

For the

LIFE of the WORLD

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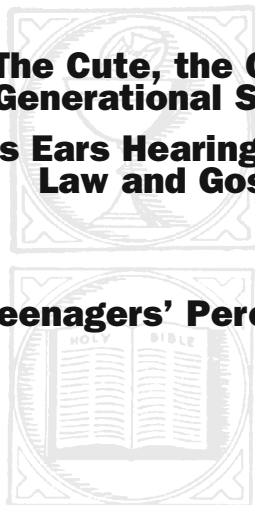
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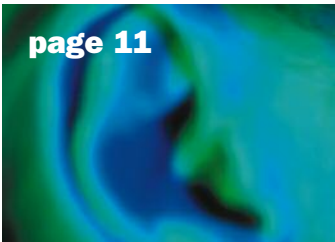
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Even within regular-sized, one-worship-service congregations, there is generational segregation. Lutheran casualties of the worship wars might be surprised to hear that liturgical worship is now being hailed as the style of both the present and the future.

6 Are Today's Ears Hearing the Timeless Message?: Law and Gospel for Every Generation

By the Rev. Dr. Carl C. Fickenscher II, Assistant Professor of Pastoral Ministry and Missions, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind.

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By Dr. Barbara J. Resch, Coordinator of Music Education, Indiana University—Purdue University Fort Wayne, and Director of Children's Choir, St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, Ind.

Planners of youth gatherings and youth services typically assume that teenagers will be most open to the hearing of God's Word when it is carried by the styles of rock and popular music. There are several concerns with this approach to choosing music for worship, not the least of which is that it may be based upon a false assumption about teens' relationship to the music they consider "theirs."

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ARE TODAY'S EARS HEARING THE TIMELESS MESSAGE

**What are your ears accustomed to hearing?
As a test, try this:**

1. Was Mantovani his first name or last name?
2. Is Paul dead?
3. How much did a fan pay for a piece of French toast partially eaten by a member of 'N Sync?
4. Britney Spears: did she or didn't she?

Scoring:

If you know enough to *understand* ONE or TWO of the above questions, you're . . . PRETTY NORMAL. If you know enough to *answer correctly* THREE of the questions, you . . . PROBABLY HAVE A CHANCE TO WIN A MILLION FROM REGIS. If you know enough to *care* about all FOUR of the questions, you're . . . UNUSUAL.

Let's face it. Few of us would be in the least interested in tuning in to all four of these artists—that's right, they're all musicians—and, if we did, we wouldn't "get it." Not all four, anyway.

Fair enough. Nobody hurt. To each his own.

There is, however, a message everybody is supposed to get, everybody needs to get. God's message is for all times, for all people. The church's task, of course, is to proclaim that message to the world. But if our pews and pulpits are a mix of the Mantovani generation, erstwhile Beatles fans, and youthful up-and-comings, is the Word actually being received by all? Are today's ears hearing the timeless message?

What Is the Timeless Message?

If the idea that today's ears are different is somewhat disquieting, there is certainly also a calming side to it. Past generations of preachers and hearers have dealt with this, too, and somehow, through it all, the Church has survived. We know why, of course. Conservative Christians, especially confessional Lutherans, would all agree that God has delivered to us a timeless message. It's not overly simplistic to say that if what's preached is God's message, it will be heard! Moreover, as we'll see, God's message does successfully reach all generations because it strikes one note that is familiar to every ear. Our greatest challenge, then, is to be sure that we are indeed proclaiming God's message.

What is the timeless message? The Bible? Certainly. Christ Jesus? Absolutely. Salvation? Yes. But what is it that the Bible says? What about Jesus Christ? What is the message of salvation?

Lutheran homiletician Herman Stuempfle writes that "whatever other elements are necessary in a Christian sermon, there is a certain theological structure which is indispensable." This,

he says, is "the classic Law/Gospel distinction which has been a constant theme in Lutheran theological and homiletical thought since the Reformation."¹

God's timeless message is Law and Gospel properly divided. C. F. W. Walther asserts, "Any passage of Scripture, yea, any historical fact recorded in Scripture, can be classified as belonging either to the Law or to the Gospel."² The message of the Bible, Christ, salvation is the Law and the Gospel.

It is Holy Scripture itself that directs us to divide Law and Gospel. St. Paul (a different Paul; this is the one who *did* die and is now feasting at the heavenly banquet) stresses to Timothy, "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth" (II Timothy 2:15). Elsewhere he identifies the distinction: "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather through the law we become conscious of sin" (Romans 3:20). "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16).

Law & Gospel for

Luther elaborates, “We should understand ‘Law’ to mean nothing else than God’s word and command, in which He directs us what to do and what not to do, and demands from us our obedience or

‘work.’ . . . On the other hand, the Gospel or the faith is a doctrine or word of God that does not require our works. It does not command us to do anything. On the contrary, it bids us merely to accept the offered grace and forgiveness of sins and eternal life and let it be given to us.”³

In other words, the Law lays down what is demanded of man; the Gospel tells him that Christ has fulfilled those demands for him. The Law is everything in Scripture about which *human beings* are to be at work. The Gospel is always *God* graciously at work in Christ Jesus. Human beings are active agents only in the Law. God alone is active in the Gospel.

Applying the Timeless Message

Luther understood the Law as God’s means of preparing man for the message of salvation. This is the Law’s chief purpose. When man hears the demands of the Law, the Holy Spirit convicts him of his failures to obey. The intended result is to drive him to his knees in desperation.

At that point, the Gospel may then fulfill its chief purpose: To lift man up with the assurance of forgiveness in Christ. Luther again explains, “The other word of God is neither law nor commandment, and demands nothing of us. But when that has been done by the first word, namely, the Law, and has worked deep despair and wretchedness in our hearts, then God comes and offers us His blessed and life-giving word and promises; He pledges and obligates Himself to grant grace and help in order to deliver us from misery, not only to pardon all our sins, but even to blot them out, and in addition to create in us love and delight in keeping His Law. Behold, this divine promise of grace and forgiveness of sin is rightly called the Gospel.”⁴ Thus the Law makes man aware of his need for a Savior by showing him

his sin, as in a mirror; the Gospel announces that he has that Savior in Christ Jesus.

But Still “Timeless” Today?

Law and Gospel properly divided is the message that everyone in every generation needs to hear. “Distinguishing between the Law and the Gospel,” Luther reminds, “is the highest art in Christendom, one that every person who values the name Christian ought to recognize, know, and possess.”⁵

This truly is timeless, not only because God the giver is unchanging, but also because human ears do in at least one sense remain the same in every era. Once more Luther: “If human nature is not aided by God’s grace, it is impossible to keep the Law, for the reason that man since the fall of Adam in Paradise is depraved and full of sinful desires, so that he cannot from his heart’s desire find pleasure in the Law, which we all experience in ourselves. For no one lives who does not prefer that there were no law, and everyone feels and know in himself that it is difficult to lead a pious life and do good, and, on the other hand, that it is easy to lead a wicked life and do evil. But this difficulty or unwillingness to do the good is the reason we do not keep the Law of God. . . .

Thus the Law of God convicts us, even by our own experience, that by nature we are evil, disobedient, lovers of sin, and hostile to God’s laws.”⁶

Everyone is sinful. Therefore, to every generation, the Law rings true. However a contemporary world may try to deny such unpleasanties, deep down inside every soul, the conscience must bow in agreement: “Yes, it’s true. I’ve sinned, and for

my sin, I’m accountable to the Creator.”

But once the conscience has been so pricked, the Gospel may also immediately become welcome. For every age, Christ is the answer to sin, and to that answer, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the terrified soul will cling. That, too, will never change “until,” the Formula of Concord says, “the flesh is put off entirely and man is completely renewed in the resurrection. There he will no longer require either the preaching of the law or its threats and punishments, just as he will no longer require the Gospel.”

Contemporary preacher will tinker with the packaging, and there is work to be done. Disciples of Britney Spears may hear differently than the Paul McCartney or Annunzio Mantovani fan. But it’s

not the packaging that causes the Word to be heard. It’s the message itself, the timeless message of Law and Gospel properly divided. When that is being proclaimed, the message will be heard by, (dare we say?) will be in sync with, each new generation.

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Notes:

1. Herman G. Stuempfle, Jr. “Law and Gospel in Contemporary Lutheran Preaching, with Special Reference to Oswald C. J. Hoffmann and Edmund A. Steimle” (Th.D. diss., School of Theology at Claremont, 1971), 4-5.
2. C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, trans. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 210.
3. Martin Luther, “The Distinction Between the Law and the Gospel: A Sermon,” trans. Willard L. Burce, *Concordia Journal*, 18 (April 1992), 156-57.
4. Martin Luther, *Sermons of Martin Luther*, ed. And trans. John Nicholas Lenker (Minneapolis: Lutherans in All Lands, 1905; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1:99.
5. Luther, “The Distinction Between the Law and the Gospel,” 153.
6. Luther, *Sermons of Martin Luther*, 1:96.

Every Generation

By the Rev. Dr. Carl C. Fickenscher II