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Law and Gospel in Preaching

Gerhard Aho

In Scripture God addresses us as a God of wrath and of grace. So sharp is the tension between these two roles that He often seems to be two gods rather than one. The Bible appears to be full of contradictions until we reflect that there are in Scripture two entirely different doctrines, Law and Gospel. Through wrath and judgment God exercises what Luther calls His “alien work” and through grace and forgiveness His “proper work.” “It is,” says Herman G. Stuempfle, Jr., “by His Word as Law that God executes His ‘alien work’ and by His Word as Gospel that He accomplishes His ‘proper work.’”¹

Stuempfle goes on to point out that it is in preaching that the distinction between Law and Gospel becomes crucially important. Although Luther had a high regard for the written Word, the church for him was a “mouth house” rather than a “pen house.” Oral proclamation is the primary means by which God addresses people with both His Word of judgment and His Word of grace. As a summons to repent and believe, the Word’s natural and proper form is spoken. This is why preachers must be adept at distinguishing between Law and Gospel.²

Any confusion of the two results in the collapse of both, as Walther demonstrates in his classic, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*.³ If the Law is not preached so as to reveal our utter bankruptcy before God, then our predicament is not extreme and grace is unnecessary. If, on the other hand, the Gospel is presented as in any sense a demand upon us, then our situation is indeed hopeless, for now there is no word that can release us from our impossible burden.⁴ The end result is either false security or abject despair.

Both Luther and Walther continually aver that the distinction between Law and Gospel is a difficult one to maintain. It is relatively easy to analyze the differences between Law and Gospel as to their content, function, and manner of revelation. But such theological analysis does not lead inevitably to their right proclamation in the sermon. To preach them rightly it is necessary to listen to the Law and Gospel accents in the text before us. We must also let the Law and the Gospel work in us so that they become the categories in which we live, so that, as Helmut Thielicke puts it, we “really exist in the house of the dogmas” we proclaim.⁵ Here we are life-long learners.

In the sermon the distinction between Law and Gospel can be maintained by letting these two doctrines function in a correlative way. That is, the mode in which the Law is preached must find its correlate in the way the Gospel is proclaimed. When the Law accuses us of sin, the Gospel is to assure us of forgiveness. When the Law describes our defeat, the Gospel is to affirm our victory. When the Law demands obedience, the Gospel is to promise power.

1. Guilt-Forgiveness

The first Law-Gospel correlate is guilt and forgiveness. The Law requires not only an outward rectitude but an inward righteousness — pure, joyous love toward God and neighbor. We are prone to smug self-righteousness. And so the Law is a powerful hammer with which God smashes our pretensions. The target of the hammer of the Law is the conscience. When the Law is truly heard it produces feelings of guilt. The Law not only convicts us of sin; it convinces us of our inability to do anything significant about our sinfulness. The Law does not induce us to try harder to win God's favor. It shows us that there is no use in trying at all.⁶ The Law as accuser is a "terrifying tyrant barring our way to God."⁷

The Gospel, on the other hand, assures us of God's forgiveness. It thereby comforts the conscience. It delivers us from guilt by announcing that Christ absorbed all the wrath of God on account of our sins. There is no need to resort to glib evasions, flimsy excuses, or boasts of moral superiority. We can face the Law which condemns us and acknowledge its validity without falling into despair. Since there is "no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1), we can walk before God and each other as forgiven sinners.

The challenge in preaching the Gospel as forgiveness lies in finding images besides atonement, redemption, propitiation, and justification. It is not enough to say, "Jesus died for your sins," "God has justified you," or "Christ has expiated your wrongdoing." Unless we flesh out such statements, sharpening the meaning of the Scriptural terms associated with forgiveness, our hearers may not find meaning. We will lapse into jargon and resort to clichés. Parables like that of the Prodigal Son and the Laborers in the Vineyard not only announce grace but unfold the dynamics of the forgiveness experience. Forgiveness becomes meaningful to the hearers also as we focus on Christ, on His person and work. He is the paradigm of God's gracious action toward us.

2. Defeat-Victory

A second Law-Gospel correlate is defeat and victory. The Law not only accuses but exposes. It describes the predicament we human beings are in because of sin — alienation, hollowness, emptiness, meaninglessness, anxiety, despair. Here the stress is on the horizontal rather than on the vertical dimension. The Law evokes self-recognition, enabling us to see behind the masks with which we seek to hide our real selves, to the boredom, loneliness, and terror within. We thus become more conscious of our situation and more sensitive to our plight. The Law evokes self-awareness by mirroring our misery and describing our defeat.

The Gospel, on the other hand, affirms our victory. The Gospel does not resolve the tensions or remove the contradictions. But in the midst of our doubts and fears and uncertainties it makes hope, healing, and certitude possible. For alienation it offers reconciliation, for meaninglessness, purpose, for loneliness, God's presence, for transiency, homecoming. In a world in which tragedy and triumph are inextricably intertwined the Gospel affirms that in Christ who conquered all the evil forces we too shall conquer. In that affirmation we can go on confidently in the midst of seeming defeat.

3. Obedience-Power

A third Law-Gospel correlate is obedience and power. The Law's demand that it be obeyed continues to have relevance for Christians. We strive for obedience to God's will, not to earn God's favor but to actualize our faith. Our obedience is a consequence and not a cause of grace. Obedience is not necessary for salvation, but it is necessary. Paul devotes a substantial portion of each of his epistles to the subject of Christian obedience.

In our concern to avoid works-righteousness we sometimes bypass obedience to God's will. It is our task in preaching to clarify the nature and content of the divine ought. Because Christians have a propensity to become indolent unless incited and guided by the Law, we must in our preaching issue the call to obedience concretely and realistically. We are to speak the Law that Christians might know more clearly how to express their love to God and neighbor.

But while the Law can guide, it cannot empower. It is the Gospel that gives power to obey God. This promise of the Gospel's power is never a must, ought, or let us. When the imperative mode predominates in our preaching we are moraliz-

ing. It is the indicative mode that best fits the Gospel promise.⁸ Exhortations to holy living are therefore to be couched in a Gospel framework in which we are reminded of who we are. Because we are God's people, made new in Christ, we can live in obedience to God's will. We can keep on becoming what we are. This Gospel context makes obedience a delight.

The sanctified life is a gift. It is God who works in us "both to will and to do of His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13, KJV). The Gospel does not demand a response of obedience; it creates that response. The Gospel does this by pointing to what God has made us in Jesus Christ and by promising to us the very power of Christ in Word and Sacraments.

These three Law-Gospel correlates can help us to maintain the distinction between Law and Gospel in our sermons.

Law and Gospel should sound forth in every sermon. Law alone just adds to the "nausea of words." There is no real joy in preaching Law. The Gospel is harder to proclaim than Law, perhaps because images of sin and brokenness seem closer at hand than images of grace. Yet we will strive to preach the Gospel pertinently and abundantly. The Law is only instrumental, it serves the Gospel. The Law remains God's "strange" Word, the Gospel, His "proper" Word.

FOOTNOTES

1. Herman G. Stuempfle, Jr., *Preaching Law and Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 17.
2. *Ibid.*
3. C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1929), pp. 79-89.
4. Stuempfle, *Preaching Law and Gospel*, p. 17.
5. Helmut Thielicke, *The Trouble with the Church* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 5.
6. Lowell O. Erdahl, *Preaching for the People* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), p. 41.
7. Stuempfle, *Preaching Law and Gospel*, p. 21.
8. H. Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), p. 209.