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The Distinction Between Law and Gospel

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THE distinction between Law and Gospel is one of the clearest systematic expressions of the doctrine of justification through faith without works formulated by the Lutheran Reformation. The reformers' understanding of the bondage of the will, of conversion and repentance, and of the Christian as being at one and the same time a righteous man and a sinner is directly related to this distinction. It is also one of their basic hermeneutical principles. (WA 18, 680 ff., 692 f. Ap IV 5, 102, 186, XII 53. FC SD V, VI)

When the Second Antinomian Controversy required Luther carefully to re-examine this principle, he concluded, "You, however, have already often heard that there is no better way of handing on and preserving the pure doctrine than the method we follow, i. e., we divide Christian teaching into two parts, into the Law and the Gospel." (WA 39, I, 361)

Lutheran theologians in the second half of the 16th century and in the 17th remained aware of the importance of this distinction — even though some distorted it. Melancthon assured the distinction between Law and Gospel a place in the theological systems of 17th-century orthodoxy by making it the basis of the relationship between reason and revelation. This was the beginning of a development in the course of which the distinction between Law and Gospel became inseparably joined to the development of the doctrine of reason and revelation.

It was in this form that 17th- and 18th-century Lutherans inherited the distinction

between Law and Gospel. Much of what they inherited came from Luther, but subtle changes were made. It is one of the characteristics of the development of orthodoxy in the 17th and 18th centuries that the doctrine of Law and Gospel is more and more displaced as a central and basic doctrine and more and more restricted to its individual locus as a paragraph under the doctrine of the Word of God, which was listed under the means of grace.

The great battles of the 18th century between the rationalists and the orthodox Lutherans were as a result waged not at the central point of Lutheran theology but at the relatively less important points, e. g., the relationship between reason and revelation. What was at stake was, of course, the doctrine of justification by faith. The concentration of the conflict at secondary points, however, robbed the Lutheran theologians of their best weapons.

While some Lutheran theologians were thus struggling to preserve the form of doctrine, other Lutheran theologians (often called Pietists) were working to restore the personal faith and the dedicated life of individual Christians. Finding few usable resources for this in the standard doctrinal handbooks, these theologians turned to Scripture. But lacking the comprehensive hermeneutical principle which the Lutheran distinction between Law and Gospel had provided 16th-century Lutherans, these theologians adopted the covenant theology of the Dutch Reformed Pietists, e. g., Coccejus, which flowed into 18th-century German Pietism through many channels.

Although the Lutheran Pietism generally preserved the outward form of orthodox teaching, it was this non-Lutheran hermeneutic which determined their preaching and their practice. At the end of the 18th-century, orthodox Lutheran theology was engaged in the last stages of a losing battle with Rationalism and Pietism.

The decisive event in the life of the Lutheran Church in the 19th century was the revival of the theology of early orthodoxy and of the reformers. A wave of restoration swept across Germany. The men who immigrated to America and later founded the Missouri Synod were themselves part of that movement. The degree of the restoration's understanding of the Reformation can easily be measured by the awareness and application of the distinction between Law and Gospel. And it is within this context that the work of C. F. W. Walther is to be understood.

The meaning of Walther's treatment of the distinction between Law and Gospel can be fully understood when it is seen as an attempt to recover the teaching of Luther and the Book of Concord and to restate it for the 19th century in a form that would present the reformers' position free from the distortions of orthodoxy, rationalism, and Pietism. Walther's specific contribution was in restating the significance of this distinction for preaching and pastoral work. Many other men made similar contributions in other areas, among them Adolf Harless, whose *Dogmatics* and *Ethics* reveal deep insight into the reformers' position; and Theodosius Harnack, who restated the significance of this doctrine for Luther.¹ Walther's ministry

is marked by an intense concern to preserve and to promote the understanding of the distinction between Law and Gospel.² He frequently dealt with this doctrine.³ He devoted two series of Friday evening lectures before the St. Louis seminary student body to this topic. In 1878 he presented 10 lectures on 13 theses; in 1884—85 he treated 25 theses in 39 lectures.⁴ The latter series is the final and definitive statement of Walther's position.

Evangelium in der lutherischen Theologie des 19. Jhs. (Berlin, 1958). Some of the material in this article first appeared there. A more complete analysis of the problem is being prepared under the auspices of the Missouri Synod's Committee on Scholarly Research and of Valparaiso University's Scholarly Research Committee.

² *Der Lutheraner* III (1847), 137.

³ "Theologische Axiome. XIV: Vom Evangelium und dessen Unterschied vom Gesetz," *Lehre und Wehre* VII (1861), 161—164, "Referat vom Gesetz," *ibid.*, pp. 321—343, 357 to 376.

⁴ Both series of lectures were edited for publication by C. L. Janzow. The 1878 lectures appeared under the title *Gesetz und Evangelium*, von Dr. C. F. W. Walther. Aus seinem schriftlichen Nachlass gesammelt. St. Louis, Mo. (Concordia Publishing House, 1893), iv and 124 pages. The 1884—85 lectures were published as *Die rechte Unterscheidung von Gesetz und Evangelium*, 39 *Abendvorträge* von Dr. C. F. W. Walther. Aus seinem Nachlass. Concordia Publishing House, 1897.

A special edition was published for distribution in Germany. This book was translated into English by W. H. T. Dau, who condensed some of the material. C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, trans. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1946).

"Gesetz und Evangelium" in this article refers to the German edition of the 1884—85 lectures. Theses identified simply by number are from the 1884—85 lectures and are quoted in Dau's translation. Since these lectures are one of the few writings of Walther available in English and probably the best known of his works, I have usually chosen to refer to lesser known writings of Walther in the footnotes.

¹ Space does not permit documentation of this picture. Cf. Robert C. Schultz, *Gesetz und*

Through them he has exercised wide influence on the pastoral theology not only of the Missouri Synod but also of many other Lutheran synods.

The distinction between Law and Gospel occupies such a central position in Walther's theology because of its decisive significance in his personal experience. From early childhood Walther believed the Bible to be true because his parents said it was. In thesis ten he points out that mere knowledge and acceptance of truth is not saving faith and is a confusion of Law and Gospel. For Walther the first step along the road to peace and joy led him to doubt and to despair of this imagined faith. He had to learn that an intellectual faith did not open heaven but rather hell to him, because it could not save him from his sins.⁵ Walther was saved from this kind of faith by the preaching of the Law, which led him to a recognition of his sinfulness and of his need for personal salvation.

Rationalist theologians intellectualized faith. They were very much concerned with the truth and very much concerned with the study of the Scriptures. They did not know, however, that the cause of unbelief lies in man's corrupted heart. In intellectualizing faith and describing the Christian life in moralistic terms they actually legalized the Gospel.⁶ Rationalism did not understand the nature of man's sin and therefore could not understand man's need for salvation. It is at this point that Walther had to begin learning about Law and Gospel.

His later sermons reflect what painful insights into himself he had gained. Unless one knows oneself as a sinner, "even the most exact knowledge of all the truths of the revealed Word of God is only a savor of death unto death."⁷ No one can enter the kingdom of grace until he has first come to learn his sinful condition from the Law. So many people within the church who enjoy a full knowledge of the Scriptures never come to a living and joyful Christianity because they wish to have either a Law without Gospel or a Gospel without Law.⁸ Walther sees very clearly that the Law is necessary to a man's knowledge of himself. He is equally clear on the fact that the Law teaches us that God's reaction to sinful man is wrath and anger. These are not empty phrases but terrible truths. The rationalists made the mistake of thinking of God simply as a loving permissive father. Walther points out He is truly a "holy and righteous being. He really hates sin, and His wrath really burns because of it to the lowest depths of hell."⁹

It is the function of the Law in Walther's thinking to prepare the way for the Gospel. No man ever believes the Gospel before he learns his sinfulness from the Law. The Law must first work the recognition of sinfulness, and it must first put a man to death, before he can receive the forgiveness and the resurrection from the dead, which are offered in the Gospel.¹⁰ Walther's clear distinction between Law and Gospel does not in any way exclude

⁷ Ibid., p. 79.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 324, 588.

⁹ Ibid., p. 339; *Evangelien Postille*, pp. 106, 107, 185.

¹⁰ *Licht des Lebens*, pp. 437, 593.

⁵ *Licht des Lebens* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1905), pp. 124 ff., 139.

⁶ Ibid., p. 384. Thesis V.

the proclamation of the Law from the preaching of the church.¹¹

Some 19th-century theologians, e.g., Schleiermacher, opposed the legalism of rationalism by becoming antinomians. Others denied the reality of the wrath of God or reduced it to another form of His love. Walther could deny neither his sin nor the wrath of God. The Law was his schoolmaster to lead him to Christ by way of the hard school of legalistic Pietism. In that struggle he turned from the intellectualized moralism of the rationalists and supernaturalists to the legalistic emotionalism of the Pietist group in Leipzig. Here Walther learned that theological truth gives meaning and significance to our existence only through an experience of the redemptive power of God and the forgiveness of sins.

But while these Pietists could set this goal before Walther, they could not help him achieve it. The theological student who was a leader of the group to which Walther belonged established his own personal experience as a model and as a requirement for all others. Walther simply could not follow along this way, and he despaired of ever achieving that faith in the forgiveness of sins. He needed the Gospel. The Pietists gave him Law and more Law. Walther later described his own despair at this time:

I just at that time was in deep spiritual affliction, was famished in body and soul, and wrestled, doubting my salvation with despair. No praying, no pleading, no weeping, no fasting, no wrestling, seemed able to help; the peace of God had de-

parted from my soul. Terrified by the Law, that verse resounded in my heart day and night:

“Nur dies, dies liegt mir an,
Dass ich nicht wissen kann,
Ob ich ein wahrer Christ
Und du mein Jesus bist.”¹²

On the verge of inner collapse, Walther came in contact with Martin Stephan, who spoke the Gospel, which freed Walther from the Law. His letter to Walther struck home with all the force of private absolutism. The Pietists had led Walther from rationalistic speculation about Scripture to the central issue of Scripture. It was Stephan who led Walther into that Scripture and who gave him the reformers' key for understanding it—the distinction between Law and Gospel. It is not accidental that Walther's intensive reading of Luther begins at this time. His personal experience of the forgiveness of sins gave him direct access to Luther's thinking. Thus Walther, through personal experience, at a relatively early point participated in the 19th century's rediscovery of Luther.

This experience with the Pietists is reflected in Theses VII, IX, XI, XII, XIII, XIV, XVII, and XXV. Thesis IX is central in Walther's approach to Law and Gospel:

. . . the Word of God is not rightly divided when sinners who have been struck down and terrified by the Law are directed, not to the Word and the Sacraments, but to their own prayers and wrestlings with God in order that they may win their way into a state of grace; in other words, when they are told to keep on praying and

¹¹ *Amerikanisch-Lutherische Pastoraltheologie* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1872), p. 104.

¹² In Barthel's funeral sermon, 1881, quoted by Steffens, *Doctor Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther* (Philadelphia, Pa.: The Lutheran Publication Society, 1917), p. 45.

struggling until they feel that God has received them into grace.

Pietism had directed Walther to his own psychological and emotional resources. It had confronted him with the reality of his sin and the wrath of God and required signs and wonders from him in his own feelings before he could have the certainty of forgiveness.¹³ It was Stephan who turned Walther away from the search for his own feelings to the reality of the Gospel. Walther learned to say with Luther: When condemned by the Law, I appeal from the Law to the Gospel; for God has given me the Gospel as a different and a second word which stands above the Law.¹⁴ Christ has saved us not only from sin and death and the devil but from the Law of God itself.¹⁵ Only when Walther came to know this did he begin to achieve an actual understanding of the true doctrine. Beginning at the point where he had, his years of hard experience under a legalistic Pietism were perhaps necessary.¹⁶

In Thesis III Walther points us to the necessity of experience in the Christian life: ". . . rightly distinguishing the Law and the Gospel is the most difficult and the highest art of Christians in general and of theologians in particular. It is taught only by the Holy Spirit in the school of experience." This experience does not have its source in a man's own

resources of feeling or emotion. Rather it is the experience of a man standing under the Law and the Gospel. The Gospel is a power that demands to be experienced. But no man can experience it unless it is preached to him. It is for this reason that Walther continually emphasizes the need for the proclamation of the Gospel.¹⁷ During the early years of the Missouri Synod the leaders of Synod also attempted to reintroduce private confession and absolution and pointed with pride to these efforts.¹⁸

The unbeliever who has come to know himself as a sinner under the wrath of God through the proclamation of the Law is brought to faith through the proclamation of the Gospel. Faith is not a condition which God demands before the Gospel is to be preached. Nor is it a self-produced feeling. It is rather a gift which God himself gives through the proclamation of the Gospel.¹⁹

This point was at stake in the election controversy. The doctrine of election was important for Walther precisely because it involved the doctrine of faith. He was so firm and steadfast in his rejection of the position of his opponents because they were confusing Law and Gospel in their doctrine of faith. In making man's election dependent upon his faith, it seemed to Walther that they were requiring that man of his own natural powers cease his resistance to the Gospel and come to faith before he could have the election of God.²⁰

Walther knew that the Law was neces-

¹³ *Licht des Lebens*, p. 625.

¹⁴ *Die Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche die wahre sichtbare Kirche Gottes auf Erden, u. s. w.* (St. Louis: 1867), p. 113.

¹⁵ *Amerikanisch-Lutherische Evangelien Postille: Predigten über die evangelischen Perikopen der Sonntage und Hauptfeste des Kirchenjahrs* (St. Louis, 1870), p. 161.

¹⁶ *Lehre und Wehre*, IV, 41.

¹⁷ *Licht des Lebens*, p. 29. Thesis XXV.

¹⁸ Cf. e. g., *Lehre und Wehre*, IV, 46.

¹⁹ Cf. Walther's address to the Western District, 1877. *Proceedings*, p. 84.

²⁰ Theses XIII and XIV.

sary not only for one who was not yet converted but also for the man who was already a Christian. He expressly rejects the position of such as say that the teaching of the Law does not concern the believers, is not necessary for them, and therefore should not be preached to them. On the contrary, Christians need the Law for the continuous putting to death and the crucifixion of their flesh.²¹ Walther thus rejects all antinomianism at the same time that he succeeds in preserving the primacy of the Gospel. For the Christian is by no means without sin. Nor is he "wallowing in undisturbed blessed peace and joy as the sermons of inexperienced or enthusiastic preachers unfortunately all too often describe him."²²

On the other hand, the pastor should not be hindered in his proclamation of the Gospel by the fact that he sees so many weaknesses and failings in his people. For these weaknesses and failings will finally be healed not by the proclamation of the Law but by the proclamation of the Gospel.²³ So while Walther advocates the proclamation of the Law to the already converted he also emphasizes the need for the constant proclamation of the Gospel.

Walther's own proclamation of this Gospel was strong and clear. In a sermon preached in 1843, he points out that "those who live in Christ's kingdom" have the assurance that "all the sins which they have committed or which they still feel in themselves and still will commit are forgiven."²⁴

²¹ *Lehre und Webre*, V, 103. *Licht des Lebens*, p. 594.

²² *Pastorale*, p. 88.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

²⁴ *Licht des Lebens*, p. 317: Alle Sünden, die

This evangelical understanding of the nature of the Christian's life was the fruit of Walther's own encounter with Pietism. In America it became the basis of Walther's firm rejection of the pietism of the Methodists and other pietistic sects. If Walther's comments sometimes seem rather sharp, the reader should remember that they stem from his own long and bitter experience with this particular distortion of the Gospel.

Stephan himself led Walther into an ecclesiastical legalism. The effects of this on Walther and Walther's resulting opposition to all forms of ecclesiastical legalism cannot be described here.²⁵

Walther's theology offers many more illustrations of his assertion that the distinction between Law and Gospel is involved in every doctrine.²⁶ He applied it to practical theology with unique clarity and consistency. From this vantage point he pointed to the implications of the distinction for both dogmatics and exegesis. His lectures on the Law and Gospel contain many insights into doctrine and rest on a broad exegetical basis. The fruitful combination of these disciplines is unique in the 19th century.

Walther continually re-emphasized that there can be no purity of doctrine without the same constant and consistent distinction between Law and Gospel which one

sie getan haben oder die sie noch in sich fühlen und noch tun werden, sind ihnen vergeben.

²⁵ Cf. *Lutheraner*, XIV, p. 2, and Chr. Hochstetter, *Die Geschichte der Evangelisch-lutherischen Missouri-Synode in Nord Amerika, und ihrer Lebrkämpfe von der sächsischen Auswanderung im Jahre 1838 an bis zum Jahre 1884* (Dresden, 1885), p. 225.

²⁶ *Gesetz und Evangelium*, p. 35. Thesis II.

finds in the Word itself.²⁷ We have already referred to the situation at the beginning of the 19th century when naturalists and supernaturalists waged endless battles over the truth of Lutheran doctrine and the reliability of Scripture. Walther remained bound all his life to supernaturalist viewpoints.²⁸ At the same time Walther clearly recognized just what is really at stake in the exegesis of Scripture in the distinction between Law and Gospel. Theses I and IV state this decisively: "The doctrinal contents of the entire Holy Scriptures, both of the Old and the New Testament, are made up of two doctrines differing fundamentally from each other, viz., the Law and the Gospel. . . . The true knowledge of the distinction between the Law and the Gospel is not only a glorious light, affording the correct understanding

of the entire Holy Scriptures, but also a knowledge without which Scripture is and remains a sealed book."²⁹

In his lectures Walther gives penetrating analyses of many Bible texts. Other theologians turned from supernaturalism to Pietist exegetical principles which fail to distinguish between Law and Gospel. One clear instance of this difference is Walther's insight that the revelation of the Law at Mount Sinai is a revelation of God's wrath.³⁰

Walther stands head and shoulders not only above almost all his contemporaries but also above many of his most orthodox successors in the depth of his understanding of the distinction between Law and Gospel and its application to practical, systematic, and exegetical theology in the church of the Lutheran Confessions.

Valparaiso, Ind.

²⁷ *Die Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche*, pp. 111—113. Pastoral 79.

²⁸ *Licht des Lebens*, p. 218; *Lutheraner*, XLII, p. 46.

²⁹ Theses I and IV.

³⁰ *Gesetz und Evangelium*, pp. 76 f.