that divine revelation might be preserved more exactly and unchangeably” (*The Longer Catechism of the Eastern Church*, question 22).

**Lutheran:** “Out of His immense goodness and mercy, God provides for the public preaching of His divine eternal Law and His wonderful plan for our redemption, that of the holy, only saving Gospel of His eternal Son, our only Savior and Redeemer, Jesus Christ. By this preaching He gathers an eternal Church for Himself from the human race and works in people’s hearts true repentance, knowledge of sins, and true faith in God’s Son, Jesus Christ. By this means, and in no other way (i.e., through His holy Word, when people hear it preached or read it, and through the holy Sacraments when they are used according to His Word), God desires to call people to eternal salvation. He desires to draw them to Himself and convert, regenerate, and sanctify them” (*FC SD II 50; Concordia*, p. 529).

**Reformed/Presbyterian:** “The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word” (*The Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 1.6).

**Roman Catholic:** “Furthermore, in order to restrain petulant spirits, it [this Council] decrees, that no one, relying on his own skill, shall—in matters of faith, and of morals pertaining to the edification of Christian doctrine—wresting the sacred Scripture to his own senses, presume to interpret the said sacred Scripture contrary to that sense which holy mother Church—whose it is to judge of the true sense and interpretation of the Holy Scripture—hath held and doth hold” (*Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Session 24, Decree concerning the Canonical Scriptures; cf. CCC2 para. 113).

**Baptist:** “We believe that, in order to be saved, sinners must be regenerated, or born again; that regeneration consists in giving a holy disposition to
the mind; that it is effected in a manner above our comprehension by the power of the Holy Spirit, in connection with divine truth, so as to secure our voluntary obedience to the Gospel; and that its proper evidence appears in the holy fruits of repentance, and faith, and newness of life” (New Hampshire Baptist Confession, article 7).

**Wesleyan/Methodist:** “The Holy Scriptures contain all things necessary to salvation; so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man that it should be believed as an article of faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation” (Methodist Articles of Religion, article 5).

**Liberal Protestant:** “If the source of our sin is located in a non-psychological ‘nature’ which we inherit, we shall, of course, interpret the work of Christ in terms of His ‘natures,’ divine and human. But if we think of sin concretely and refer it to its psychological causes, we shall interpret salvation in terms of conscious experience. We shall then not ask concerning the ‘nature’ of Jesus, but rather concerning His religious consciousness and life. We shall emphasize His God-consciousness and His ability to create in His disciples a trust in God which gives spiritual insight and moral power” (Gerald Birney Smith, ed., A Guide to the Study of the Christian Religion [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1916], pp. 531–32).

**Point to Remember**

From childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 2 Timothy 3:15

**Lutheran Summary of God’s Word**

**Augsburg Confession Conclusion 5**

We have mentioned only those things we thought it was necessary to talk about so that it would be understood that in doctrine and ceremonies we have received nothing contrary to Scripture or the Church universal. It
is clear that we have been very careful to make sure no new ungodly doctrine creeps into our churches. (*Concordia*, p. 63)

**APOLOGY OF THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION IV 5**

All Scripture ought to be distributed into these two principal topics: the Law and the promises. For in some places Scripture presents the Law, and in others the promises about Christ. In other words, in the Old Testament, Scripture promises that Christ will come, and it offers, for His sake, the forgiveness of sins, justification, and life eternal. Or in the Gospel, in the New Testament, Christ Himself (since He has appeared) promises the forgiveness of sins, justification, and life eternal. (*Concordia*, p. 83)

**SMALL CATECHISM: THE THIRD COMMANDMENT**

You shall sanctify the holy day. *What does this mean?* Answer: We should fear and love God so that we may not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred, and gladly hear and learn it. (*Concordia*, p. 319. See also LC I 91–93, *Concordia*, p. 369.)

**SMALL CATECHISM: THE FIRST PETITION**

Hallowed be Thy name. *What does this mean?* Answer: God’s name is indeed holy in itself. But we pray in this petition that it may become holy among us also. *How is this done?* Answer: When the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity and we as the children of God also lead holy lives in accordance with it. To this end help us, dear Father in heaven. But anyone who teaches and lives other than by what God’s Word teaches profanes the name of God among us. From this preserve us, heavenly Father. (*Concordia*, p. 332. See also the Second and Third Petitions, *Concordia*, pp. 333–34; and LC V 76, *Concordia*, p. 439.)

**FORMULA OF CONCORD EPIHOME SUMMARY 1**

We believe, teach, and confess that the only rule and norm according to which all teachings, together with all teachers, should be evaluated and judged [2 Timothy 3:15–17] are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament alone. For it is written in Psalm 119:105, “Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” St. Paul has written, “even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed” (Galatians 1:8). (*Concordia*, p. 473)

**FORMULA OF CONCORD EPIHOME SUMMARY 7**

In this way the distinction between the Holy Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament and all other writings is preserved. The Holy Scriptures alone remain the judge, rule, and norm. According to them—as the only touchstone—all teachings shall and must be discerned and judged
to see whether they are good or evil [1 Thessalonians 5:21–22], right or wrong. (Concordia, p. 474)

**Formula of Concord Solid Declaration Summary 3**

1. First, “we receive and embrace with our whole heart” are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the pure, clear fountain of Israel. They are the only true standard or norm by which all teachers and doctrines are to be judged. (Concordia, p. 508)

**Formula of Concord Solid Declaration XI 12**

Against this false delusion and thought we should set up the following clear argument, which is sure and cannot fail: All Scripture is inspired by God. It is not for self-confidence and lack of repentance, but “for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). Also, everything in God’s Word has been written for us, not so that we should be driven to despair by it, but so that “through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4). (Concordia, p. 604)
ENGAGING THIS TOPIC

“I just don’t get it.”
“What’s that?”
“You Lutherans say you believe in the Ten Commandments,
but you worship on Sunday, not the Jewish Sabbath.”
“But Jesus is our Sabbath rest.”
“So, the Third Commandment no longer applies?”

With characteristic boldness Martin Luther once defined the content of the Christian faith by saying, “The proper subject of theology is man guilty of sin and condemned, and God the Justifier and Savior of man the sinner.”Although brief and provocative, it is not a rash statement. Luther, who was by vocation a professor of the Bible, understood well that theology—words about God—has its only sure foundation in Scripture, the Word of God. As Luther’s years of study continually made evident, the great subject of Scripture itself is man as sinner and God as Savior.

By his own admission, however, Luther did not always understand the content of Scripture. As a young monk he was acutely aware of what it had to say about his own sin and well-deserved condemnation, but he knew little of its comforting doctrine of God the Justifier and Savior. This he came to know only once he had learned to distinguish between Scripture’s two main themes. As Luther stated, “When I discovered the proper distinction—namely, that the law is one thing and the gospel is another—I made myself free.”

For Luther, a proper distinction between Law and Gospel opened the door to a right understanding of God’s Word and, therefore, a right understanding of God’s will for humankind and our salvation. Throughout its

1 This chapter adapted from The Lutheran Difference: Law and Gospel, written by Korey Maas, with contributions by Robert C. Baker. Copyright © 2005 Concordia Publishing House.
2 AE 12:311.
3 AE 54:443.
history, the Lutheran Church has continued to maintain that rightly distinguishing between Law and Gospel is absolutely necessary in this regard. The Law shows us God’s will and reveals our sin; the Gospel proclaims our salvation in Christ. To confuse these two doctrines is to remain confused about ourselves and about our God. To misunderstand them is to misunderstand the reason for the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Christ. In short, Law and Gospel are the means by which we can rightly understand the whole of the Christian faith.

This is, of course, not an easy task. Luther himself realized that no one can perfect the art of properly distinguishing between these two biblical doctrines. But in light of their great importance, he also encouraged Christians to exercise daily in this task. “He who masters the art of exact distinction between the law and the Gospel should be called a real theologian,” he said, speaking equally of pastors, professors, and parishioners.

**Lutheran Facts**

Although all Christian churches use Holy Scripture, Lutherans emphasize that Scripture is the final and only certain judge of doctrine and practice (*sola scriptura*)—not human traditions, reason, or churchly authority.

Lutherans also confess the three ecumenical creeds (Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian) because they correctly summarize biblical teaching.

Lutherans find that distinguishing Law and Gospel is a key interpretive principle in understanding the Bible. As John tells us in his Gospel: “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (1:17). (See also 2 Corinthians 3:6). This distinction between Law and Gospel is particularly helpful when we look at how sinners are justified before God by His grace through faith in Christ: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him” (John 3:16–17; see also Galatians 4:4–5; Hebrews 2:14–17; 1 Timothy 1:15.)

Lutherans believe that the proper application of Law and Gospel is imperative, so that sinners are brought to repentance through the condemnation of the Law and are justified through faith in the promises of the Gospel.

The confusion of Law and Gospel leaves one between Scylla and Charybdis: either self-righteous or with weakened faith. Such confusion confirms unrepentant sinners in their sinful thoughts, words, and deeds, and starves repentant sinners of God’s free forgiveness through Christ’s life, death, and resurrection.
God’s Word: The Law

In a madhouse there exists no law.
—John Clare

If we are in a great hurry, we may not appreciate traffic laws. If we are buying a home or opening a business, we may dislike existing zoning laws. Rules and regulations can sometimes seem highly inconvenient. Most people, however, recognize their importance. In fact, every society in the world has some form of law, some code of right and wrong. Without laws the world would become a madhouse.

Why is it that we are annoyed by certain laws? Most often, it’s simply because they prevent us from doing what we want to do. But this is precisely their goal. In the same way, God, knowing all too well our sinful nature, has lovingly given us His divine Law to prevent us from succumbing to sin and being driven even further from Him.

Holy Legality

God’s Law, like God Himself, is holy, righteous, and good. Although it threatens and accuses sinners, the Law does so as part of God’s plan to reveal our sin and our consequent need for salvation. He Himself has mercifully provided this salvation in the person of Christ, who both fulfilled the Law and suffered its condemnation on our behalf.

Exhorting the Christians of Ephesus to live a holy and God-pleasing life, Paul distinguishes between those who are wise and unwise. The wise, he explains, are those who “understand what the will of the Lord is” (Ephesians 5:17). We can look to Psalm 40 to see how the Old Testament writers described the Law: “I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your law is within my heart” (v. 8). The psalmist, clearly one of the wise referred to by Paul, proclaims that he earnestly desires to do the will of God. He goes on to say that he knows God’s will because he knows God’s Law. The Law of God does indeed express His will for our life. For this reason, the Lutheran Confessions can refer to the Law quite simply as “God’s unchangeable will” (FC Ep VI 7; Concordia, p. 487). Not only does the Law teach “what is right and pleasing to God,” but it also “rebukes everything that is sin and contrary to God’s will” (FC Ep V 3; Concordia, p. 484). Because the Law expresses nothing less than the will of a holy, righteous, and good God, Paul can also explain that the Law itself is “holy and righteous and good” (Romans 7:12).

Because the Law expresses God’s holy and perfect will for His creation, He desires that all clearly know what this will is. To this end He gave
the written Law to His Old Testament people (see Exodus 31:18). Moses received the summary of God’s Law, the Ten Commandments, on two stone tablets.

Not all people are descended from Israel, however. Not all have been taught the Ten Commandments as Israel was commanded to teach her children. Are some, then, without the Law? This is the question Paul answers in the opening chapters of Romans. While admitting that the Gentiles “do not have the law”—that is, the written Law given to Israel—Paul explains that “they show that the work of the law is written on their hearts” (2:15). In fact, this “natural” law was given to all people even before the “revealed” Law of the Commandments. Thus the confessors write that those before Moses (even those before the fall into sin) “had God’s Law written into their hearts, because they were created in God’s image” (FC Ep VI 2; Concordia, p. 486). To be sure, sinful human nature prevents a perfect understanding of this natural law, but it does not prevent all understanding. For this reason Paul can explain that the Gentiles are without excuse, because, as the reformers wrote: “Mankind’s reason or natural intellect does still have a dim spark of the knowledge that there is a God. It also knows about the doctrine of the Law” (FC SD II 9; Concordia, p. 521).

While Scripture is clear that all know the Law, it is also perfectly clear that none keep the Law. The author of Ecclesiastes announces that there is no one “who does good and never sins” (7:20). John explains the relationship between sin and the Law, stating that “everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4). In agreement with John, the Lutheran Confessions bluntly state: “Sin is everything that is contrary to God’s Law” (FC SD VI 13; Concordia, p. 559). Lest people be tempted to think lightly of sin, to downplay their own sinfulness by believing they keep most of the Law, sinning only occasionally or breaking only minor points of the Law, James takes pains to explain the folly of this thinking. With a sweeping condemnation he declares that “whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it” (2:10). In this light, it is perfectly understandable that the confessors would note that “all Scripture, all the Church cries out that the Law cannot be satisfied” (Ap V [III] 45 [166]; Concordia, p. 108).

So if it’s impossible for us to keep the Law, what is its purpose? Paul tells us in 1 Timothy 1:8–11:

Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine,
in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted.

The Law of God is not static. God Himself uses it to produce certain effects. In fact, the Law can be put to several uses. In his letter to Timothy, while noting that care must be taken to use the Law properly, Paul gives some indication of one of its uses. He says it was made “for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane” (1 Timothy 1:9). The Law and its threat of punishment are to prevent these people from doing what their sinful nature would otherwise compel them to do. This is referred to as the first use of the Law. Luther states in the Confessions: “We hold that the Law was given by God, first, to restrain sin by threats and the dread of punishment” (SA III II 1; Concordia, p. 271). Likewise, the confessors note that the Law was given “(1) that by the Law outward discipline might be maintained against wild, disobedient people” (FC Ep VI 1; Concordia, p. 486).

The Law is meant not only to prevent sin, but it also reveals sin. Paul says that it is only through the Law that sin is revealed. He confesses: “If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin” (Romans 7:7). Paul does not merely comment on his own experience; expressing the same thought elsewhere, he notes that “through the law comes knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20). Because it is only by means of the Law that we become conscious of sin, this second use of the Law is what the Confessions call its chief use: “the chief office or force of the Law is to reveal original sin with all its fruits. It shows us how very low our nature has fallen” (SA III II 4; Concordia, p. 271).

There are serious consequences for breaking God’s Law. In addition to revealing man’s sin, the second use of the Law also reveals the consequences of sin. It reveals that the holy and sinless God—who also created His people to be holy and sinless—does not at all take sin lightly. He Himself announces, “Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them” (Deuteronomy 27:26). The ultimate consequence of this curse, Paul explains, is death, both temporal and eternal. It is in the light of such scriptural testimony that the authors of the Lutheran Confessions acknowledge that the Law “threatens its transgressors with God’s wrath and temporal and eternal punishments” (FC SD V 17; Concordia, p. 555). Even more strongly, they write that we are “accused or condemned by God’s Law. So we are by nature the children of wrath, death,

---

4 The Lutheran Confessions denote three uses of the Law [see FC Ep VI 1; Concordia, p. 486]. Two of these apply to all people, while the third applies only to those who have first been called and redeemed by the Gospel. We'll look at this third use in “Law, Gospel, and Sanctification,” p. 77.)
and damnation, unless we are delivered from them by Christ’s merit” (FC SD I 6; Concordia, p. 512).

The Law of God may be used in different ways. There is one thing, however, for which the Law is not to be used. Paul, a former proponent of the Law, makes this point again and again in his letters to the early Christian churches. “Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law” (Galatians 3:11), he writes. He goes even further, stating bluntly that “you are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law” (Galatians 5:4). This is obviously no small point. Although the Law expresses God’s will; although it is holy, righteous, and good; and although it has many uses, it cannot effect salvation. Paul goes so far as to say that those who try to use it for this end have instead forfeited salvation. The confessors could therefore reach no conclusion other than that “it is clear that we are not justified by the Law. Otherwise, why would we need Christ or the Gospel . . . ?” (Ap V [III] 136 [257]; Concordia, p. 120).

**Crime and Punishment**

If our civil laws can at times seem burdensome, the divine Law of God can seem even more so! No one escapes its jurisdiction. No one escapes accusation for breaking this Law. And, if we were left to our own devices, no one would escape its penalties.

It is impossible to be nonchalant when meditating on the Law of God. It not only commands and prohibits, but it also points out our failure to obey and the dire consequences that follow. If your meditation on the Law produces “true terrors, contrition, and sorrow,” then you have properly understood it (FC SD II 54; Concordia, p. 530; see SA III II 4; Concordia, p. 271). It is time to hear the Gospel!

Paul had reminded his readers in Galatia of God’s Old Testament announcement of a curse on all those who do not fulfill the Law (3:10). He also reminds them of another biblical curse: “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree” (Galatians 3:13). This, says Paul, applies even to Jesus Himself, who hung on the cross. But how could the sinless Christ who fulfilled the Law be cursed? Paul explains that He became “a curse for us,” in our place (Galatians 3:13). He who fulfilled the Law received the punishment deserved by those who have not fulfilled it. Thanks be to God! Those condemned by the Law have been redeemed from its curse.

**Utter Silence**

Paul informs us that the Law speaks “so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God” (Romans
As you encounter those who do not know or do not believe the Bible, consider how you might begin to discuss both Law and Gospel with them. Many do not know the Ten Commandments. Others may know them and reject them. Yet all people recognize and live their lives according to some form of law, some understanding of right and wrong. Conversation with unbelievers might begin with an attempt to understand the nature of the “law” they follow. On the basis of their explanation, you might emphasize the common ground between what they believe, what all people believe, and what is stated in the Commandments. You might then point out that these commonalities suggest a common source—God Himself. Furthermore, you might ask what happens when they do not fulfill their own “law.” You could point out that the inability to keep even those laws which we acknowledge is an indication that there is something fundamentally wrong with mankind. Our inability to keep the Law reveals our need for the Gospel.

**Comparisons**

**Eastern Orthodox:** “What is necessary in order to please God and to save one’s own soul? In the first place, a knowledge of the true God, and a right faith in Him; in the second place, a life according to faith, and good works” (*The Longer Catechism of the Eastern Church*, question 3).

**Lutheran:** “We believe, teach, and confess that the Law is properly a divine doctrine [Romans 7:12]. It teaches what is right and pleasing to God, and it rebukes everything that is sin and contrary to God’s will. For this reason, then, everything that rebukes sin is, and belongs to, the preaching of the Law” (FC Ep V 3–4; *Concordia*, p. 484).

**Reformed/Presbyterian:** “God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which He bound him and all his posterity to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience; promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it; and endued him with power and ability to keep it . . . . Although true believers be not under the law as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified or condemned; yet is it of great use to them, as well as to others” (*The Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 19.1, 6).

**Roman Catholic:** “The holy Synod declares first, that, for the correct and sound understanding of the doctrine of Justification, it is necessary that each one recognize and confess, that, whereas all men had lost
their innocence in the prevarication of Adam . . . free-will, attenuated as it was in its powers, and bent down, was by no means extinguished in them” (*Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Session 6, Decree on Justification; cf. CCC2 paras. 143, 154–55).

**Baptist:** “We believe that man was created in holiness, under the law of his Maker; but by voluntary transgression fell from that holy and happy state; in consequence of which all mankind are now sinners, not by constraint, but choice; being by nature utterly void of that holiness required by the law of God, positively inclined to evil; and therefore under just condemnation to eternal ruin, without defense or excuse” (*New Hampshire Baptist Confession*, article 3).

**Wesleyan/Methodist:** “Although the law given from God by Moses, as touching ceremonies and rites, does not bind Christians, nor ought the civil precepts thereof of necessity be received in any commonwealth, yet, notwithstanding, no Christian whatsoever is free from the obedience of the commandments which are called moral” (*Methodist Articles of Religion*, article 6).

**Liberal:** “We cannot define Christian ethics in terms of a church-controlled society. Neither can we regard Christian duty as identical with biblical precepts. . . . Christian ethics should be defined as the determination of the duties of a modern Christian living in the modern world. To define it in terms of an ethical system belonging to another age is to fail to make Christianity ethical” (Gerald Birney Smith, ed., *A Guide to the Study of the Christian Religion* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1916], p. 570).

**Point to Remember**

I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your law is within my heart.  
*Psalm 40:8*
God’s Word: The Gospel

Ill news hath wings, and with the wind doth go,
Comfort’s a cripple and comes ever slow.
—Michael Drayton

War, famine, crime, scandal—such is the stuff of headlines. It grabs our attention; it sells newspapers. And it depresses us. There is, to be sure, a desperate shortage of good news in our daily news—so much so that we are frequently skeptical of good news. In moments of cynicism we may even be tempted to label it sentimentalism rather than proper news.

What was the last bit of good news you read in the newspaper, saw on television, or heard on the radio? What was the last bit of good news that had relevance for your own life? While it may seem challenging to find good, current news that has immediate and personal relevance, the death and resurrection of Christ—“old news” for more than 2,000 years—remains the best news. No matter how many times this news is heard, it never loses its personal relevance.

Power Points

The Christian faith and life are set on the foundation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This Gospel is the central doctrine of Christian theology, that which distinguishes the Christian faith from all other religions and philosophies. It is, in short, the peculiar good news of Christ’s death and resurrection for the free forgiveness of sins.

Paul refers to the Gospel as “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). Even in such a short phrase he manages to highlight the manner in which the Gospel differs from the Law. Two differences can be noted here. First, the Gospel is not about doing what is commanded; it is about believing what is promised. And most important, unlike the Law, which cannot justify, Paul specifically states that the Gospel is “for salvation.” These significant differences are concisely expressed in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession: “The Gospel (which is properly the promise of forgiveness of sins and of justification for Christ’s sake) proclaims the righteousness of faith in Christ. The Law does not teach this” (Ap IV [II] 43; Concordia, p. 88).

In the passage discussed above, Paul mentions righteousness being “revealed” with the Gospel. In his letters to the Ephesians and the Corinthians, he sheds some light on why the Gospel must be revealed.

In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one. (Ephesians 6:16)
In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. (2 Corinthians 4:4)

The apostle Paul requests the prayers of the Ephesians so that his proclamation of the Gospel may be made clearly and boldly. Significantly, he refers to the Gospel as a “mystery” (see Ephesians 3). Unlike the Law, which is written on the hearts of all people, the Gospel cannot be known by natural human reason. In this light, Paul’s request is quite urgent: unless the Gospel that has been revealed to him is subsequently revealed by him in his preaching, people will remain in their sins. What is more, because reason cannot comprehend it, the Gospel will not be believed unless this belief is effected by God Himself. This is indicated when Paul notes that unbelievers are “blinded” and are kept “from seeing the light of the gospel” (2 Corinthians 4:4). For this reason, while noting that the human mind has some knowledge of the Law, the Lutheran Confessions explain that “it is so ignorant, blind, and perverted that even when the most ingenious and learned people on earth read or hear the Gospel of God’s Son and the promise of eternal salvation, they cannot by their own powers perceive, apprehend, understand, or believe and regard it as true” (FC SD II 9, Concordia, pp. 521–22).

Scripture declares that God’s Law is universal; it is given to all people. But for whom is the Gospel revealed? Timothy, who is himself a young preacher of the Gospel, is told that Christ “gave Himself as a ransom for all” (1 Timothy 2:6) because He “desires all people to be saved” (1 Timothy 2:4). This bit of information is particularly relevant for those appointed to the task of proclaiming God’s Word. Christ did not die only for some; nor is God stingy with His Good News. Christ’s death covered the sins of all people; He therefore desires His Gospel of forgiveness to be preached to all people. The apostle Peter agrees with Paul, assuring his readers that God is “not wishing that any should perish” (2 Peter 3:9). In agreement with both Peter and Paul, the Formula of Concord insists that “Christ calls all sinners to Himself and promises them rest. He is eager <seriously wills> that all people should come to Him” (FC Ep XI 8; Concordia, p. 498). Likewise, the Formula rejects the notion that “God is unwilling that everyone should be saved. But some—without regard to their sins, from God’s mere counsel, purpose, and will—are chosen for condemnation so that they cannot be saved” (FC Ep XI 19; Concordia, p. 500).

For fuller descriptions of the Gospel’s purpose, we can turn to Mark, 2 Corinthians, and Romans. Mark begins his life of the Savior by calling it “the gospel of Jesus Christ” (1:1). Paul, writing to the Corinthian church, mentions that he has preached “the gospel of Christ” (2 Corinthians 2:12). In the same manner, when he refers to the Gospel in his Letter to the
Romans, he calls it “the ministry of the gospel of Christ” (15:19). As most Christians have learned, the word Gospel simply and literally means “Good News.” But the apostles and evangelists do not have just any good news to share; it is very specific news. It is the Good News about Christ, it is His Gospel. Thus the reformers state that “the Gospel presents Christ to us” (Ap XIIA [V] 76; Concordia, p. 168) and further clarify that “the Gospel is such a preaching as shows and gives nothing else than grace and forgiveness in Christ” (FC SD V 12; Concordia, p. 555). No matter how good the news, if it is not about Jesus, it is not the Gospel of the Scripture. As its authors emphasize time and again, Jesus stands at the beginning, center, and end of the Christian Gospel.

Sadly, many people and many religions preach about Christ without in fact preaching the Gospel. In the early days of the Church, as in our own day, there were those who not only misunderstood the Gospel but who also misapplied it. In an attempt to prevent this, Paul writes to the Corinthians, reminding them of the Gospel as he had purely preached it: “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:1–4). Here Paul highlights three important events: Christ’s death for our sins, His burial, and His resurrection on the third day. Even more succinctly, Paul had reminded them earlier that when he was with them he endeavored to preach nothing “except Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). Christ’s death and resurrection is the only basis on which the forgiveness of sins and eternal life rests. As such, it is the only basis on which the Gospel can be proclaimed. Christ’s death and resurrection for our salvation is the Gospel. As the Lutheran Confessions state: “This is the very voice unique to the Gospel, namely, that for Christ’s sake, and not for the sake of our works, we obtain the forgiveness of sins through faith” (Ap V [III] 153 [274]; Concordia, p. 123).

Not only do the writings of Paul purely set forth the Gospel message, but they also offer strong warnings against being deceived by false gospels and those who preach them. The apostle harshly rebukes the Galatians for “turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one” (1:6–7). But he saves his strongest words for those who were guilty of misleading them, those trying to “distort the gospel of Christ” (1:7). With righteous anger Paul prays that such men be eternally condemned (1:8). Although it may sound extreme, Paul’s reaction is by no means an overreaction. He is well aware of what is at stake. The context of his letter makes clear that some in
Galatia were preaching works as if they were necessary for salvation. No, says Paul; to mingle Law and Gospel is to pervert the Gospel and thereby endanger salvation.

This confusion of Law and Gospel may have begun in Paul’s time, but it certainly didn’t end there. It was also very much at the heart of the debates of the Reformation. The reformers, therefore, had to clarify that “the Gospel is not a preaching of repentance or rebuke. But it is properly nothing other than a preaching of consolation and a joyful message that does not rebuke or terrify. The Gospel comforts consciences against the terrors of the Law, points only to Christ’s merit, and raises them up again by the lovely preaching of God’s grace and favor, gained through Christ’s merit” (FC Ep V 7; Concordia, p. 485).

**Living by Faith**

In the same way that many people faithfully read the morning paper or turn on the evening news, Christians are eager to hear important news that affects their lives. There is none more important or more relevant than the good news of Christ Himself.

What does that mean for the worship life of a Christian? As Paul notes, the Gospel is a mystery; it is not self-evident. Furthermore, because of our sinful nature, we may misunderstand or even be tempted to reject the Gospel after having received it. But God Himself stirs up and strengthens our faith. This faith, Paul writes, comes by hearing the Word of the Gospel itself (Romans 10:17). For this reason Christians eagerly take advantage of opportunities to have their forgiveness announced and their faith strengthened where and when the Good News is preached.

Frequent study of God’s Word and of sound Christian doctrine also keep us from being swept along by the tide of popular preaching and writing that portrays Christianity in a light not dissimilar to many self-help groups. The Gospel, properly speaking, is like no other teaching. As we continue to study God’s Word, we become equipped not only to recognize the Gospel and to distinguish it from contrary messages, but also to refute false teachings that may otherwise endanger our faith and salvation.

**Communicating the Message**

In our sinful world, where good news is so infrequently heard, it is easy to become skeptical about such news or cynical about its content. But our Lord assures us that His Gospel is no sentimental story; it is true, faithfully reported, and eternally relevant. It is good news indeed.
Although it may seem strange to us, there are many who find the Gospel too good to be true. *Free* forgiveness, they say; I don’t have to do *anything*? There is, however, nothing that is too good to be true. Truth is not a matter of good or bad; quite simply, something is either true or it is not. The New Testament authors go to great lengths to verify the truth of the news they preach. Explaining the Gospel to the Corinthians, Paul specifically mentions that the resurrected Christ had been seen by hundreds of people, most of whom were still alive to be consulted (1 Corinthians 15:1–8). The news of Jesus’ death and resurrection is indeed true; happily, this true news is also good news.

While some unbelievers think the Gospel is too good to be true, others say the importance of Jesus is found in His moral example, and they dismiss Him as the one who both fulfilled the Law and suffered its consequences in our stead. To be sure, the sinless life of Jesus does provide a perfect moral example, and Scripture does encourage us to imitate this example. As we are all too aware, however, a perfect example is an example to which we cannot live up. Our gross lack of perfection is, in fact, what prompted Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection—not merely to provide us with an example, but to redeem us. This redemption through Christ is the very Gospel itself.

**Comparisons**

**Eastern Orthodox:** “What was Christ’s doctrine? The Gospel of the kingdom of God, or, in other words, the doctrine of salvation and eternal happiness, the same that is now taught in the Orthodox Church (Mark 1:14–15). How have we salvation by Christ’s doctrine? When we receive it with all our heart, and walk according to it. For, as the lying words of the devil, received by our first parents, became in them the seed of sin and death; so, on the contrary the true Word of Christ, heartily received by Christians, becomes in them the seed of a holy and immortal life (1 Peter 1:23). How have we salvation by Christ’s life? When we imitate it. For He says, ‘If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there shall also My servant be’ (John 12:26)” (*The Longer Catechism of the Eastern Church*, questions 196–98).

**Lutheran:** “But the Gospel is properly the kind of teaching that shows what a person who has not kept the Law (and therefore is condemned by it) is to believe. It teaches that Christ has paid for and made satisfaction for all sins [Romans 5:9]. Christ has gained and acquired for an individual—without any of his own merit—forgiveness of sins, righteousness that avails before God, and eternal life [Romans 5:10]” (*FC Ep V 5; Concordia*, p. 484).
Reformed/Presbyterian: “Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit, who works when, and where, and how He pleases. So also are all other elect persons, who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the Word. . . . God did, from all eternity, decree to justify all the elect, and Christ did, in the fullness of time, die for their sins, and rise again for their justification: nevertheless, they are not justified until the Holy Spirit doth, in due time, actually apply Christ unto them” (*The Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapters 10.3 and 11.4).

Roman Catholic: “The Synod furthermore declares that . . . the beginning of the said Justification is to be derived from the prevenient grace of God, through Jesus Christ . . . that so they, who by sins were alienated from God, may be disposed through His quickening and assisting grace, to convert themselves to their own justification, by freely assenting to and cooperating with that said grace” (*Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Session 6, chapter 5; cf. CCC2 para. 2001).

Wesleyan/Methodist: “The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and works, to faith and calling upon God; wherefore we have not power to do good works, pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preventing us, that we may have a good will, and working with us, when we have that good will” (*Methodist Articles of Religion*, article 8).

Baptist: “We believe that the blessings of salvation are made free to all by the Gospel; that it is the immediate duty of all to accept them by a cordial, penitent, and obedient faith; and that nothing prevents the salvation of the greatest sinner on earth but his own inherent depravity and voluntary rejection of the Gospel; which rejection involves him in an aggravated condemnation” (*New Hampshire Baptist Confession*, article 6).

Liberal: “Theologically, the content of Christology is to be found by asking two questions: ‘From what do men need to be saved?’ and ‘How is Jesus related to man’s salvation?’ If the source of our sin is located in a non-psychological ‘nature’ which we inherit, we shall, of course, interpret the work of Christ in terms of His ‘natures,’ divine and human. But if we think of sin concretely and refer it to its psychological causes, we shall interpret salvation in terms of conscious experience. We shall then not ask concerning the ‘nature’ of Jesus, but rather concerning His religious consciousness and life. We shall emphasize His God-consciousness and His ability to create in His disciples a trust in God,
which gives spiritual insight and moral power. As Schleiermacher declared, the important thing about Jesus is His God-consciousness” (Gerald Birney Smith, ed., A Guide to the Study of the Christian Religion [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1916], pp. 531–32).

**Point to Remember**

I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. *Romans 1:16*

**Distinguishing Law and Gospel**

“Say It Loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud”
—James Brown hit single, 1968

In our society, the majority idea that people have different worth simply based on stereotypes has done much harm to all people. This behavior is based on the practice of false discrimination. We still hear a lot about false discrimination. Employers, for example, announce that they do not discriminate on the basis of age, race, sex, or other criteria. Reputations can be ruined by the mere accusation of discrimination. But there is a difference between false discrimination and making valid judgments based on fact instead of fiction or stereotypes. When based on the facts, discriminating, which simply means “making distinctions,” is often a useful—even necessary!—skill. Despite the negative connotations the word may have in certain situations, we all must discriminate among sets of facts.

Under certain circumstances, discrimination is even to be encouraged. The artist’s eyes are able to discriminate hundreds of colors from one another. This allows him to use the full spectrum of color in his paintings. The young child is taught to discriminate between appropriate and inappropriate behaviors. This skill, part of social awareness, is honed as the child matures. These are both positive examples of discrimination. And the dictionary lists the positive definition as primary: making distinctions, using good judgment. In this section, we will concern ourselves with the primary definition here. Discriminating—making distinctions or using good judgment—is of great importance when we are talking about God’s Law and His Gospel.
Handle with Care

In the previous sections, we looked at the natures and uses of both Law and Gospel. Now it becomes important to further clarify their proper distinction. This distinction is not arbitrary or invented; it is revealed in Scripture itself as the means by which all of God’s Word is to be rightly understood and interpreted. Properly understanding God’s Word, the Christian will properly understand God’s will for his or her salvation.

Let’s look again to Paul’s instructions to young Timothy for an example of this “proper understanding.” Paul reminds Timothy that he is appointed a preacher of both Law and Gospel, and that the Law is good—“if one uses it lawfully” (1 Timothy 1:8). Timothy is to know that the Law can be used improperly and with harmful results. In the same manner, Paul exhorts Timothy to be one who is “rightly handling” (2 Timothy 2:15) the Word of God. Again, an incorrect use of God’s Word may confuse and even lead astray those who hear its proclamation. Paul gives good pastoral advice. Knowing the power and effects of both the Law and the Gospel, Paul is concerned that Timothy rightly divide and properly proclaim each, neither confusing nor mingling them together. Paul’s concern is highlighted in the Lutheran Confessions, which observe that if Law and Gospel are “mixed with each other” then “Christ’s merit is hidden and troubled consciences are robbed of comfort” (FC SD V 1; Concordia, p. 552). Therefore the confessors also state: “We believe, teach, and confess that the distinction between the Law and the Gospel is to be kept in the Church with great diligence as a particularly brilliant light. By this distinction, according to the admonition of St. Paul, God’s Word is rightly divided [2 Timothy 2:15]” (FC Ep V 2; Concordia, p. 484). Here we see the good kind of discrimination at work.

In his second Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul makes a clear distinction between what he calls “the letter” and “the Spirit” (3:6) of the Law. He gives his readers a clue regarding the nature of the former by indicating that it came with letters engraved on stones, a reference to the two tables of the Law given to Moses (3:7). In verse 17 Paul further explains that the Lord Himself is the Spirit. The letter came with Moses, the Spirit with Christ. But Paul not only distinguishes between their names and origins; he also notes their radically different effects. He tells the Corinthians that “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (3:6). This is certainly true. As noted earlier, the chief use of the Law accuses us, condemns us, and announces the deadly consequences of our failure to obey God’s commands. But the proper function of the Gospel is to reveal Christ and the eternal life that He has won for us. The distinctly different effects of the Law and of the Gospel are also noted in the confessional writings of the Lutheran Church. They confess that “whenever the Law alone exercises its office, without the Gospel being added, there is nothing but death and hell” (SA III III 7;
When he writes to the Galatians, Paul also makes a distinction between two things found in Scripture. He here refers to them as the Law and the promises. As he explains their differences, he notes that the Law was “added because of transgressions” (3:19) and that it cannot impart life. By way of contrast, he notes that the Christian’s inheritance “comes by promise” (3:18) so that this promise “might be given to those who believe” (3:22) This promise is clearly the Gospel promise of salvation, a promise received by Abraham in the Old Testament and later fulfilled with Christ’s coming in the New Testament. Paul’s distinction is maintained by the Lutheran confessors, who note that “all Scripture ought to be distributed into these two principal topics: the Law and the promises” (Ap IV [II] 5; Concordia, p. 83). The Law and the promises, though different, are certainly not unrelated. Paul strongly insists that the Law is not opposed to the promises of God. Rather, he says, “The law was our guardian until Christ came” (Galatians 3:24). The authors of the Formula of Concord explain how the Law prepares sinners for and leads them to Christ and His Gospel: “(a) Through the preaching of the Law and its threats in the ministry of the New Testament the hearts of impenitent people may be terrified, and (b) they may be brought to a knowledge of their sins and to repentance. This must not be done in such a way that they lose heart and despair in this process. . . . People must be comforted and strengthened again by the preaching of the Holy Gospel about Christ” (FC SD V 24–25; Concordia, p. 557).

It is not infrequently heard that the Old Testament is Law while the New Testament is Gospel. This is understandable. The first four books of the New Testament are referred to as the Gospels; likewise, many New Testament figures (including Jesus Himself) use the word Law as a sort of shorthand in reference to either the books of Moses or the entire Old Testament. But the New Testament is not without the Law; nor is the Old Testament without the Gospel. Consider, for example, the following passages:

**Exodus 20:1–3:** “And God spoke all these words, saying, ‘I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me.’ ” The chapter continues with the rest of the Ten Commandments through verse 17.

**Isaiah 53:5–6:** “But He was wounded for our transgressions; He was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep
have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the
Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” Read the rest of Isaiah
53 for a full description of Christ’s life and death and purpose: clear
Gospel.

**Romans 2:1, 5–9:** “Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of
you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn
yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. . . . But
because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath
for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will
be revealed. He will render to each one according to his works: to those
who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality,
He will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do
not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and
fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who
does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek.” The heading for this section
of Romans 2 is “God’s Righteous Judgment”—pretty harsh words of
Law are spoken here.

**Ephesians 1:2–8:** “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the
Lord Jesus Christ. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus
Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the
heavenly places, even as He chose us in Him before the foundation of
the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He
predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to
the purpose of His will, to the praise of His glorious grace, with which
He has blessed us in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through
His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches
of His grace, which He lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight.”
Here Paul is jubilant in his description of our redemption through
Christ. This is a joyful depiction of Gospel.

Two Law, two Gospel. Law and Gospel each clearly in the Old Testament
and each clearly in the New Testament. The confessors, especially eager to
highlight the Gospel’s Old Testament presence, make note of this when
they write that “in some places Scripture presents the Law, and in others
the promises about Christ. In other words, in the Old Testament, Scripture
promises that Christ will come, and it offers, for His sake, the forgiveness of
sins, justification, and life eternal. Or in the Gospel, in the New Testament,
Christ Himself (since He has appeared) promises the forgiveness of sins,
justification, and life eternal” (Ap IV [II] 5; Concordia, p. 83).

Jesus pointed to the presence of the Gospel in the Old Testament as He
read the Scriptures in the synagogue:
And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as was His custom, He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and He stood up to read. And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to Him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’ And He rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:16–21)

Jesus shocked His audience in Nazareth. Reading from the prophet Isaiah, He concluded by announcing that Isaiah’s Gospel promise was being fulfilled in their very presence. In terms unmistakable to His hearers, He announced that He was the Anointed One (i.e., the Messiah, the Christ) mentioned by the prophet. He was the one with whom the Good News arrived.

This announcement was not lost on Jesus’ disciples. Peter, in the Book of Acts, tells his audience that it was not Isaiah alone who foretold the coming of Christ; rather, “to Him all the prophets bear witness” (10:43). This revelation is quite significant. Not only can the whole of Scripture be divided into Law and Gospel, but also the whole of Scripture is about Jesus Himself. Not only are Law and Gospel the keys to rightly understanding the written Word of God, but they are also the keys to understanding the incarnate Word of God and His divine work. The Lutheran Confessions describe this work by saying that the Law is “an alien work of Christ. Passing through this teaching, Christ arrives at His proper office, that is, to preach grace, console, and give life, which is properly the preaching of the Gospel” (FC Ep V 10; Concordia, p. 485).

Paul very clearly and succinctly summarizes the great emphases of Scripture. Men are sinners, but “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Timothy 1:15). Sin leads to death, but “the free gift of God is eternal life” (Romans 6:23). Sin and salvation, life and death—from Genesis to Revelation the Scriptures consistently highlight this dialectic of Law and Gospel. One exhorts, the other comforts; one chastises, the other consoles; one condemns, the other saves. These dual emphases are illustrated and proclaimed throughout the great sweep of Old Testament history, in the preaching of Christ, in the sermons of Acts, in the Letters of Paul and the other New Testament authors. From this witness of the whole of Scripture—and even in such brief verses as those shown here—the reformers were led rightly to believe that “whenever the Law and works
are mentioned, we must know that Christ cannot be excluded as Mediator” (Ap V [III] 251 [372]; Concordia, p. 138).

The author of Hebrews can help us confirm the necessity of properly distinguishing between the Law and the Gospel: “And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him” (11:6). There are some who believe the Bible to be a sort of guidebook to holy living, that is, a book that describes and prescribes what people must do to live a holy life. This is not entirely incorrect; the Law found in Scripture certainly tells us how we are to live. But the author of Hebrews reminds us that, even if we were to expend all of our energy in the observation of the Law, we would remain unable to please God without faith. Thus the confessors write that “these two things should always be understood in the preaching of the Law. First, the Law cannot be obeyed unless we have been reborn through faith in Christ, just as Christ says in John 15:5, ‘Apart from Me you can do nothing.’ Second, some outward works can certainly be done. But this general judgment, which interprets the whole Law, must be retained. ‘Without faith it is impossible to please [God]’ (Hebrews 11:6)” (Ap V [III] 135 [256], Concordia, p. 120). As the Letter to the Hebrews gloriously explains, this faith that is God-pleasing is faith in God’s own promises, His Gospel. To read the Bible simply as a book of laws is therefore to misread it. It is also—and most important—a book of promises.

**Divine Discernment**

Discrimination between different foods and medicines is not merely an intellectual exercise. It can be, in some situations, a matter of life and death. So it is with those desiring to be fed with and healed by God’s Holy Word.

Many people, even many Christians, do not properly understand the distinction between Law and Gospel. Not recognizing the difference between the two, many outside of the Church regard Christianity as a religion of rules and regulations, of doom and gloom. Even more distressing, there are those within the Church who remain burdened with a sense of guilt or anxiety because they know they do not measure up to the demanding biblical standard of holiness. Properly understanding the distinction between Law and Gospel, the Christian will realize that this guilt is produced by the Law. He or she will also know—and be greatly comforted to know!—that the message of the Gospel is that our guilt has been removed. Despite any feelings to the contrary, our Lord sees us as perfectly holy, our sins having been covered by the death of His only Son.

A proper understanding of the distinction between Law and Gospel will affect the way in which you daily read and study the Bible. Many
people simply open the Bible and begin reading at random. Some read the Bible merely as literature. Others scan the text of Scripture looking for answers to particular questions. Reading God’s Word is always to be encouraged. But reading God’s Word with an awareness of its two major themes will provide a depth of understanding that many miss. Being aware of the nature and purpose of the Law, readers will gain a deeper understanding of their own nature: creatures made in the image of God but, having fallen into sin, separated from God and standing under His judgment. Being aware of the nature and purpose of the Gospel, readers will gain a deeper understanding of God’s own nature: loving, merciful, and forgiving, willing to sacrifice His own Son so that we might once again be united with Him.

**Test Your Skills**

We do hear a lot about discrimination. But perhaps not enough! Paul warns us that God’s Word must be correctly handled; he informs us that the Law is good—but only if used properly. In humble thanksgiving for this precious gift of God’s Word, the Christian responds with the desire to use this gift faithfully and properly, distinguishing carefully between Law and Gospel.

We’ve heard the oversimplified comment that the Old Testament contains the Law while the New Testament contains the Gospel. As it stands, this comment is not false. The Old Testament does “contain” the Law and the New Testament does “contain” the Gospel. When stated in this simplified manner, however, the impression may be given that these are the only contents of each. Review the passages on pages 56–57 that show clearly both Law and Gospel in the Old Testament and the New Testament. Were there no Gospel before Christ’s incarnation, then Old Testament believers would have been denied salvation. Paul declares, “No one is justified before God by the law” (Galatians 3:11). The author of Hebrews, however, clearly indicates that Old Testament believers will dwell with God in heaven:

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered Him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore. These all died in faith, not having received the
things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared for them a city. (Hebrews 11:8–16)

**Comparisons**

The following table shows Bible passages sorted into their relation to Law and Gospel, which will provide examples to improve your ability to sort the content into Law, Gospel, or a few special cases.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCRIPTURE</th>
<th>LAW</th>
<th>GOSPEL</th>
<th>BOTH</th>
<th>OTHER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exod. 20:3</td>
<td>As the First Commandment, this passage is clearly Law.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John 3:16</td>
<td>This verse, of course, is “the Gospel in a nutshell.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lev. 11:7–8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>As ceremonial law, Old Testament food restrictions have been abrogated (abolished) through the coming of Christ (see Matthew 5:17; Acts 10:9–16).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job 19:25–27</td>
<td>Job’s expression of expectant hope in his living Redeemer, and his own bodily resurrection, is Gospel.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isa. 9:6–7</td>
<td>Fulfilled in Christ, Isaiah’s ancient prophecy is Gospel.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCRIPTURE</td>
<td>LAW</td>
<td>GOSEP</td>
<td>BOTH</td>
<td>OTHER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark 16:16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The gift of faith and the promises of Holy Baptism are Gospel. Rejcting God’s saving gifts and promises through unbelief places one under the Law’s condemnation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke 22:19–20</td>
<td></td>
<td>The institution of the Lord’s Supper, whereby Christ grants us the forgiveness of sins through His broken body and poured-out blood, is Gospel.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eph. 2:8–10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>That which God provides us because of Christ, namely, His unmerited grace and the gift of faith to receive it, is Gospel. God’s condemnation of our self-righteous works, as well as the works performed after we have come to faith, are Law.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Col. 3:1–4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Paul faithfully presents the Gospel (see also 2:9–15) as the motivation for the Christian’s thankful obedience to the Law.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Tim. 5:23</td>
<td>While Paul’s Holy Spirit-inspired words appear to be “sanctified advice,” properly speaking they are still Law.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heb. 13:1</td>
<td>The writer’s appeal to fraternal charity is Law.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Point to Remember

The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. 2 Corinthians 3:6

Applying Law and Gospel

Careless talk costs lives.
—World War II security slogan

In the context of war, saying the wrong thing to the wrong person at the wrong time can be a deadly mistake. But even off the battlefield, our words can have serious and unintentional consequences if we do not choose and speak them carefully. Sometimes we say too much, sometimes too little. Sometimes we say the wrong thing; sometimes we speak at the wrong time. Many such misunderstandings are of minor importance; in fact, as an essential part of any situation comedy, they are often a source of amusement. When the words are God’s own, however, misunderstanding becomes much more serious.

Completing the Task

It is of great importance that Christians properly understand Law and Gospel. It is of equal importance, especially if we are to make disciples of all nations, that Christians be able to articulate and correctly apply God’s Word of Law and Gospel. In order to do so, it is necessary to understand not only the nature and purpose of each but also the effects—intentional and unintentional—that each may have upon their hearers.

Despite unending hardship and persecution, the apostle Paul remained well aware of his task as an apostle. It was nothing other than “to testify to the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24). Given the persecution he suffered, Paul could have made his life infinitely more comfortable if he had simply refused to give such testimony. Or he could have given a less controversial testimony. He did not, however, because he knew that saving faith is founded upon no testimony other than that of God’s gracious Gospel. And, as he explains in his Epistle to the Romans, “faith comes from hearing” (10:17). For this reason the authors of the Lutheran Confessions note that faithful proclamation of the Gospel is the means by which Christ “gathers an eternal Church for Himself . . . . By this means, and in no other way (i.e., through His holy Word, when people hear it preached or read it, and
through the holy Sacraments when they are used according to His Word), God desires to call people to eternal salvation” (FC SD II 50; Concordia, p. 529).

Apostles are one thing—it’s their job to proclaim the Gospel—but what about the rest of us? Why is it necessary that all God’s servants faithfully proclaim the Law as well as the Gospel? Although the proclamation of the Gospel is the means by which Christ calls men to salvation, this does not mean that there is no necessity of also applying the Law. Although He Himself would fulfill the Law in His atoning death, Jesus tells His audience: “Whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:19). For this reason it is vitally important that we know what God’s commandments are, that we know His Law. This is also essential because if we do not know the Law we will remain unaware of our sin and our consequent need for salvation. As the psalmist asks, “Who can discern his errors?” (19:12).

Unless God’s Law itself reveals our sin and accuses us of it, we will remain ignorant of our need for the Gospel. Both Law and Gospel must therefore be applied to Christians and non-Christians alike. The truth of this and the reasons for doing so are emphasized in the reformers’ confession that “these two doctrines, we believe and confess, should always be diligently taught in God’s Church forever, even to the end of the world. They must be taught with the proper distinction.” The reasons are so that “(a) through the preaching of the Law and its threats in the ministry of the New Testament the hearts of impenitent people may be terrified, and (b) they may be brought to a knowledge of their sins and to repentance” and so that they “be comforted and strengthened again by the preaching of the Holy Gospel about Christ” (FC SD V 24–25; Concordia, p. 557).

The Book of Acts, describing the early growth of the Christian faith, contains a large number of evangelistic sermons. Two examples of such sermons illustrate the manner in which Law and Gospel were applied by early Christian preachers. In chapter 2, Peter recalls the events of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. As he does so, he applies the Law by emphasizing that Christ’s death was effected “by the hands of lawless men” (v. 23), including his hearers. But when the Law had done its work, when his audience was “cut to the heart” (v. 37), Peter is quick to apply the Gospel. He encourages them to receive Baptism “in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (v. 38), and he assures them that the Gospel promises have been made even for them and for their children (v. 39). Peter also applies Law and Gospel in his sermon of chapter 3. He accuses his audience of having “denied the Holy and Righteous One” (v. 14) and of having “killed the Author of life” (v. 15). But having done so, he also assures them
that, with repentance, God will “send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus” (v. 20). He concludes by announcing again that Jesus was raised and sent “to you first, to bless you” (v. 26). These sermons illustrate well the faithful application of both Law and Gospel. They also illustrate the emphasis of the Lutheran Confessions that “the two doctrines belong together and should also be taught next to each other, but in a definite order and with a proper distinction” (FC SD V 15; Concordia, p. 555). Peter preaches both. Distinguishing between the two, he first preaches the Law to effect repentance. After the Law has done its work, he then applies the Gospel to comfort and console with the Good News of salvation.

Let’s look at two other examples of Law and Gospel from Scripture:

And behold, a man came up to Him, saying, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” And He said to him, “Why do you ask Me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments.” He said to Him, “Which ones?” And Jesus said, “You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The young man said to Him, “All these I have kept. What do I still lack?” Jesus said to him, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.” When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. And Jesus said to His disciples, “Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, “Who then can be saved?” But Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” (Matthew 19:16–26)

And our second example:

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone’s bonds were unfastened. When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried with a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” And they spoke the word of
the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. (Acts 16:25–33)

In each of these passages essentially the same question is asked. Although the way in which the question is phrased betrays something of the mind-set of those who ask, each asks about the way of salvation. The answers received by these two men, though, are startlingly different and may at first cause some confusion. The jailer is given what is perhaps the expected answer: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). This is the Gospel answer: faith alone, believing in Christ and His promise, effects salvation. The young man in Matthew, however, is told to “keep the commandments” (Matthew 19:17). When he claims to have done so, Jesus tells him to sell everything he has. We then read that the young man “went away sorrowful” (v. 22). What accounts for these different answers? Did Jesus really mean to suggest that obeying the Law or selling our possessions is necessary for salvation? Absolutely not! Rather, Law and Gospel are applied as they are appropriate. The jailer was at the point of despair; he had drawn his sword to kill himself; he fell trembling before Paul and Silas. The night’s terrifying events had displayed God’s mighty power and left him in desperate need of consolation. By way of contrast, the rich young man approached Jesus proudly and completely unaware of his own sinfulness. He was in need of hearing the Law and being made aware of his inability to earn his own salvation.

The manner in which Jesus and Paul apply Law and Gospel illustrates the powerful effects of each—and the vital need for not only distinguishing between the two but also knowing when each needs to be applied. As Luther often wrote: “The Law is to be preached to secure sinners, the Gospel to terrified sinners.” This is because “the Law always accuses and terrifies consciences” (Ap IV [II] 38; Concordia, p. 87), preparing them for that which will “console, and give life, which is properly the preaching of the Gospel” (FC Ep V 10; Concordia, p. 485).

The Gospel is effectively applied to sinners not only in the preaching of God’s Word but also in the administration of Baptism in the name of His Son. As Paul explains to the Galatians, all who have been baptized into Christ become “heirs according to promise” (3:29). Here again Paul uses the word promise as a synonym for the Gospel itself. He also speaks to Titus of our having become heirs on account of this washing and rebirth. Through this application of water and the Word of the Gospel, he writes, Jesus saved us. (See Titus 3:4–7.) The Gospel benefits of Baptism are extolled in the Small Catechism, which explains that “it works forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare” (SC IV; Concordia, p. 339).
As the Gospel is revealed and applied in the Sacrament of Baptism, so it is in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. On the night of its institution, Jesus explained the great benefit of this Sacrament. Taking the cup, He told His disciples they were about to receive “My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:28). This forgiveness of sins is the essence of the Gospel. It is for this reason that the Lutheran Confessions can boldly state that “the entire Gospel and the article of the Creed—I believe in . . . the holy Christian Church, . . . the forgiveness of sin, and so on—are embodied by the Word in this Sacrament and presented to us” (LC V 32; Concordia, p. 435). Preaching, Baptism, the Lord’s Supper—the Lord has left His Church many and various means by which the Good News of His salvation is to be applied to sinners seeking consolation. In humble thanksgiving we receive these gifts for our benefit.

So what is the relationship between the Gospel and the Church? “Cleansing,” “washing,” and “making holy” all describe the work of the Gospel, the benefits received from Christ’s having given Himself up for us. It is, in fact, this work of the Gospel that both brings the Church into existence and preserves her until the Lord’s return. Therefore the Church is urged to purely and continually preach and teach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself declares that this is the only means by which we remain a part of His Church: “If you abide in My word, you are truly My disciples” (John 8:31). At the same time, the Church is jealously to guard the pure doctrine of the Gospel, watching out for those who “create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught” (Romans 16:17). On the basis of its central place in the Church, the authors of the Lutheran Confessions note that the Gospel is the means by which the Church can be both recognized and defined. “We know,” they write, “that Christ’s Church is with those who teach Christ’s Gospel” (Ap V [III] 279 [400]; Concordia, p. 143). This, they further explain, relates not only to the preaching of the Gospel but also to its application in the Sacraments: “The Church is the congregation of saints [Psalm 149:1] in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered” (AC VII 1–2; Concordia, p. 34).

**Aptly Applied**

God’s Word is powerful. His Word of Law and His Word of Gospel, however, each produce very different results. For this reason it is important that each is applied properly, at the right time, in the right amount, and in the right order.

It is comforting to know that God Himself has appointed and ordained ministers of His Word and Sacrament. We are often unable to discern our
own sinfulness. We are also frequently tempted to downplay the consequences of what we may consider to be insignificant faults. That we might never delude ourselves or become self-righteous, God Himself has ordained men to proclaim and to apply the Law, to reveal and announce on the basis of His Word that we are—even if it is not obvious—sinful and deserving of God’s wrath. But we may give thanks that this is not the only task for which God has appointed His ministers. They are also to proclaim the Gospel. Although we are often unaware of our sins, we can become equally forgetful regarding the forgiveness of our sins. For this reason pastors are charged with the task of faithfully and constantly preaching this forgiveness in biblical sermons and applying this forgiveness in the administration of the Sacraments.

Christians hear Law and Gospel proclaimed by their pastor. They, in turn, communicate Law and Gospel in conversations with their friends and neighbors. As this section illustrates, however, Law and Gospel are not to be applied randomly or without thought. Consideration must be given to the purpose and effects of each, as well as to the circumstances particular to the hearer. Because the Law is meant to reveal sin and the Gospel to forgive sin, it will be important to apply the one before the other. At times there may even be circumstances under which there is no necessity of proclaiming the Law. Those already conscious of and burdened by their sin will find relief only in the words of God’s sure promise of forgiveness for the sake of Christ.

A Faith-Filled Response

Our God is a gracious God. Not only has He revealed Himself in Scripture, but He has appointed pastors to proclaim His Word faithfully. Through them He applies His Gospel not only by means of the spoken Word but also through the means of Baptism and Holy Communion. A gracious God indeed!

Christians often hear it said—even by fellow Christians—that attendance at services of Word and Sacrament is unnecessary. “After all, I can get the same thing from reading my Bible at home,” comes the reply. It is certainly true that God’s Word contains all that is necessary for salvation. However, there is great benefit in hearing this Word proclaimed. For this reason the preaching office was ordained by Christ Himself. Through the work of this office, Law and Gospel are distinguished and applied to the Church and her members. What is more, this written and proclaimed Word is not the only benefit God would have His people receive. As a reading of God’s Word makes clear, Jesus also instituted the Sacraments by which His Gospel is applied. We come into God’s house not because we
are coerced by necessity, but because we are eager to receive all of the good gifts made available for the strengthening and preserving of our faith.

Because the Gospel is indeed applied in the Sacrament of the Altar, Luther arranged brief questions and answers as an aid to those preparing for its reception (see “Christian Questions with Their Answers,” LSB, pp. 329–30). In a biblical, pastoral manner, Luther first appeals to the Law. “Do you believe that you are a sinner?” he asks. “How do you know this?” “What have you deserved from God because of your sins?” As the answers to these questions make clear, it is the Law, summarized in the Ten Commandments, that reveals our sin, its consequences, and our need for the Gospel. This Gospel is then extolled in brief questions regarding Christ’s death for the forgiveness of sins and, finally, with respect to the Sacrament itself. Contemplation of these questions and their answers is an ideal way to spend a few moments, either before worship begins or while you await your turn to approach the altar.

COMPARISONS

**Eastern Orthodox:** “What must we join with prayer in order to be grounded in the hope of salvation and blessedness? Our own exertions for the attainment of blessedness (Luke 6:46; Matthew 7:21). What doctrine may we take as our guide in these exertions? The doctrine of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is briefly set forth in His Beatitudes, or sentences on blessedness” (*The Longer Catechism of the Eastern Church*, questions 435–36).

**Lutheran:** “We believe, teach, and confess that the distinction between the Law and the Gospel is to be kept in the Church with great diligence as a particularly brilliant light. By this distinction, according to the admonition of St. Paul, God’s Word is rightly divided [2 Timothy 2:15]” (FC Ep V 2; *Concordia*, p. 484).

**Reformed/Presbyterian:** “They whom God has accepted in His Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved. . . . Nevertheless they may . . . fall into grievous sins; and for a time continue therein; whereby they incur God’s displeasure, and grieve His Holy Spirit; come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts; have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded; hurt and scandalize others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves” (*The Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter 17.1, 3).
Roman Catholic: “If anyone says, that the man who is justified and howsoever perfect, is not bound to observe the commandments of God and of the Church, but only to believe; as if indeed the Gospel were a bare and absolute promise of eternal life, without the condition of observing the commandments; let him be anathema. If anyone says, that Jesus Christ was given by God to men as a Redeemer in whom to trust, and not also as a Legislator whom to obey; let him be anathema.” (Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, Session 6, On Justification, canons 20–21; cf. CCC2 paras. 1965–86).

Baptist: “We believe that the Law of God is the eternal and unchangeable rule of His moral government; that it is holy, just, and good; and that the inability which the Scriptures ascribe to fallen men to fulfill its precepts arises entirely from their love of sin; to deliver them from which, and to restore them through a Mediator to unfeigned obedience to the holy Law, is one great end of the Gospel, and of the means of grace connected with the establishment of the visible Church” (New Hampshire Baptist Confession, article 12).

Wesleyan/Methodist: “Original sin stands not in the following of Adam (as the Pelagians do vainly talk), but it is the corruption of the nature of every man, that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam, whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and of his own nature inclined to evil, and that continually” (Methodist Articles of Religion, article 7).

Liberal: “Today we are coming more and more to think of religion as a normal and natural experience. Those who confuse experience with its doctrinal interpretation are greatly perplexed by this tendency, for it seems like abandoning fundamental realities of Christianity. But the history of religion has made us aware that, so far as the supernaturalistic details of a doctrine of salvation are concerned, these appear in various forms in pagan religions as well as in Christianity. . . . The distinctive qualities of Christian salvation must be looked for in the kind of moral and religious character produced by Christian faith” (Gerald Birney Smith, ed., A Guide to the Study of the Christian Religion [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1916], p. 523).

**Point to Remember**

But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. 

*Acts 20:24*
**Law, Gospel, and Justification**

Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
That in the course of justice none of us
Should see salvation.
—Portia, in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*

“I was perfectly justified!” Such is often the cry of those seeking to escape punishment. The claim—in the courtroom as well as in popular use—is a legal claim, an appeal to the laws of the state or to commonly accepted ideas of right and wrong. A lawyer, for example, may argue that his client committed no murder; rather, it was “justifiable homicide.” That is, it was legal homicide, an act not condemned by the law. Quite frequently we attempt to justify our actions by appealing to the law. That is, though we understand why others think we have committed some wrong, we argue that technically—according to the letter of the law—we are innocent.

**Just an Observation**

Although we may often think of *justify* and *justification* as technical theological language, they are in fact derived from the courtroom. They are legal terms. It is not surprising, then, that even in their theological use they have some relation to the Law. What may be surprising is the way in which the Bible speaks of justification in relation to the Law.

Although discussed in section 1, the Law’s inability to justify deserves mention again. In Galatians 2:15–16 (only two verses!) Paul says three times that justification is impossible according to the Law. He obviously does not want this point to be missed. And just to make sure it is not, he emphasizes this even more strongly again in the fifth chapter, saying that “You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace” (v. 4). This is no small matter. The Law of God is good and holy, but by it we cannot be made holy. Paul makes this point so strongly and so often that it could not be ignored by the Lutheran reformers. They wrote that “by their own strength, people cannot fulfill God’s Law. They are all under sin, subject to eternal wrath and death. Because of this, we cannot be freed by the Law from sin and be justified” (Ap IV 40; *Concordia*, p. 87). But this does not mean that the Law has no place in God’s plan for our salvation.

Although the Law is powerless to justify, the New Testament is also clear that the Law plays an important role in preparing people for the free gift of justification. Paul takes pains to insist that the Law is not opposed to the promises of God. What, then, is their relationship? Paul explains that
“the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith” (Galatians 3:24). Justification is by faith, not Law. But it was the Law that led us to Christ, in whom we place our faith. How did it do this? The accusations of the Law lead sinners to repentance. Concerning this the Lutheran Confessions state that “to repent means nothing other than to truly acknowledge sins, to be heartily sorry for them, and to stop doing them. This knowledge comes from the Law” (FC SD V 8–9; Concordia, p. 554). By this function of the Law man is prepared to receive the Gospel. Being made aware of his sins, man is made aware of his need for forgiveness. Thus the Law is sometimes referred to as God’s “alien” work, while the Gospel is called His “proper” work. The confessors make this distinction when discussing the relationship between the Law, the Gospel, and justification: “He must do the work of another (reprove), in order that He may afterward do His own work, which is to comfort and to preach grace” (FC SD V 11; Concordia, pp. 554–55).

What, then, is the relationship between Jesus and the Law? All men are born under the Law. Jesus, being true man as well as true God, was not exempted from this condition of birth. Paul makes note of this when he mentions that the Son of God was “born of woman, born under the law” (Galatians 4:4). But, as he goes on to explain, Jesus was born this way for a particular purpose. He was born under the Law “to redeem those who were under the law” (v. 5). What exactly does the apostle mean by this? Remembering the chief purpose of the Law—to reveal man’s sin and to accuse him of his sinfulness—it would not be wrong to say that the Law announces a curse on us. It announces that we who have not fulfilled the Law deservedly face death and condemnation. The good news is that we do not face these consequences. Paul explains the reason for this. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Galatians 3:13). Not only was Christ born like us, born under Law, but He was also born for us, to suffer in our place the curse that had been pronounced on us. Therefore, commenting on Galatians 3:13, the Confessions state that “the Law condemns all people. But Christ—without sin—has borne the punishment of sin. He has been made a victim for us and has removed that right of the Law to accuse and condemn those who believe in Him” (Ap V [III] 58 [179]; Concordia, p. 109).

Christ’s relationship to the Law—being born under it and having suffered its curse—radically affects the relationship between Christians and the Law. Although the Law formerly accused us, or, as Paul says, “stood against us with its legal demands,” its power to do so has now been nullified. Having both fulfilled the Law and suffered under it, our Lord canceled “the record of debt” (Colossians 2:14). With Christ’s very body the Law was taken away and nailed to the cross. We can therefore joyfully confess with
Paul that “Christ is the end of the law” (Romans 10:4). We can joyfully confess with the reformers that “since they [Christians] are counted righteous, the Law cannot accuse or condemn them, even though they have not actually satisfied the Law” (Ap V [III] 58 [179]; Concordia, p. 109). That final clause is important. We have not actually satisfied the Law. Our relation to the Law has not changed because of something we have done. It is only on account of Christ and His saving work that the Law no longer accuses or condemns. It is only on account of the Gospel that the curse of the Law has been removed.

Jesus’ relationship to the Law is intimately entwined with His relationship to the Gospel. While Paul tells the Romans that his Gospel is none other than “the preaching of Jesus Christ” (16:25), he also explains to the Corinthians that the Gospel saves (1 Corinthians 15:2). As he outlines the content of this saving Gospel message, he cannot but mention the central event of the Gospel, that “Christ died for our sins” (v. 3). That is, Christ died because we had broken the Law; Christ suffered the ultimate penalty of the Law’s curse. It might be said in a sense that Jesus’ relation to the Law is the Gospel. The news that He suffered the Law’s penalty in our place is the good news. This is the point Luther makes as he confesses the doctrine of justification in his famous explanation of the Creed’s Second Article: “I believe that Jesus Christ . . . is my Lord. He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil. He did this not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death” (SC II; Concordia, p. 329).

If, then, we were all born under the Law, what is our relationship with the Gospel? Paul informed the Colossians that, on account of Christ’s death, they have been reconciled to God and can now stand “holy and blameless and above reproach before Him” (1:22). They are told simply that this is “the hope of the gospel” (1:23). Indeed it is! Once being alienated, now being reconciled; once being evil, now being holy; once enemies, now free from accusation—these are the amazing effects of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. These are benefits not to be squandered. Paul therefore urges his audience to continue in their faith, to remain “stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard” (1:23). Paul’s exhortation to the Colossians remains relevant for each of us today. Having been redeemed from the Law and reconciled by the Gospel, let us continue joyfully and thankfully in the faith that lays hold of such good news. We can do so with the assurance that it is God’s own Spirit who has “called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith” (SC II; Concordia, p. 330).
Thanks be to God, we have no need of appealing to the Law. Thanks be to God, we have been redeemed from the Law! Jesus Himself suffered what we lawfully deserved, giving us instead a free and unearned pardon.

As you consider Jesus’ relationship with the Law, what comfort can you take in the circumstances of His birth, life, and death? Christians familiar with both the Scriptures and their own behavior will be acutely aware of their inability to keep the Law. This should never lead one to despair of salvation, however. The good news of the Gospel is that Jesus Himself was born under the Law, that He perfectly fulfilled the Law’s demands in His earthly life, and that He suffered the condemnation of the Law in His atoning death. These things He did in our place, for our sake. This is the Christian’s great comfort: all that we cannot do, Christ has done for us.

How can we, like the Colossians, “continue in the faith, stable and steadfast” (1:23)? Just as we have been saved through faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, so, too, does the ministry of the Gospel continue to strengthen and preserve our faith. This, in fact, is the reason behind the writing of so many of Paul’s New Testament Letters. He knows that his audience has received salvation by grace through faith in Christ. In many cases it was Paul himself who first proclaimed the Gospel of Christ to them. Yet he writes to remind them of this Gospel, to comfort, to encourage, and to strengthen the faith of those who already believe. These same benefits are received when we read the Scriptures or hear them proclaimed. Likewise, we receive these benefits through the administration of the Gospel by means of the Sacraments. So long as we remain in this world, afflicted by sin and our lingering sinful nature, we will eagerly seek to make use of these gracious gifts of God.

The Christian can indeed proclaim, “I was perfectly justified!” This claim can be made confidently even in the court of God Himself. But it is not made with an appeal to the Law. The Christian instead appeals to Christ, whose perfect life and perfect death are the basis for our perfect justification.

All of this is indeed comforting good news. But the question remains: How do we respond to a friend who believes that both believing the Gospel and obeying the Law are necessary for salvation? How do we clarify the distinctive purposes of Law and Gospel? As the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions frequently make clear, the mingling of Law and Gospel is a dangerous and harmful thing. One way in which they are mingled or confused is by appointing to one the work of the other. To be sure, as we will review in the next section, Christians do follow the Law of God; but
this in no way affects the justification that has been freely received by faith in the Gospel of Christ. Perhaps the best response to those who believe that keeping the Law is necessary for salvation is to review with them the numerous passages in which Paul declares that the Law cannot justify. Galatians 5:4 is a particularly strong statement on this matter: “You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace.” Galatians 3:3 is also relevant; here the Galatians are asked, “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?”

**Comparisons**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHURCH BODY</th>
<th>ORIGINAL SIN</th>
<th>LAW’S PURPOSE</th>
<th>GOSPEL’S PURPOSE</th>
<th>SALVATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Orthodox</td>
<td>Stained soul; will able to cooperate with grace.</td>
<td>Show God’s will for our lives.</td>
<td>Provide empowering grace, yielding obedience.</td>
<td>Ultimately depends on the Christian’s obedience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutheran</td>
<td>Thoroughly corrupted soul; will turned completely against God.</td>
<td>Point out our sin, restrain evil, and show God’s will for our lives.</td>
<td>Provide forgiving grace through Word and Sacrament.</td>
<td>Assured to all who believe in Christ’s perfect obedience and sacrifice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reformed/ Presbyterian</td>
<td>Thoroughly corrupted soul; will turned completely against God.</td>
<td>Point out our sin, restrain evil, and show God’s will for our lives.</td>
<td>Provide forgiving grace, symbolized by Word and Sacrament.</td>
<td>Never sure, as it is given only to the elect, those whom God has pre-chosen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>Corrupted soul; will able to cooperate with grace.</td>
<td>Show God’s will for our lives.</td>
<td>Provide empowering grace, yielding obedience.</td>
<td>Ultimately depends on the Christian’s obedience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>Thoroughly corrupted soul; will greatly impaired.</td>
<td>Show God’s will for our lives.</td>
<td>Provide grace so that will chooses salvation.</td>
<td>Ultimately depends on the Christian’s decision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHURCH BODY</td>
<td>ORIGINAL SIN</td>
<td>LAW’S PURPOSE</td>
<td>GOSPEL’S PURPOSE</td>
<td>SALVATION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WESLEYAN/METHODIST</td>
<td>Thoroughly corrupted soul; will greatly impaired.</td>
<td>Show God’s will for our lives.</td>
<td>Provide grace so that will chooses salvation.</td>
<td>Ultimately depends on the Christian’s decision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIBERAL</td>
<td>Primarily a psychological experience.</td>
<td>Man-made for life in community.</td>
<td>Model of Jesus’ ethical life.</td>
<td>Pertains only to betterment of this life.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Point to Remember**

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. *Ephesians 2:8–9*

**Law, Gospel, and Sanctification**

Is that which is holy loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because it is loved by the gods?

—Plato

Even the pagan philosopher Plato was greatly concerned with the issue of holiness. In our modern society, however, *holy* has become a four-letter word in more than the literal sense. Although we are inundated with aids and advice for self-help and self-improvement, holiness, it seems, is not something to which our world aspires. To the contrary, being “holier than thou” is an accusation with which no one wants to be charged.

**A Faith That Works**

Sanctification is perhaps one of the most frequently misunderstood, and therefore most hotly debated, topics in the Christian Church. As with the interpretation of Scripture and the doctrine of justification, to arrive at a correct understanding of sanctification it is necessary to properly
understand and consistently maintain the biblical distinction between Law and Gospel.

James famously declares that “faith apart from works is dead” (2:26). He offers a clear reminder that faith is not the end of Christian life, but its beginning. This does not at all imply that deeds must be added to faith in order to effect our salvation. It does mean, however, that our saving faith is also a sanctifying faith. The faith by which we lay hold of the Gospel promise is also a faith that prompts us to do those works that please God. Indeed, it is only this saving faith that allows us to perform God-pleasing works, works that God Himself has revealed in His Law. Paul explains this while clearly distinguishing between justification and sanctification. Justification, he says, “is the gift of God, not a result of works” (Ephesians 2:8–9). And yet, once being justified, we are freed “for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (2:10). The Lutheran reformers likewise distinguish between Law and Gospel, justification and sanctification, when they write that “though people who are truly believing ‹in Christ› and truly converted to God have been freed and exempted from the curse and coercion of the Law, they are still not without the Law on this account. They have been redeemed by God’s Son in order that they should exercise themselves in the Law day and night ([Psalm 1:2;] Psalm 119)” (FC Ep VI 2; Concordia, p. 486).

This point is further clarified in Paul’s Letter to the church at Rome. Because the Law reveals sin and condemns sin, those who live under the Law are also slaves to sin. But the Christian lives under grace. Paul is quick to point out, however, that our freedom from the Law has not given us a license to sin. Freedom from the Law does not mean complete freedom; the Christian remains a slave, not to sin and the Law, but now to righteousness. It is only as holy slaves to righteousness that we have been freed to obey that which is holy and righteous. While the Law always accuses, in Christ we have been freed to obey and it no longer condemns us. Indeed, those who have been made slaves to righteousness by the working of God’s Spirit will eagerly and inevitably walk in the ways of God’s holy Law. The Confessions thus explain that “when we have received the Holy Spirit through faith, the fulfilling of the Law necessarily follows” (Ap XX 92; Concordia, p. 201).

But how do we distinguish between works that are truly good and other forms of obedience? In Matthew 15, the vocabulary used by the Pharisees offers a striking contrast to that used by Jesus. The Pharisees asked Jesus accusingly, “Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders?” (Matthew 15:2). Jesus replied by asking why the Pharisees break “the commandment of God” (v. 3). Indeed, He says, they break God’s command for the sake of tradition. By doing so they have become guilty of nullifying God’s Word for the sake of human traditions. Some human
traditions may certainly be useful and good. But they do not have the status of commandments, and they must never supplant God’s commandments. The New Testament refers quite harshly to those who suggest otherwise, calling them insincere “liars” (1 Timothy 4:2) who follow “deceitful spirits and teachings of demons” (v. 1). The authors of the Lutheran Confessions warn against such teachings by explaining that the “doctrine of the Law is needed by believers in order that they may not make up a holiness and devotion of their own. Using God’s Spirit as an excuse, they must not set up a self-chosen worship, without God’s Word and command” (FC SD VI 20; Concordia, p. 560). Our sanctification is not a matter of self-chosen good works; rather, it is a matter of those works to which God Himself exhorts us and which His Holy Spirit works in us to fulfill.

Psalm 119 is a beautiful meditation on the Law of God. In it the psalmist expresses his love of God’s Law and his desire to walk in its ways. Given our understanding of the first and second uses of the Law, this may at first seem strange. Surely no one delights in the coercion, accusation, and condemnation that result from the first two uses. The psalmist understands, however, that the Law has yet another use. The Formula of Concord notes this third use in saying that “God’s Law is useful (1) because external discipline and decency are maintained by it against wild, disobedient people; (2) likewise, through the Law people are brought to a knowledge of their sins; and also (3) when people have been born anew by God’s Spirit . . . they live and walk in the Law” (FC SD VI 1; Concordia, pp. 557–58). As a revelation of the will of God—a lamp and a light (Psalm 119:105)—it serves as a guide for those who have been redeemed and thus freed to live their lives in accordance with God’s will. While it is impossible to please God without faith, the Law teaches those who do have faith how they might by their actions please God in their daily lives. This third use of the Law is therefore an exclusively Christian use of the Law. It is proclaimed to those who have been justified by Christ’s Gospel in order that they might know how to “live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness” (SC II; Concordia, p. 329).

We have been justified by Christ. How, then, have we been sanctified, that is, set apart for a sacred purpose? In discussing sanctification, Paul uses the language of “putting off” and “putting on.” Much like the manner in which we change clothes, he says, we have also taken off our old selves and put on new selves. This new self, Paul says, is “being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (Colossians 3:10). Using a different metaphor, Peter speaks of the Christian “being built up as a spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:5). Significantly, both Peter and Paul speak of these processes in passive terms: “being renewed” and “being built.” The process of becoming a “holy priesthood” is not something in which the Christian endeavors
alone. To the contrary, it is something that God Himself effects; He renews, He builds—He makes holy, that is, *sanctifies*, according to His will. Indeed, we could not even make a beginning if God Himself were not active in this process. As the reformers wrote: “The Law indeed says it is God’s will and command that we should walk in a new life [Romans 6:4]. But it does not give the power and ability to begin and do it. The Holy Spirit renews the heart. He is given and received, not through the Law, but through the preaching of the Gospel (Galatians 3:14)” (FC SD VI 11; *Concordia*, p. 559). For this reason they even distinguish between man’s own works done in obedience to the Law and those that result from the Spirit’s working in man. They write: “When a person is born anew by God’s Spirit . . . and led by Christ’s Spirit, he lives according to God’s unchangeable will revealed in the Law. Since he is born anew, he does everything from a free, cheerful spirit. These works are not properly called ‘works of the Law,’ but works and ‘fruit of the Spirit’ [Galatians 5:22]” (FC SD VI 17; *Concordia*, p. 560).

Scripture consistently affirms that, even after his conversion, man neither keeps the Law nor becomes sanctified without God Himself working in and through him. Thus even Jesus Himself prays to His Father that He may “sanctify them in the truth” (John 17:17). Likewise, Paul assures the Philippians that the God who justified them will also sanctify them; he writes that “He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion” (1:6). And again he assures them that “it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (2:13). Although the work of God in sanctification is sometimes overlooked in contemporary Christianity, it was not neglected by the authors of the Lutheran Confessions. Recognizing that “the Law cannot be kept without Christ; likewise, the Law cannot be kept without the Holy Spirit” (Ap V [III] 5 [126]; *Concordia*, pp. 102–3), they were led to joyfully confess that it is the Holy Spirit who “has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith” (SC II; *Concordia*, p. 330).

Paul’s confession to the Romans about sanctification is powerful:

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. (Romans 7:18–23)

Paul desires to do the will of God, yet he is unable to do so. He agrees with the Law, but his sinful nature will not allow him to fulfill it. He therefore
reminds the Philippians that even he cannot say “that I have already obtained this or am already perfect” (3:12). Because sin still clings to even those redeemed by Christ, the sanctified life is not a life of perfection. That is, sanctification will never be completed this side of heaven. The reformers thus confess that “believers are not renewed in this life perfectly or completely. Their sin is covered by Christ’s perfect obedience . . . . Nevertheless, the old Adam still clings to them in their nature and all its inward and outward powers” (FC SD VI 7; Concordia, p. 559). They likewise condemn the opinion that “a Christian who is truly regenerated by God’s Spirit can perfectly keep and fulfill God’s Law in this life” (FC Ep XII 25; Concordia, p. 502). Although we are assured by the Gospel that God Himself has declared us perfectly holy and sees us as such, we will not be made so until our bodies are transformed in His heavenly presence.

Be clear on this: A misunderstanding of sanctification, because it is a misunderstanding of Law and Gospel, is no small matter. Calling them foolish and bewitched, Paul strongly chastises the Galatians for such a misunderstanding. He asks them bluntly: “Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (3:3). Or, put another way, he asks if they began with the Gospel only to turn then to the Law. The folly of doing so is pointed out by indicating that the Holy Spirit does not work among them because they obey the Law, but only on the basis of their faith. Taking up the practical example of circumcision, the apostle again warns against trusting in one’s ability to obey the Law. The Christian, while continuously being sanctified by the Holy Spirit, will never take confidence in his or her ability to fulfill the Law. Rather, we say with Paul: “But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Galatians 6:14). It is in the Gospel of the cross that our justification has been announced and our sanctification begun.

**SAINT AND SINNER**

Holiness is by no means something to be avoided, neither in conversation nor in life. It is commanded by our holy God Himself. And yet, as we must confess, we are incapable of making ourselves holy.

Because we are incapable of effecting our own salvation, it is a great consolation to know that we are not responsible for it. The same is no less true of sanctification. Although we have put off the old self and put on a new, even this new self remains unable to fulfill the Law. It is greatly comforting to know, then, that we are not left to fulfill the Law of our own power. Instead, Christ prays that the Father Himself sanctify us by means of His Word (John 17:17). The apostles Peter and Paul also assure us that another is at work in us, renewing us and building us into a holy—that is,
a sanctified—priesthood. Our sinfulness, therefore, is no cause for despair. It is cause for us ever more thankfully to take hold of God’s promises, the promise of what He has done on the cross and the promise of what He continues to do in our daily lives.

Christians who honestly assess their life and works are forced to confess that they are not perfect, that their actions are not in accordance with the Law, and that they even do many things contrary to their own desires. Although this continuing sinfulness is cause for great sorrow, it is some small comfort to know that our struggle against sin is not unique; even Paul was not free from sin. But Paul’s lifelong battle with the flesh provides comfort not only because “misery loves company,” but because he offers an exemplary illustration of how the Christian is to respond to his or her own sinfulness. Like Paul, we will freely and humbly acknowledge and confess our sin, give constant thanks for Christ’s free justification, and pray for the Holy Spirit’s ongoing work of sanctification.

Christ in Action

“Holy, holy, holy” the Church sings in the Sanctus. It is a description of our God, but it also describes God’s desire for His people. He so desires our holiness that He not only declares us holy for the sake of His Son, Jesus Christ, but also, through the working of His Holy Spirit, He Himself acts to make us holy.

The claim that God justifies man while man sanctifies himself is often made in an attempt to simplify the distinction between the doctrines of justification and sanctification. However, this is an oversimplification that inadvertently subverts the work of the triune God. God alone is responsible for declaring us holy. But He is not complacent in the process of our being made holy. The indwelling of His Holy Spirit stirs up in the Christian a new love of the Law and a desire to keep the Law. But if it were not for the continual working of this Spirit within us, we would remain helpless to work out our sanctification. God, in His great mercy, has not redeemed us only to leave us to our own devices. Instead, through the means by which He first called us to Himself, He continues to work in us, renew us, and transform us into the holy people we were first created to be.

There are some who do not believe in a third use of the Law. Some also believe that, since Christ has cancelled the written code, even the second use of the Law, which acts as a mirror to show us our sins, need not be preached to Christians. Christ did indeed fulfill the Law and nullify its accusatory power. Yet as even a cursory reading of the New Testament Letters reveals, the earliest Christian authors did not shy away from proclaiming the Law to their (Christian!) audiences. The first Letter to the
Corinthians illustrates this well. Although Paul rebukes the Corinthians for numerous sins, he never insinuates or implies that they are less than redeemed brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul understood that Christians remain, in the words of Luther, “at the same time saint and sinner.” Through the preaching of the Law, we, too, are reminded of our sinfulness. Being thus reminded, we are encouraged to cling ever more dearly to the sure promise of the Gospel, the power of God for our salvation—and for our continual sanctification.

**Comparisons**

**Progressive sanctification:** Some church bodies today teach that sanctification, God’s process whereby He effectively makes us holy, is progressive. The Lutheran Church teaches that sanctification may vary at different times in a person’s life (see Romans 7:14–19; Galatians 2:11; 5:17; 1 John 1:8).

**Possibility of sanctification:** Lutheran Christians, along with Presbyterians and some Evangelicals, teach that perfect sanctification in this life, due to the persistent effects of the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh, is impossible, and that Christians claiming to be sinless have, under the influence of Satan, deceived themselves (see 1 John 1:8, 10; John 8:44). Other church bodies, particularly the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches, teach that perfect sanctification is difficult to obtain, but it can be done—the saints, for example. Still others, particularly from the Wesleyan family of church bodies, including the Methodists, Pentecostals, and Holiness groups, teach that perfect sanctification is attainable in this life by any Christian earnestly seeking it.

**Requirement of sanctification:** Correlative with their doctrine of purgatory, the Roman Catholic Church insists that perfect sanctification is required before enjoying the beatific vision of God. Upon death, the saints, due to their achievement of perfect holiness, enter immediately into heaven. Those not achieving full sanctification in this life are “purged” (hence, “purgatory”) of their sins after death for an indeterminate time until they are able to enter God’s presence.

**Point to Remember**

We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death.

*Romans 6:4*
LUTHERAN SUMMARY  
OF LAW AND GOSPEL

AUGSBURG CONFESSION IV
Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake. By His death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight (Romans 3 and 4 [3:21–26; 4:5]). (Concordia, p. 33)

APOLGY OF THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION IV 5–6
All Scripture ought to be distributed into these two principal topics: the Law and the promises. For in some places Scripture presents the Law, and in others the promises about Christ. In other words, in the Old Testament, Scripture promises that Christ will come, and it offers, for His sake, the forgiveness of sins, justification, and life eternal. Or in the Gospel, in the New Testament, Christ Himself (since He has appeared) promises the forgiveness of sins, justification, and life eternal. Furthermore, in this discussion, by Law we mean the Ten Commandments, wherever they are read in the Scriptures. (Concordia, p. 83)

APOLGY OF THE AUGSBURG CONFESSION IV 43–44
Since justification is gained through the free promise, it follows that we cannot justify ourselves. Otherwise, why would there be a need to promise? Since the promise can only be received by faith, the Gospel (which is properly the promise of the forgiveness of sins and of justification for Christ’s sake) proclaims the righteousness of faith in Christ. The Law does not teach this, nor is this the righteousness of the Law. For the Law demands our works and our perfection. But, for Christ’s sake, the Gospel freely offers reconciliation to us, who have been vanquished by sin and death. This is received not by works, but by faith alone. (Concordia, p. 88)

FORMULA OF CONCORD EPIHOME V 7
The Law and the Gospel are also contrasted with each other. Likewise also, Moses himself as a teacher of the Law and Christ as a preacher of the Gospel are contrasted with each other [John 1:17]. In these cases we believe, teach, and confess that the Gospel is not a preaching of repentance or rebuke. But it is properly nothing other than a preaching of consolation and a joyful message that does not rebuke or terrify. The Gospel comforts consciences against the terrors of the Law, points only to Christ’s merit, and raises them up again by the lovely preaching of God’s grace and favor,
gained through Christ’s merit. (*Concordia*, p. 485; FC Ep V is devoted entirely to the discussion of Law and Gospel)

**Formula of Concord Solid Declaration V 1**

The distinction between the Law and the Gospel is a particularly brilliant light. It serves the purpose of rightly dividing God’s Word [2 Timothy 2:15] and properly explaining and understanding the Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles. We must guard this distinction with special care, so that these two doctrines may not be mixed with each other, or a law be made out of the Gospel. When that happens, Christ’s merit is hidden and troubled consciences are robbed of comfort, which they otherwise have in the Holy Gospel when it is preached genuinely and purely. For by the Gospel they can support themselves in their most difficult trials against the Law’s terrors. (*Concordia*, p. 552; FC SD V is devoted entirely to the discussion of Law and Gospel)