

# CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

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Legalism in an Evangelical Church

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The Realism of Hope: The Feast of the Resurrection  
and the Transformation of the Present Reality

JURGEN MOLTMANN

The Authority of Scripture

KENT S. KNUTSON

Homiletics

Book Review

Vol. XL

March 1969

No. 3

# Legalism in an Evangelical Church

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## EDITORIAL NOTE

*John Philip Koehler (1859—1951), professor of church history at the theological seminary of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod at Wauwatosa, Wis., from 1900 to 1930, was one of the most original church historians in American Lutheranism. He delivered this essay in German on Jan. 20, 1914, at Milwaukee. It was subsequently printed in Theologische Quartalschrift, 11, 4—12, 3 (1914—15). William J. Hassold, associate professor of religion at Concordia College, Ann Arbor, Mich., has prepared and edited this new translation for CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY. Major omissions are indicated by ellipses, and section headings have been added. The fact that the essay reflects both the situation obtaining when Koehler wrote it and some of the author's own biases and prejudices does not diminish the value of the article for the perceptive reader as a significant explication of the Law-Gospel polarity as Lutherans understand it.*

The essay that follows developed from a remark that the author made at one of the larger intersynodical conferences. The remark was to the effect that there is much legalism rampant in our circles, that the result is stagnation and retrogression in all areas of church life, and that for this reason sincere and general repentance is necessary before we may anticipate a turn for the better. The expression "legalism in our circles" was not generally understood. It was intended to describe one aspect of all our activity in thought, speech, and endeavor, based on a comprehensive observation of life and in particular on a study of history.

As a result of this remark the author

has been assigned the task of preparing an essay on legalism. In order to avoid extraneous matters and to underscore the thrust of the remark cited above as a summons to repentance, I have narrowed the theme to legalism among us.

Four theses will be developed in the course of this paper:

1. Legalism among Christians consists in drawing the motivations and forms of their life from the Law, instead of allowing them to grow from the Gospel. This misdirected motivation derives from the flesh, which injects this trait into every expression of the Christian life and thus externalizes it.

2. This characteristic expresses itself in the Lutheran Church first of all and primarily through a hammering away at correctness of belief. In connection with it there is a harping on sanctification which makes itself felt especially in ecclesiastical regulations. In opposition to this, a "pietistic" harping on sanctification reveals itself. This latter manifestation of legalism opposes external doctrinal discipline and all external discipline in life; but by appealing to a "higher" piety it reveals itself as equally legalistic.

3. Whenever this characteristic gains the upper hand, a retrogression develops in ecclesiastical life. This shows itself outwardly in adopting from the sectarians all kinds of unhealthy practices.<sup>1</sup>

4. Only a general and penitent recogni-

<sup>1</sup> The author's development of theses three and four has been omitted in this translation.

tion of this condition can prevent the ultimate rejection of the Gospel. The Gospel can achieve this effect in us only if we immerse ourselves more deeply in the Gospel and cling to it more firmly. The result of this will be that we shall recover many of the important Gospel emphases which are taught in Scripture and which were expounded in masterful fashion by Luther, but which have been shoved from the center of our field of vision by one-sided doctrinal discussions.

### I. LEGALISM AND THE POLARITY OF LAW AND GOSPEL

The first thesis shows that one must clearly distinguish between the Law and the Gospel to be able to determine the nature of legalism. As soon as this distinction is clear, the following three statements follow self-evidently: (1) The true being of the Christian derives from the Gospel. (2) The Christian as Christian receives the motivations and forms of his activity from the Gospel, not from the Law. (3) These consist in faith, love, and hope, which determine *every* expression of the Christian life. On the other hand, the motivations and forms which the flesh gets from the Law are distrust, selfishness, and fear. The flesh injects these, too, into *every* expression of the Christian's life. Insofar as they are present or reveal themselves in the Christian's life, it is correct to speak of manifestations of legalism.

What, then, is the distinction between the Law and the Gospel?

#### *The Law*

The Law is God's eternal and holy will as it is revealed, for example, in the Ten Commandments. Its content is love toward God and one's neighbor. When we here

speak of the Law, we speak of it in the sense that Paul employs "law" in his letters to the Galatians and to the Romans when he speaks about the annulment of the Law. Paul is not talking about the eternal content of the Law, which rests on the very nature of God. Instead, he is discussing the manner in which this will of God opposes men in their lives since the fall into sin.

The Law, or the will of God, opposes sin by means of demands, threats, and condemnations. The Law is not acting against sin in the abstract, against the idea of sin, but it is placing itself into concrete, personal opposition to the sinner. The difficulty is not only that in his sinfulness a person has a false conception of God's will and therefore thinks of it as demanding, threatening, and condemning, but also that God Himself has adopted a different relationship of will toward the sinner since the latter's fall. In this new relationship God does demand, threaten, and condemn!

God's will is eternal. Where there was no sin to oppose it, it did not show itself in demands, threats, and condemnation. Thus man in the state of innocence heard nothing like that. Therefore God's prohibition concerning the tree of knowledge in paradise does not mean that God intended to determine the shape of the first man's life by demands, threats, and condemnation. Its only function was to serve as a warning against danger. Also for the Christian as Christian, for the Christian as πνεῦμα, the eternal and holy will of God is valid. But it does not approach him in the guise of demanding, threatening, and condemning. For the justified sinner this aspect of the Law has been abolished.

On the other hand, God intends to determine the outline of the sinner's life by His demands, threats, and condemnations. It is a forceful way of dealing with the natural man, who does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God. The Law intends to strike down the natural man and thus to bring him forcibly to a knowledge of sin. God can deal with the natural man in no other way. His basic element, sin, shows itself in distrust, selfishness, and fear, according to Moses' magnificent typical presentation in the account of the fall into sin. Whenever the Law of God opposes this basic element of man's nature, no new, God-pleasing being can arise; for man regards the will of God as demands, threats, and condemnations, even though in the state of innocence he had not done so. It is not the nature of the Law to be creative; it manifests itself only in the way depicted above. Therefore the Law is entirely incapable of awakening love for God and one's neighbor. Thus it is not in the competence of the Law to engender such a new and God-pleasing being. The Law can only beat down and kill.

In addition there is an increase of sinfulness, which Paul discusses in Rom. 5:20; 7:5, 9, 11, 13. Not only do efforts to keep the Law engender distrust, selfishness, and fear; but sin also takes occasion from the commandment and breaks out into coarse and infamous deeds. Where human will collapses in despair under the destructive force of the Law, sin with its characteristics remains in full force. That is not accidental, but it remains within the realm of the Law's activity and accordingly agrees with God's goals and purposes. For example, God's purpose is to bring men to the knowledge of their sins. The way to ac-

complish this purpose is to make sin stronger, to make it even more sinful. One dare not take this to mean that God is the cause of sin, and that therefore man is free from responsibility. . . . Paul does not say this. He says that sin took occasion from the commandment.

Thus to accomplish this chief function, namely, that sin appears to be sin and man despairs of his being justified by his own righteousness and in his own competence, the Law must be preached in such a way that it produces these effects.

### *The Gospel*

The Gospel is quite different in respect to content, goal, methods, results, and use. It proclaims the marvelous message that for Christ's sake God has forgiven our sins and thereby grants us and assures us of salvation, life, and blessedness. The Gospel does not make demands, nor does it give directions or regulations as to what should happen. Instead it tells us what has happened. It does not make threats; but it offers promises. It does not condemn; rather it bestows. It does not slay; instead it creates faith, which is the new life. All these blessings derive their nature from the Gospel, not from the Law. This new nature consists in trust, love, and hope. It is the opposite of what the sinner develops in his encounter with the Law, namely distrust, selfishness, and fear.

### *The Law and the Gospel*

This difference manifests itself in the stance of the Christian toward the law of God. For his new spiritual life the holy will of God loses its legal character as demanding, threatening, and condemning. It is not only that the Christian, through the activity of the Holy Spirit, has adopted

a new stance toward it and has a new understanding of it; but the will of God, that is God Himself, adopts a different stance toward him. God makes no demands upon him. Still less does He threaten or condemn him. The eternal and holy will of God exists both prior to and subsequent to a man's coming to faith; but it no longer lies upon the Christian as a burdensome, alien will. Instead, both in God's intent and in the Christian's attitude, insofar as he is a Christian, the will of God is the Father's will, which the child follows with love, in which he finds joy, and from which he lives by the Gospel through faith. Now he knows and understands that his distrust and fear towards God's will derived from his self-centeredness. Now he is sure that the proper approach to life is to live within the will of God, to live according to that which agrees with God's will.

Now the Christian has a much greater respect for the holy will of God than he had previously. This respect is not only higher in degree but also in kind. It is no legalistic, servile fear, but it is the respect of a child for his father. In line with this respect, the Christian will continue to speak of the Law; and he will continue to use expressions which have been used in human language to talk about this subject. They, however, will convey an entirely different meaning from that which they would have for an unconverted person using the same words.

Accordingly when Paul speaks of this Christian respect for the Law, and when Luther uses the same judicial terms in speaking of it, one must not confuse their way of speaking with the way in which the legalistically minded man speaks about

the same subject. Instead, one must carefully discover how the words are to be understood from the context in which they appear. When Christians, who are aware that they are in the proper relationship to God's will through joyous faith, speak of God's will as God's law, this manner of expression of a Paul and a father will not confuse them. The Bible speaks the same way. . . .

The Gospel is not the complement of the divine Law, given only after the Law had failed. Rather, it is the ultimate truth concerning God's true nature, which is love. . . .

#### *The Essence of Legalism*

What is the essence of legalism? One finds a tendency to take motivation for service from the Law's demands, threats, and condemnations. Even the Christian allows the demands of the Law to constitute his obedience to God's will. Then he experiences God's will as an alien and burdensome will. He does not dare go against it, but he does not act as though he had a blissful confidence in God. The old distrust remains. The Christian allows the threats of the Law to serve as motivations for obedience, so that self-serving in the form of a desire for reward remains the moving force behind his activity. The Christian allows himself to be motivated by the condemnations of the Law, so that fear lies at the root of his activity. This situation exists not only when he takes the Law as the point of departure for his own obedience to it, but also when he forces it upon other people to make them obey it too.

This is nonsense, for it does not correspond to the nature of the new life. This new life assuredly takes its motivation for

activity from the Gospel. The new creation which the Gospel produces consists of faith, love, and hope. Faith walks the ways of God in the confidence that it is obeying the will of the Father. Love conforms itself to God's will, not as though it were something alien and burdensome but because it corresponds to its own nature and because the Christian desires and loves what God wills. Hope is the opposite of that fear which by its activity seeks to avert a danger that it believes is coming from God. In all its activity, hope presses forward to God, whom it recognizes as a loving Father and who is the goal of its longings. The new life flows from the Gospel as it creates the Christian's relation both to God and to his fellowmen. All his activity is determined by confidence, love, and patience.

Legalism confounds the natural course of the new life. Any activity which is based on a legalistic attitude requires definite form, which arises from such confusion. While the activity that flows from faith, love, and hope is natural, immediate, unprejudiced, pure, and true, because it flows from the proper source of life, legalistic activity shows itself to be mechanical, external, burdened with ulterior and mixed motives, opportunistic, counterfeit, and insincere. Legalism shoves the true source of Christian life, the Gospel, aside, and turns to the Law, which God never intended as the source of new life. On the one hand, it gives the Law the place reserved for the Gospel; and on the other, it confounds both Law and Gospel, so that neither one retains its true nature.

It turns God's law into its opposite and makes of it a means for creating life. Consequently the life which comes from the

Law does not have the proper quality in God's sight, and the Law's intended function of beating down the old Adam is destroyed.

In the same way legalism converts the Gospel into its opposite. After he has forgotten that the Gospel is the source of the new life, the legalist transfers to the Gospel the characteristics of life derived from the Law. He seeks to settle his score with it, to set himself right in respect to the Gospel, and from the Gospel to fashion for himself a law code similar to that which he had in the Law. He loses the real effect of the Gospel and hastens the decline of the authentic new life.

We are describing the style of life which results from this. The Law beats down, but when the Gospel comes, it lifts up and produces humility and trust. Where legalism reigns, the individual is either depressed or exhilarated; he is either in despair or he is overly confident, while he thinks he is placing his hope in Christ. Both attitudes are wrong. This style does not correspond with the real results which the Law and the Gospel achieve in men's hearts. Something artificial and hypocritical exists in such people, and this characteristic expresses itself in all kinds of legalistic action.

#### *Confusion of Law and Gospel Among Christians*

What is the source of this confusion of the Law and the Gospel among Christians? It is the sinful flesh. The flesh clings to us. This needs no proof from Scripture. The flesh of Christians is the same as the flesh of unbelievers. The only difference is that in the case of Christians it does not have an unhampered sphere of activity. The

spirit struggles against the flesh, and where the work of the spirit goes on unhindered the flesh is ever and again suppressed and put to death. But insofar as the flesh is present, it has the same nature that it has in the unconverted. Therefore it needs the preaching of the Law, and the preaching of the Gospel is not the proper thing for it. In similar fashion one must not approach the spirit with the preaching of the Law, but only with the preaching of the Gospel. Because the flesh coexists with the spirit in the Christian, there is a spot of the sinful in every manifestation of his life, even in his faith, love, and hope.

In the course of his life the Christian stumbles, falls, and rises again. When the fire of the first love wanes, the old Adam's power reappears. By nature this power is constantly legalistic in its opposition to the Gospel. As long as this struggle between flesh and spirit consists in individual engagements, the consciousness of the incompatibility of spirit and flesh is strong. Under such circumstances one need not speak of legalism. But the farther removed the Christian life is from the freshness of its Christian beginnings, the weaker it tends to become in its manifestations. It seems that the Christian recognizes the thrust and counterthrust in this battle less incisively. The thrust and counterthrust become routine and thus lose their effectiveness. In this slippage, life takes on increasingly the forms of the old Adam. We live by the Law. This is legalism. The life of faith still continues, but the characteristics of legalism inject themselves into the manifestations of faith in such a way that the Christian, due to the weakness of his faith, is not even aware of this contradiction. He believes, because he must, because

it is right. He makes faith into a condition of salvation; and before he knows it, all his evangelical conceptions have acquired a legalistic cast.

What happens in the lives of individual Christians occurs also in the life of the church. There is a difference, however. While in the lives of individuals there are great differences, because there are many individuals involved, the development of church life follows a regular course in the direction of decline. There legalism is most easily observed and described.

## II. MANIFESTATION OF LEGALISM

This conception of Law and Gospel and the authentic life which flows from it is not a monopoly of the Lutheran Church. On the contrary, it is the true, evangelical foundation for life for all who believe in the Lord Jesus. . . .

All the true believers whom the Lord knows agree not only in a general way that Jesus is their Savior, but they also, again after a fashion which only the Lord knows, concur in their attitude toward the Law and the Gospel as that attitude has been effected by the same faith. Lutherans are not the only ones who express themselves correctly on these subjects. Even among those who theoretically have legalistic inclinations, there are those who in their hearts are truly evangelical Christians. . . .

### *Insistence on Orthodoxy*

Because of the Lutheran emphasis on justification and on faith, it is natural that among us primacy of position should be given to the formulation of doctrine for the sake of the proclamation of the Gospel, while the Reformed community excels in

developing external activity in the areas of church government and social welfare. Because we place greater stress upon doctrine and its purity, legalism comes among us in the form of a hammering away at orthodoxy (*Rechtgläubigkeit*). By this I mean the kind of stress upon correctness of faith in which the emphasis shifts from faith to correctness. The following consequences flow with logical necessity from what has just been said. Such a stress on orthodoxy is primarily intellectual in nature and is accompanied by demands and by an admixture of self-satisfaction in one's own rectitude. This hammering away at orthodoxy maintains itself by means of party-spirit, which is in opposition to the ecumenical spirit. Therefore it clings to the letter of what was said or spoken, instead of living in the essence of the matter. The result is traditionalism, which has lost the spirit of what was said and the spirit of the Gospel as well. All this is legalistic in nature and resists the Gospel; it also shows itself when in the development of a doctrinal controversy the insistence upon orthodoxy deserts the foundation of the Gospel.

It goes without saying that the Gospel must remain pure. For without the truth of the Gospel, without a real comprehension of the Gospel by the individual, faith and conversion are impossible. But for the proclamation of the Gospel the preservation of its purity is not a matter of primary interest but only of secondary interest.

The primary goal of the proclamation of the Gospel is faith. The Gospel wants to create faith. But faith is a matter of the heart. The message is a proclamation of the wonderful truth of the Gospel, an

overawed heralding, an alluring invitation. A secondary goal emerges only when someone misunderstands my proclamation. That secondary goal is to contend for the purity of the Gospel. The Gospel still remains an evangelical preaching. There still is no room for a hammering away at orthodoxy. Such a discussion must take place in such a way that the correction of error retains the character of the proclamation of the Gospel. That is the only way that the proclamation can assure itself of acceptance in faith—in a faith which the Gospel itself creates.

The endeavor to preserve the Gospel in its purity can become a preaching of sanctification if one finds it necessary for the sake of the purity of the Gospel to admonish against the sinful inclination to error. This preaching of sanctification also proceeds from the Gospel, if it is done in the right way. It never becomes a hammering away and a demanding; it remains a winning and wooing. It can become a warning, but even in the warning the evangelical and loving wooing must remain in the foreground. We presuppose here of course, that in a given doctrinal controversy we are still dealing with people who believe in the Lord Jesus. The admonition, which is to strengthen the new life in a positive manner, is directed to the spirit, not to the flesh. The Law, with its demands, threats, and condemnations, does not apply to the spirit. Only the Gospel has validity in that realm.

In a doctrinal controversy it may occasionally become necessary to preach the Law to Christians because of their old Adam. Then demands and threats are in place. But in such a situation one must be clear that it is no longer a question of

mutual discussion of doctrine; one is no longer trying to bring into existence a manifestation of new life, namely an acceptance of teaching; now one is dealing with sin, that must be condemned. Yet even this must be done in love; it must be done in such a way that even the opponent can sense our love. It is not superfluous to observe that an outward differentiation among the Law, the Gospel, and evangelical exhortation is not enough. That would be something merely external. Confusion of the Law and the Gospel does not consist in having both in the same paragraph or even in the same sentence, but in that the conception which one has of them and the inner attitude of the heart toward them is askew. Anyone who is clear in this matter has the greatest possible freedom available to him. In the sermons of Jesus these matters are always intermingled.

In doctrinal controversy a kind of legalism manifests itself through the injection of the works of the flesh. This legalism expresses itself in threats and condemnations, in dogmatism, in an arrogant boasting about the correctness of one's own position, and in traditionalism. It so pervades one's entire way of thinking that dogmatism and its resultant traditionalism will manifest themselves even if the speaker does not consciously intend to let this happen. In this situation two developments, intellectualism and lack of ecumenical spirit, sum everything up. The two appear side by side. In fact, both may appear simultaneously. Historically, however, intellectualism comes first.

#### *Intellectualism*

By intellectualism I mean that in the discussion of doctrinal matters the interests

of reason take precedence over the interests of faith. Three factors are intimately connected with each other in this area: (1) The chief emphasis is placed upon intellectual comprehension instead of on winning over the heart. (2) The discussion bogs down on formulation instead of dealing with substantive matters. (3) The words of Scripture (in particular, of the Gospel) are converted into a law, to which one demands intellectual assent.

The self-evident presupposed purpose of the proclamation of the Gospel is that the doctrine, the Scriptures, or an individual Bible passage be understood. For this understanding nothing more is necessary than a correct and clear presentation. As a result of doctrinal controversy, however, all emphasis comes to be placed on the *understanding* of a doctrine. That is already a false path. The Gospel can be understood intellectually and formally. Indeed, through lengthy acquaintance with it or through profound intellectual penetration into the interrelationships of the Gospel, a person may come to so profound intellectual perception and to so fine a critical judgment regarding the truth of the Gospel that he immediately notes any slight departure from it on the part of another. By itself that still is not faith. It can very well be purely formal and intellectual in nature. On the other hand, it is entirely possible that even without a profound intellectual penetration into doctrinal formulations, a deep and powerful life of faith will arise. On occasion this may reveal itself in uncommonly profound speech or through a corresponding action, in a way which no intellectual acumen can reproduce and no dialectical dissection can clarify. That is the childlike nature of

faith. It manifests itself particularly among ordinary people.

In contrast, where an intellectualizing tendency obtains, it makes itself felt in the presentation of the Gospel in such a way as to be more concerned for clarity than for Gospel. Faith desires to hear the Gospel truth; the intellect desires to have clear conceptual relationships. True evangelical preaching will, accordingly, present the marvelous realities of God's love and mercy. That becomes a heralding and an awe-filled *kerygma*, which applies itself to faith and which overcomes doubt with the reality of God's love and grace.

Intellectualism gets caught up in formulations. It wants to compel a comprehension of them through references to grammatical and logical connections. To be sure, it is necessary that the wording of the Gospel be understood correctly, and for that it is also necessary that one takes note of grammatical and logical relationships. The assent, however, which one desires to achieve for his message is not to be attained by purely formal linguistic discussions but by the Gospel realities themselves. As soon as the formal aspects of the discussion come to the fore, the discussion is already on a wrong basis. The flesh will then intrude itself. The purely intellectual approach is wrong from the start. This approach will result in hair-splitting. On the one hand this hair-splitting may insist on the precise vocable, or even on the very letter, in such a way that it becomes unsound and does not lead to conviction. On the other hand, it may insist on the logical consistency of a dogmatic system so that the factual records of the Bible receive too little attention.

We may let 2 Tim. 3:16 serve as an ex-

ample of the first situation. "Every Scripture inspired by God is also profitable" (RSV margin). Luther's German Bible version of this clause<sup>2</sup> is frequently explained on the basis of the Greek text in the following manner: "The entire Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable." The additional statement is made that this is the correct way to understand Luther's translation. People believe that in this way they have laid a firm foundation for the divine character of Scripture. But the use of lexicon and a grammar, and the study of the context will persuade anyone who knows Greek that the correct and unambiguous translation must be as follows: "If a Scripture has been given by inspiration of God, then it is also profitable," and so on, or "Every divinely inspired Scripture is also profitable."

The exegetes who take the other position have failed to note the weakness of their interpretation, because, in the first place, they believe that they cannot get along without a clearly expressed statement of the doctrine of the divine origin of Scripture. That is intellectualism. In addition, they argue, Luther must have expressed himself correctly. That is traditionalism. The earnestness with which an honest Christian clings to a doctrinal formulation is not to be lightly esteemed. But that is not the entire story. While these exegetes were so keen on demonstrating the fact that the divine origin of Scripture is expressed in just so many words, the real thrust of the text was lost. Ultimately the text presents the divine origin of Scripture in a much more impressive

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<sup>2</sup> Alle Schrift, von Gott eingegeben, ist nütze . . .

way by assuming rather than expressing it and by depicting its blessed consequences. The other interpretation I call being caught up in formulations.

This is a bit of untruthfulness which occurs more frequently than many think. This untruthfulness has nothing malicious about it, because it really intends to defend a divine truth in which one believes with his whole heart. A less strong spirit can be persuaded that such a way of argumentation does no harm. This occurs with special ease when, as is always the case when new concepts are presented, many honest souls cannot immediately master the facts intellectually.

If, then, the frequently misunderstood hermeneutical catchword concerning the primacy of the wording of the text is adduced, the matter is done in such a way (when one is up against a less able opponent) that one is satisfied with such ostensible proofs. But what is accomplished by that? Even if the opponent cannot solve the riddle, the result is not always successful. Doubt remains in his heart, along with the feeling that he was right nevertheless. . . .

On the other hand, in a doctrinal controversy we frequently criticize the opponent's use of different vocables instead of assuming that he means the right thing or that he is only expressing himself in a different way from the way we do with the result that we with our limited understanding do not understand him immediately. If, in addition, we hold him up to offensive ridicule, then the real character of this manner of dealing reveals itself.

The way thus described is wrong. Through its personal attack it reduces the willingness of our opponent to reach an

amicable agreement with us and prevents him from accepting the position we are defending. It makes the opponent obstinate. This approach is false in essence because it remains bound to the letter instead of living by the content of the Gospel. If instead it proclaimed the Gospel to trusting faith as something desirable, it might gain the person's confidence. With its compelling logic it promotes legalism and makes of the Gospel a code of doctrine.

Still another way of promoting legalistic tendencies is to make a law out of the wording of Scripture (especially of the Gospel), for which one then demands intellectual acceptance. Characteristic of this way of thinking, for example, is the way in which the discussion of the divine origin of Scripture is made the first item of theological business in a dogmatic system. When a person has established the divine character of Scripture on the basis of all kinds of attributes, or has determined its characteristics from its own expressions, then he has established the so-called formal principle of theology. Henceforth the naked word, severed from its context, is to have the same status which a statement of law has for a lawyer. In other words, this way of dealing with Scripture which treats it and its contents as a code of so-and-so-many established propositions which people must believe because it is the Word of God is legalism. Furthermore, procedure is always grounded in intellectualism. I do not want to be understood as detracting from the trustworthiness of Scripture. I am reacting to what I term the legalistic way of dealing with Scripture. The proper way is as follows: At the beginning of theology stands

the statement concerning the forgiveness of sins. This has been called the material principle of theology while the section that treats the divine character of Scripture is called the formal principle.

In passing I might say that I do not like these designations. For me faith in the forgiveness of sins is primary. The intellect is only the organ which accepts ideas in order to appropriate the content of faith. This faith is created by the Holy Spirit through the message concerning the forgiveness of sins. It is created by loving entreaty, not by logical necessity. Because I have this faith, I then also cling to what Scripture says about its own divine character. And thus it is with everything that Scripture says. . . .

Now from this faith-full stance one can enter all the areas of Scripture, and every point will be illuminated and made acceptable by the light of Gospel truth and in particular by the entire Gospel context in which the point appears. The Gospel, just because it is the Gospel, is sure and worthy of full acceptance (1 Tim. 1:15); it is a word which generates love instinctively and to which one offers his confidence. This is the way we must deal with the Gospel.

The counterpart is the Calvinian-Zwinglian way of operation. It is the Reformed community that has a formal principle; and there it is really a formal and formative principle. The intellect with its logical necessity is determinative. Zwingli demonstrated this keenly honed sharpness when, prompted by his intellectualism, he ignored the wording and the logical requirements of linguistic investigation by substituting "means" for "is" in the words of institution of the Sacrament of the Altar. In this

way he smuggled in an idea which cannot be derived from the words or the context but which is rejected by them. In this he demonstrated the connection between intellectualism and legalism. This is a constantly recurring inconsistency in human life. One should trace this trait through the history of Reformed theology to understand how in doctrinal discussions they deal with Scripture as a mathematical theorem which demands acceptance or produces schism. Because of men's prevalent love of liberty, the latter is usually the case.

When Luther at Marburg in 1529 wrote the words of institution on the table and did not retreat from them, his approach was quite different. His action was not a senseless hammering away at the exact wording. That would have been legalism in action! Previously Luther's writings on the sacraments had extensively and intensively, with linguistic sensitivity, established the basis for his conception of the Sacrament. At the same time Zwingli's basic rationalism and radicalism had germinated and revealed itself, not only in his writings but also in the Swiss position toward the rationalistic Anabaptists. Luther understood this well. He knew how to test the spirits. Since Luther's citations of all the evidence in the Word of God did not persuade Zwingli, Luther finally concluded his dealings with Zwingli by delivering an ultimatum. In cases of error it must finally come to that. Truthfulness demands it. But then it is no longer doctrinal discussion but a preaching of the Law. . . .

Tied in with the Zwinglian rationalistic-legalistic way of operation is an indifference toward unity in doctrine and a spine-

less willingness to make common cause with one's opponents in other ecclesiastical affairs. That is to be expected. For if one has nothing more to offer than his purely human ideas, it is not proper to create divisions because of them. When, on the other hand, in doctrinal discussions legalism takes hold among Lutherans, the exact opposite appears—a lack of the ecumenical spirit.

#### *Lack of the Ecumenical Spirit*

The term "true visible church," which in spite of its misleading character may be understood properly, has much to do with this unecumenical spirit. The ecumenical spirit, on the other hand, arises directly from the Gospel. If it is true that there is a holy Christian church, a "communion of saints," and that among its members a unity of the Spirit is dominant, that is, a oneness of spirit which consists in faith in the Lord Jesus, then, it cannot be otherwise than that the faith of one person draws him close to the faith of another. This ecumenical spirit does not consist in the fact that we have a *doctrine* of the invisible church. This is a great gift of God. But if we go no farther, we externalize it. Again, the ecumenical spirit does not consist in that lack of character which overlooks inner differences that must lead to separation if one wishes to remain faithful. That is also external and superficial.

I understand the ecumenizing impact of the Gospel proclamation to mean that one is always concerned about . . . the fellowship of those who truly believe in the Lord Jesus. This concern is in opposition to the sectarianism of the various historical ecclesiastical fellowships in the world which

present themselves as the true visible church. The ecumenical spirit comes from within and becomes a person's possession through the Holy Spirit.

Its essence is that I rejoice in the fact that another person, no matter in which fellowship he finds himself, believes in the Lord Jesus. For me the chief concern whenever I meet someone who believes in the Lord Jesus is the fact that he believes and that through faith he has become a child of God and a member of the body of Christ. I will express this oneness by stressing those factors which unite us in faith, and I will not by means of reproof and criticism stress first of all those things which separate. The evangelical spirit allows truth to rule. Criticism will not be excluded, but it will draw its tone from the Gospel. Is it necessary to explain what is meant? An example should suffice.

Toward the end of the 1870s, when Moody was in St. Louis and was proclaiming the Gospel of grace in a marvelous manner, Walther did not hesitate to pay Moody recognition in the classroom in the most friendly fashion, without limiting it at the same time by voicing his reservations about Moody's errors. One could sense that Walther was personally fond of Moody. . . .

Since the Reformation the ecumenical spirit has been lost to some extent because the external splintering of the church became greater than it had been before. This loss is intimately connected with the elevation of the confessional writings to ultimate sources of doctrine. . . . The way in which these writings originated betokens the correct spirit. They are confessions of faith, proclamations of the Gospel. . . .

In the course of time, however, legalism

attached itself to the use of the confessional writings, to the detriment of the consciousness of the *one* church. What is meant here by "legalism" is the sectarian spirit which pits one external confessional organization against another. This sectarian spirit is manifested when our doctrinal controversies are carried on in such a tone that we have to show the other party: "*You* are wrong! You are *wrong!* We are *right!*!" Through this hammering away at orthodox belief in the course of time an external, sectarian quarrelsomeness develops out of controversy. People operate in all areas with external, mechanical thought processes, which always involve a legalistic coercion of the other person's mind instead of an effort to win him to faith in the Savior through the wonderful reality of the Gospel, something that no one can grasp with intellectual acumen. Then it is also quite natural that for all practical purposes we no longer accord to Scripture its proper role. Even if one theoretically holds fast to the idea that Scripture is the ultimate norm, the confessional writings or even the writings of the fathers become the primary norm, and Scripture is compelled to serve, by means of individual prooftexts that are cited (*dicta probanta*), merely as a device for shedding light on the meaning of the penultimate norm. Quite obviously I am not talking about the external activity of the dogmatician but of the inner legalistic stance which creeps into some people from time to time. . . . That is traditionalism. It produces legalism.

### *Traditionalism*

Traditionalism is that way of thinking in which tradition, a manner of teaching

handed down from the fathers, is ultimately determinative. This way of thinking occurs not only among Roman Catholics, where tradition is often put forward in opposition to Scripture, but also among Lutherans. The term traditionalism is not used to suggest that the tradition is incorrect, but to indicate the tendency to rely on human teachers and their interpretations instead of relying on the Scriptures. This felt necessity to rely on human teachers does not derive from the difficulty of understanding the Bible, as the Roman Catholics claim. . . . This tendency is rather a token and consequence of an inner lack of freedom, which may result from various causes. When one is naturally a person who is dependent on authority, this dependence will be decisive in his theological activity in the way already indicated. . . .

### *Lack of Evangelical Consciousness*

With this methodology two factors go in tandem, factors which show its legalistic nature sharply. On the one side the certitude of one's own rectitude (in this case, of one's own orthodoxy) will express itself. . . . The speaker, of course, does not want to leave the grace of God in the background, but an unrecognized tone of self-righteousness, innate or developed in the course of history, prevents the glorious message of God's grace from coming to suitable expression. . . .

The other factor, which stands in close correlation with the legalistic antiecumenical stance, is that proper evangelical consciousness among us leaves much to be desired. After careful observation one will see that, in spite of the best evangelical intentions, the Gospel gets too little emphasis among us, although most of us do

not notice this. Even though they may be dogmatically correct, many sermons have an entirely wrong tone to them. An example would be a sermon in which the preacher tells the congregation all that a Christian must believe if he is to be saved. There the individual's act of believing is the object of faith, and it degenerates quite naturally into an intellectual activity. Another example would be the presentation of the mathematics of the Trinity as an object of faith. This is a doctrine revealed in Scripture. When it is torn out of its context, however, it is not *evangelical* truth. Frequently the mistake of the Greek fathers was that the intellectual factor in the Trinitarian and Christological controversies was so prominent. That was not evangelical debate. With Athanasius and Leo the Great, on the other hand, the decisive factor was that they made their presentation in immediate connection with the doctrine of the atonement. That is the real object of faith. Where one keeps this in the forefront, one will not fall into the snare of making the credal tenet the object in which one has confidence. . . .

#### *Encouragement to Sanctification*

{One area in which the question of legalism quickly comes up is the area of sanctification. Two extremes must be avoided: overlooking sanctification and overemphasizing it. . . .}

The question arises: Is it necessary to urge sanctification? If it is, whom should one address, the flesh or the spirit?

Some might hold that encouragement to sanctification is unnecessary for the spirit. The Holy Spirit has created this new spirit in man, and at its creation He has bestowed the will to struggle against the

flesh. We know, however, that this new creation is not immediately mature. It must grow. The Holy Spirit does not create the new in mechanical fashion. The Spirit's fundamental nature enters human life in such a way that from small beginnings, containing in themselves all the basic ingredients, a new, strong and vigorous life can grow and mature through constant effort and struggle.

The flesh, too, still adheres to the Christian and is intent on suppressing the spirit. Because of the flesh's presence the new spiritual life requires constant encouragement and strengthening. This occurs—disregarding for a moment the proclamation of the Gospel—through proper encouragement to sanctification.

From what has been said, the nature of encouragement to sanctification immediately becomes clear. It does not direct itself to the flesh but to the spirit. We are not to improve the flesh, but are to beat it down and to kill it. We are not to develop the new life from powers inherent in man. Just as the Holy Spirit created the first spark of the new life, so the continuation of this new life is the ongoing creative activity of the Spirit, employing the same means which He had used at the start. Therefore the Law's demands, threats, and condemnations are out of place here. Encouragement to sanctification should rouse the spirit and should assist and strengthen it. Only the Gospel can perform this function. Since we are speaking of sanctification as a withdrawal from and a struggle against sin, this encouragement to sanctification treats the same topics as the death-bringing law of God. It speaks of those things which God

desires and which He forbids. The approach, however, is quite different.

The preaching of the Law is directed against human self-assertiveness. In encouragement to sanctification we presuppose the readiness of the child of God to live according to God's will. The unbeliever as well as the Christian's old Adam experiences God's will as the alien, burdensome will of an overlord who is intent on meting out punishment. In preaching to the goal of sanctification we tell the believer about the will of his Father and of his Savior. He rejoices in this will because it encompasses all true happiness. The preaching of the Law is to shatter man's stubborn will; encouragement to sanctification is to teach and assist the weak will. The former way of speaking knows nothing of the Gospel. Encouragement to sanctification occurs in immediate connection with the Gospel. It derives its motivations from the Gospel. In addition it presents God's will in a completely different manner from the way in which the Law does. There are no demands, no threats, no condemnations; only invitation, encouragement, and promise—all in immediate connection with the Gospel.

What do I mean? Encouragement to sanctification is in reality an entirely different way of speaking. It deals with matters other than those with which the Law concerns itself. The important factors of a childlike respect, which honors God, and the humble consciousness of one's own insufficiency belong to this way of preaching. The approach is not that of the Law, even though it centers on the same matters with which the Law deals. The Gospel produces humility and childlike respect.

### III. BROTHERLY EXHORTATION, THE NEW LIFE

If anyone is of the opinion that this presentation, which takes seriously the apostolic statement that the Law is not for the righteous man, removes the feeling of responsibility from the Christian life, he should recognize that the Gospel produces these feelings of childlike respect and humility, and that these emotions are far more powerful than servile fear and despair. This orientation of the inner life produced by the Gospel—not the Law—alone can acknowledge God's majesty and sovereignty. Therefore this way of speaking, which we term "evangelical exhortation," has a serious character in addition to possessing the fresh, bracing joy of faith. This distinguishes it from all frivolity. The approach is not strictly the Gospel in the sense which dwells on the mighty acts of God. Rather it treats of God's will in respect to our activity. Nor is it the Law, with its burdensome demands, threats, and condemnations. Evangelical exhortation proceeds from the Gospel. It points directly to the connection between God's will and the Gospel. It tells us not only that God's grace has redeemed us through the blood of Christ, but also that He creates the good within us and purifies us from the slag of our sinfulness. This type of presentation allows the motivations for creative activity to flow from the Gospel. This approach is not a preaching of the Law. Rather it is evangelical exhortation which is directly tied in with the preaching of the Gospel. In similar fashion the Holy Spirit always produces love along with faith. We have an excellent example of this approach in the Sermon on the Mount.

The outcome of this approach is similar. The Holy Spirit does not first bring a man to faith and then begin sanctification after the completion of the work of justification. That would be a mechanical schematization. We are talking about life processes. What the Holy Spirit produces is life, not a single act severed from the totality of life. Therefore there is no faith apart from love. For that reason we also must not think of love by itself, as a work which flows from a faith about which one need no longer concern oneself.

The Holy Spirit is constantly active in the life which is now in the Christian, in all of its dimensions as at its beginning. Justification is always complete, and yet it is constantly occurring. Thus, too, faith is constantly active in grasping salvation. Faith is a continuing activity; or, to phrase it otherwise, it is an infinite line of many actions of which we later become conscious in various ways. We can see that faith is also an element in our sanctification. . . .

We also say that faith comes first and love is its fruit. In spite of its unsatisfactory character we understand this terminology. Faith without love cannot exist even in the abstract! Faith itself is already love. Even if a person were to produce both of these virtues from within himself, they could not be sequential. Since, however, the Holy Spirit is doing it, the impossibility is still more obvious. Therefore faith, love, illumination, regeneration, conversion, and sanctification are always intimately related. This interrelationship is such that a "holy embryo" is laid into the human heart and must of necessity develop there. Therefore the insistence upon sanctification! This sancti-

fication includes the whole man—all of his emotional life, his thoughts, and his words. Sanctification does not concern externals like monastic vows or the prohibition of the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages. These things are clumsy business! But sanctification is life. Accordingly it concerns the whole man and revolves around the items, even the little ones, of one's daily life within the scope of one's calling, as Luther showed so clearly. Therefore where the Gospel is, there is also sanctification. One cannot preach the Gospel without directly or indirectly also preaching sanctification. This is the preaching which I term "*evangelical exhortation*." It is my purpose to stress that it is a fresh, joyous, and glorious proclamation.

The article in the Formula of Concord on the Third Use of the Law treats this subject. That article also deals with the preaching of the Law as it addresses the Christian's old Adam. My presentation excludes that aspect of the matter. For that reason I do not call this insistence on sanctification a preaching of the Law. I rather term it exhortation. Indeed, in order to place the emphasis at the proper point, I use the term *evangelical exhortation*. . . .

Hammering away at sanctification is quite another matter. This abuse takes two forms. One is in conjunction with the harping on orthodoxy. The other opposes it. Anyone who is at home in church history is aware that the first form flourished in the age of Orthodoxy. The other arose under the influence of Pietism. Both kinds of harping on sanctification are determined by the situation which gave them birth. They may be seen at all periods and in all areas of the external church at large.

Before the Reformation they were present in the early and medieval church in the form of sects and schisms. They are to be seen also in the Lutheran Church down to the present day. Through their opposition to one another they reveal their true character, though in differing ways. Their character is by nature legalistic. There are three particular aspects to it: (1) The motivations do not come from the Gospel. They attempt to achieve results through threats and demands. (2) They inject alien elements into the contents of these demands. These outside elements do not come from God's will but from an individual's conscience. (3) A person has a certitude of the correctness of his own position.

A sermon on sanctification which hammers away at correctness of belief can produce nothing except a legalistic outlook. This may appear in two possible ways. Either the sermon will treat only the relationship between faith and works, or it will look to all kinds of ecclesiastical sanctions (for example, excommunication) for its power. In the first instance the presentation may be entirely correct. The doctrine of adiaphora may even be stressed in order to avoid the appearance of legalism. But this sermon lacks power because, as a harping on orthodoxy, it operates legalistically and squelches all inner participation. As a result, indifference to sanctification arises.

It cannot be any other way. Where there is mere knowledge and intellectual comprehension, there still is no life of faith. Where the life of faith is lacking, legalism is on the throne. This legalism shows itself in the way I have indicated. It is satisfied when it has found intellectual

acceptance. The sermon will speak of works as the necessary fruits of faith. The comment will always be made that good works are not meritorious. In discussing the doctrine of adiaphora we easily believe that we have done our job when we have made clear that matters which lie within the creative order and not in the moral law cannot become a matter of conscience. We feel that we have discharged our duty when we have clarified the smallest possible point. We have taken care of our evangelical position. But the intellectual grasp of ideas has eliminated all inner participation. The individual does not put it into practice, nor does the pastor direct his spiritual care to that goal. The result is indifference to sanctification.

By itself this is already a form of legalism. Purely intellectual comprehension relies upon the compulsion of logical conclusions. It revolves around external, intellectual concerns, which are not spirit and life and which are not the essence of God's requirements. This comprehension is purely mechanical. To grasp the idea of salvation with the intellect without experiencing it by faith is wrong and unnatural. One need not marvel, therefore, that people neglect self-discipline in the small matters of daily life. This neglect will detract from the influence of the sermon, and the sermon's lack of effectiveness will show itself in the life of the congregation. The sermon will resemble the spiritual life which produced it. The preaching of sanctification is always related to the proclamation of salvation. Anyone who summons men to the faith-full acceptance of the forgiveness of sins also preaches sanctification. He calls men from

slavery to sin to a godly life. The one emphasis is bound up with the other, and in the sermon it becomes effective in a similar way. Where the first stress is lacking (as in harping on orthodoxy), the second also gets too little attention. The sermon has three elements: the word of Scripture, the confession of the hearers, and the experience of the preacher. A sermon on sanctification, therefore, is an especially difficult task for the student of theology or for the young preacher be-

cause they lack rich experience in this area. Where the tendency to intellectualism has slighted experience by leaving it out of consideration, nothing worthwhile can result. Accordingly, the observation has been made that in times of doctrinal controversy sanctification has come off second best. Not only has sanctification been suppressed in carrying on the struggle, but it has also been downgraded in the life of the church. This is a consequence of legalism.