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Table of Contents

The Third Use of the Law: Keeping Up to Date with an Old Issue Lawrence R. Rast	187
A Third Use of the Law: Is the Phrase Necessary? Lawrence M. Vogel	191
God's Law, God's Gospel, and Their Proper Distinction: A Sure Guide Through the Moral Wasteland of Postmodernism Louis A. Smith	221
The Third Use of the Law: Resolving The Tension David P. Scaer	237
Changing Definitions: The Law in Formula VI James A. Nestingen	259
Beyond the Impasse: Re-examining the Third Use of the Law Mark C. Mattes	271
Looking into the Heart of Missouri: Justification, Sanctification, and the Third Use of the Law Carl Beckwith.....	293
Choose Life! Walter Obare Omawanza.....	309

God's Law, God's Gospel and Their Proper Distinction: A Sure Guide Through the Moral Wasteland of Postmodernism

Louis A. Smith

I take my brief to be that of addressing the matter of biblical hermeneutics, specifically in the context of the morass in which the church of the Lord Jesus Christ now finds herself. These are indeed strange times in which the talk of mission is pirated by revisionist relativists to distract the church from her Christ-given mission of the disciple-making proclamation of the gospel; in which bishops and pastors repudiate their ordination vows with impunity; in which everything is tolerated in the church, except the saving gospel; in which millions can be spent to study the un-studiable, while support for mission development both home and abroad both dwindles and is eaten up by increasingly irrelevant bureaucracies; strange times indeed. But such are the times with which we must try to come to grips. And it is my conviction that the church has at hand the resource to deal with these times, namely the Bible itself. Which is, of course, why the matter of hermeneutics is so crucial.

I am going to try to touch on several things. First, I want to say a few things about hermeneutics in general. Second, I want to say a few things about the phenomenon that we have come to call *postmodernism* as they relate to matters of hermeneutics. Third and finally, I want to say something about that Lutheran *proprium*: the proper dividing of law and gospel, specifically as it relates to hermeneutics in the postmodern morass.

We begin with hermeneutics. What do we mean by this term, which is regularly invoked for the conduct of all kinds of mischief? As everyone knows, hermeneutics has something to do with interpretation but specifically what? We can get at it, I think, by comparing the two key words in the study and interpretation of the Bible: hermeneutics and

Louis A. Smith was called to his eternal rest on November 30, 2004 less than two months before he was scheduled to deliver this essay at the 2005 Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions in Fort Wayne, Indiana. A tribute to him was given by Frank C. Senn and the essay was read by Richard Niebunk, both members of the Society of the Holy Trinity and close friends.

exegesis. Both, of course, may be rendered in English by the word *interpretation*; yet the two are not interchangeable. Rather, they relate in the following way. When I take a biblical text and say to you: This means that . . . What follows the *that* is my exegesis. When you then ask me: How do you know that's what it means? My answer to that question is, at least in part, my hermeneutics. That is to say, in answering the how-do-you-know question, I will reveal the basic principles which I use in order to read and interpret the biblical text.

We need also to consider the fact that there are what we might term *exegetical tools*. They are intellectual devices that are used to carry out our exegesis, and while they are not per se hermeneutical matter, it is fairly common sense to conclude that such tools should be appropriate to the hermeneutics that we claim. So, for instance, if I say that one of my hermeneutical principles is that the biblical writers say what they mean and mean what they say (the old dogmaticians would call this the perspicuity of Scripture; i.e. its fundamental clarity), then it would be inappropriate to use the interpretive devices called allegory, unless a writer clearly tells you that he has made an allegory. Likewise, if one of my hermeneutical principles is that the Bible's original languages must lie behind any interpretation, it would be inappropriate to use a word study based upon an English dictionary.

On the other hand, if a hermeneutical principle is that the thought structure and language of the Hebrew Scriptures underlies the New Testament, or as it has been said that the New Testament writers may have written in Greek but they thought in Hebrew, then it is quite appropriate to take terminology from the New Testament and explain it on the basis of its roots in the Hebrew Scriptures.

What then are the hermeneutical principles that form the basis of a Lutheran interpretation of the Bible? The first thing that we need to note is that nowhere in the Lutheran symbolical books is there a discreet theological topic on the Bible to lay out a complete hermeneutic for us. This means that we will only discover the hermeneutical principles in the context of a broader reading and, I would argue, in what might be called an occasional fashion (i.e., we will discover principles as the occasion requires it of us). For example, as long as the Bible was actually functioning as authority in the church, it was probably sufficient to testify to it as God's word. This matter is challenged even by those who use a language that says the Bible is the word of God, when the Bible is not allowed to function as actual authority. For example, does it matter that the ELCA constitution says that the Scriptures are the authoritative source and norm for church teaching, if it can then appoint a study commission

which can admit other so-called authorities and functionally allow them to trump the Bible?

When that happens, it becomes necessary to spell things out more extensively and more carefully. And we might see such spelling out as prescriptions for reading the Bible properly. In the process, we will undoubtedly find spots where we ourselves have been blind and will be called to alter our own ways. Unless, of course, there might be some who think themselves beyond repentance. To such, I have nothing to say, finding repentance to be the most appropriate stance for my own life and person. This is, of course, not the first time that a need for such prescription has arisen in the life and history of the church. We might take the historic creeds of the church to be just such prescriptions. So, for example, the Apostles' Creed might be seen as a prescription that says: When you read the Bible, read it in such a fashion as to proclaim the world's creator, redeemer, and fulfiller as one and the same God, and not like Marcion who could not stomach the connection. Or for another example, the Christology of Chalcedon might tell us to read the Bible in such a fashion that when you read of Jesus of Nazareth, the Word (of God), or the Son of God, you know that they are one and the same person, and not two different persons as the Gnostics want us to think.

If anything is peculiar about our current situation, it might be that the controversial point that we have to deal with is the Bible itself. Therefore, it seems to me, the very first affirmation that we will have to insist on is that the Bible is the word of God in the words of God. You do not have to have some theory of inspiration like a notion of dictation to make such an affirmation. All that you need to do is begin with Jesus himself, God the Son incarnate. I would hold that most ideas of inspiration have missed the point because they have begun elsewhere, even when that elsewhere has thought to have been the Holy Spirit. And they have missed the point because they have at this one point forgotten the teaching of the Smalcald Articles part III, which holds that the Spirit is never given apart from the word of God, and in that forgetting have turned the biblical authors into enthusiasts, who, if they have not swallowed the Holy Spirit feathers and all, have at least imbibed in some rarified air (SA III).¹

¹ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, tr. Charles Arand, Eric Gritsch, Robert Kolb, William Russell, James Schaaf, Jane Strohl, Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 310-326.

It seems to me that if we start with Jesus himself, several things happen. First, his words to those whom he chose to be his apostles become the source of their inspiration as they write (or initially speak) what they have been taught. The inspiration of the New Testament resides precisely in their nature as confessional writings; that is words that speak the same thing as they have first heard. Second, we can see the close connection between inspiration and proclamation. These words, the Holy Scriptures, have been given to be confessed. I take it as a given that you know that the Greek word that stands behind our English word *confession* is ὁμολογέω, which means: to say the same thing. Third, the inspiration of the Old Testament as the word of God in the words of God is christologically established, since it is Jesus himself who gives us the Old Testament, as Luke 24:44-47 testifies. So then, the first affirmation: The Bible is the word of God in the chosen words of God.

A second affirmation: The Bible is inerrant with respect to its proper purpose. Inerrancy was, of course, a piece of Lutheran theological orientation from the outset, even if its precise definition did not come until the time of Lutheran Orthodoxy. And we all know that it was eroded over the course of time under the impact of Rationalism, Pietism, and the advances of modern science—both natural and social. But I think that it is a doctrine that must be reclaimed and the key to reclaiming it is to identify the proper purpose—the proper purpose, that is, for which the Bible was given to us. The old term for that proper purpose was *faith and morals* or as the constitution of the ELCA so elegantly phrases it, “proclamation, faith and life.”² It is no disrespect of the Bible to say that it was written not to introduce us to the creation which is below us, but the creator who is above us. It is no disrespect to say that Scripture was not written so that we could be informed about the age of rocks but rather that we might be reformed into the image of the Rock of Ages.

Lutherans in America never really had to work through the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy. That is most likely due to the fact that the Lutheran Churches existed as immigrant churches well after the time that their members themselves ceased to be immigrants. Now, having made it pretty much into the mainstream of American life without having gone through the struggle, we are easily intimidated by the accusation that we might be fundamentalists, even though both we and our accusers are highly likely to be ignorant of just what the fundamentals were. We just

² *Constitutions, Bylaws, and Continuing Resolutions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*. (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2005), 19, Section 2.03.

have to get past that and lay it on the line: When it comes to faith and morals, the Bible is inerrant.

A third affirmation: The Bible is clear. To repeat what I said earlier, the Biblical writers say what they mean and mean what they say. This, of course, does not mean that we immediately grasp what they say and mean. But the fault for that does not lie with the biblical text. It lies with us, and that for any number of reasons. We might not yet have learned the grammar. We might not yet have learned the vocabulary or the particular idiom of an author. Luther's struggle with the righteousness of God might be an example (Rom 1:17). He had imported a foreign notion of righteousness into the biblical text and so misunderstood the text to his own great pain. And it took a goodly amount of reading before the Bible could straighten him out. But in the end, the Bible's clarity won the day.

A fourth affirmation: The Bible must be read historically. Its own language as well as the events to which it bears witness are rooted in the specific history of Israel, Israel's Jesus, and his church and cannot be divorced from them. These writings are not in any way mythological. Having now said that the Bible must be read historically, I must immediately go on to say that the term *historically* does not imply the historical-critical method. That method, which is so thoroughly entrenched in the modern academy and which is really a collection of intellectual devices united by a common perspective, is in many ways not historical at all, since rather than accept the witness that comes to us from the past it seeks to judge that testimony on the basis of the critic's own quite limited perspective, as if that present perspective had automatic claim to be normative. This is nowhere more clear than when we observe the way in which the historical-critical method so easily slid into deconstructionism, which for all practical purposes denies any objective meaning to the text, preferring instead to treat it as a wax nose, to use Luther's colorful expression for the effort, to treat the text according to our own desires.

Nor do the texts of the Bible, as historical texts, lend themselves to the abstraction of which the postmodern world is so fond. For example, the Bible does not know of something called sexuality, nor does it know of committed relationships. Rather it knows men and women with their differentiated but mutually adapted sexual apparatuses, who produce human babies, and it knows of marriage.

A fifth and for now final affirmation: The interpretive task is not so much to understand the word of the Bible as it is to stand under the word of the Bible. It is, after all, not the Bible that is the puzzle that we need to

solve. It is we who are the puzzle, and the Bible that will solve us. Matthias Flacius Illyricus, the true father of the science of hermeneutics, put the basic issue this way: the Bible he said, is recognized by everyone as a very difficult book to understand. And there are reasons for that. It is ancient and we are modern (he was writing in the sixteenth century). It comes out of a Semitic culture and we do not. Its languages are not our native tongue. It includes so many different styles of writing. And the authors are often verbose. And not infrequently they will stop a thought in mid-stream and start all over again. But all of these problems are solvable. We can learn the languages, we can learn the culture, we can come to understand the styles. When we do those things, then we come up against another problem, and it is the real reason why the Bible is so difficult to understand. When we have cleared up all the other problems, we finally confront the claim of another, the LORD of Israel, incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, to be God. We confront that claim at exactly the point where we are putting forth our own claim. There are some things that it is more convenient not to understand.³ It is this word that meets us in judgment and grace, which asserts the claim of God upon us in law and gospel, which we must first stand under. All interpretive activity is finally aimed at clarifying that claim.

Our next item is postmodernism. Here I want to point to a few characteristics of postmodernism that have an effect on the interpretation of Scripture in the church, which, if allowed, will render any serious interpretation of the Bible impossible. I think that each involves an inherent contradiction that I will try to point out. I begin with the obvious: postmodernism relativizes the absolute and absolutizes the relative. This is perhaps most clearly seen in the postmodern phenomenon of multiculturalism. This notion that somehow all cultures are of similar value and that they can be included in one over-arching common culture, which can pick and choose what it likes best in each of them, is probably rooted in middle-twentieth-century cultural anthropology, which looked upon cultural diversity as a way to critique and reconstruct certain aspects of Western culture in general and American culture in particular. But, of course, if there is no place to stand, no absolute, then there is no possibility of critique other than the arbitrary. There could only be description. How, for example, with no absolute could one render a critical judgment about wife-beating, other than to say: I am repelled by it? Morality would at best be a matter of taste and as the Romans said: *Degustibus non disputandum est*,

³ Cf. Robert Kolb, "The Clarity of Scripture," in *The Christian Faith : A Lutheran Exposition*. (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 201. Francis Pieper, "For Whom the Clear Scriptures Are an Obscure Book," in *Christian Dogmatics*, 3 Vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 1:321-322.

"You can't argue with taste."⁴ But this would finally mean that laws against wife-beating come about because those who are repelled by it have gained the power to enforce it on those who would like to practice it, thus putting themselves in the same moral pasture of the wife-beater who likewise seeks to impose his will by force.⁵

A second characteristic of postmodernism is its attachment to an ideology of progress. From its point of view things can only change for the better. Revision means improvement. Moreover, in this ideology, progress does not move toward a goal. It is on-going and never ending. Some of you may remember the old General Electric commercial that boasted, "Progress is our most important product." It is what anthropologists call *liminality*, the condition of being in transition. But with postmodernism it becomes the ideal whole way of life. Anything less than constant movement is looked upon as less than good.

This ideology of progress has two built-in problems. First, it has no way to deal with evil brought about by change. "'Cheer up, things could get worse.' So I cheered up and sure enough things got worse." This old joke catches the problem. In fact, change is not always for the better, not by a long shot. But the ideology of progress has no way to deal with that. The second problem with the ideology of progress is that it has no way really to appreciate the past. History can be no more than the story of what we have left behind. If, however, the Bible's history really is the history of salvation, then to leave behind the Bible's history is also to leave the Bible's salvation; which is, of course, just what has happened and is happening.

Third, postmodernism is the age of the slogan. Like the world of advertising it works with sound bites. For all of its seeming sophistication,

⁴ Suetonius, *Life of Titus*, 8.1.

⁵ I have chosen this illustration not quite arbitrarily. It is actually rooted in an encounter reported to me by a friend. He was teaching as a guest lecturer in a small and, in fact, quite conservative church liberal arts college. The subject was morality, and it finally dawned on one of the co-eds that he was arguing on the basis of moral absolutes. "You don't really believe that there are moral absolutes, do you?" she quizzically asked. "Yes", he answered, "and what's more, if you will think for a moment, you do too." "I do?" came the response. "Yes, you do. For example, you believe that it is always wrong for a husband to beat his wife." Well what followed that, according to my friend's report, was some of the most fantastic mental gymnastics he had ever witnessed. "Well," she mused, "maybe she could learn something from the beating. Maybe it would serve to strengthen her. She might become a more compassionate person as a result." All of which might be true and none of which can justify a husband beating a wife. Why the mental gymnastics? All of it done in the effort to hold absolutely to the notion that there are no absolutes.

clear and penetrating thought is not postmodernism's long suit. This was typified for me in a recent *New York Times* editorial supporting gay-lesbian marriage. In this editorial the argument for gay marriage was: We're gonna get it so why fight it; thirty-seven years from now it will be a non-issue, just as now inter-racial marriage is a non-issue; activist mayors and judges are like civil rights protestors and should be seen as heroes.⁶ That is about as fuzzy as thinking can get. Civil rights protestors were private citizens violating what they perceived as unjust laws, and taking the penalty to bear witness to a higher law. Activist mayors and judges are officers sworn to uphold the law taking it upon themselves to rewrite laws they do not like without the threat of penalty. Rather than heroic behavior they are engaged in tyrannical behavior. The laws against interracial marriage introduced a foreign element into marriage, namely skin pigmentation; whereas the limiting of marriage to men and women concerns something that is fundamental to marriage, namely sex and its function in the reproduction and nurture of life. Nevertheless, the civil rights sound bite is all that is necessary for the postmodernist argument in this matter.

Another brilliant example of this less-than-clear thinking produced by the slogan comes from our sister church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC). The ELCIC's Eastern Synod's Synod Council has recommended that "all persons are welcome to full participation in the organizational and sacramental life of this church, regardless of race, ancestry, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, age, record of offences, marital status, sexual orientation, economic status, family status, or disability."⁷ It also offers the same list of people to be respected by Canadians individually and in public institutions. The former, if taken as expressed, would allow convicted sex offenders to have charge of the congregation's nursery school or youth program. How would you like to be the attorney for the ELCIC if that should happen? It might well run into legal problems with under-age members holding trusteeship. The latter, if taken as written, would encourage granting public office to convicted felons and open political life to nepotism. I am not saying that the members of the Eastern Synod's Council intend any of that mischief. But it is what happens when you think in slogans designed to be politically correct.

⁶ "The Road to Gay Marriage" [Editorial], *New York Times* (Late Edition (East Coast)), Mar 7, 2004, 4, 12.

⁷ This statement was later adopted by the Eastern Synod convention. See Eastern Synod. Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. 2004 *Eastern Synod Assembly Motions*. (Kitchener, Ontario: Eastern Synod, 2004), 3. <http://www.easternsynod.org/docs/2004assembly/2004%20ES%20Assembly%20Motion%20listing.pdf>

The fourth characteristic of postmodernism that I want to hold up is that religion replaces God. Even here, "man is the measure of all things."⁸ "When God is dead religion is everywhere."⁹ The thought is accurate, but the expression could be more precise: when we are dead to God, religion is everywhere. Religion, under the impact of multi-cultural relativity, is held to be an entirely subjective matter. And we have no way past the subjective. What is granted to the natural scientific endeavor, namely the capacity to transcend our physical location in the solar system and see things from another perspective, is not really granted to other realms of thought (e.g., religion and morals). In this area we are supposed to be bound to our own place and point of view, at least until the multi-culturalists come along to tell us that there is nothing to be bound to, that all is relative. Now I think I know enough about the Old Adam who lives in all of us to know how hard such relocation can be. But I also know that there is an intellectual equivalent of repentance that allows us to move beyond the subjective in the same way that genuine repentance allows us to move beyond some specific sin; we never move completely, to be sure, but enough to make a difference. Surely every one of us has changed his mind about something significant at one time or another!

Even here, however, there is a built-in contradiction in the postmodern position. For after all, postmodernism does have a god: something to which all else must bow and which must be granted the place of any god as the ground of all value. God or deity, if you will, is not the highest good in a hierarchy of things otherwise deemed good. On this score, I think Aquinas, if I understand him, is wrong. Rather than the highest good, God is the ground of there being any possibility of good at all. God, any putative god at all, authors the good. And until the will of that author is known, we do not know what the good is (more on this later).

What authors the good for postmodernism? And therefore, what is its god? The answer is choice. Everything always is to be a matter of choice. If you choose it, that makes it good. If it is given that makes it bad. It is for this reason that when you meet up with the gay-lesbian agenda you meet with a confusion of language. Is it sexual orientation? Or is it sexual preference? It depends on the audience, does it not? If the appeal for support is addressed to the dim, who have yet to grasp postmodern enlightenment, that language will be orientation. *Hard wired* seems to be

⁸ Protagoras as quoted by Socrates in Plato's *Theaetetus* as cited in Michael Macrone, *Eureka! 81 Key Ideas Explained* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1999), 20.

⁹ Quoted in Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Living the Death of God: A Theological Memoir* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2006), 74.

the slogan of choice. Among the illuminated, however, the term is *preference*, to indicate that it is a life-style choice. To legitimate that life-style to the soft-minded there can be talk about committed relationships, while everyone knows that promiscuity is a key element of the gay life-style.

As an utterly biased observer, seeking to understand how it is that the jumble of postmodernism manages to hold so many in thrall, I am reminded of the ancient Greeks who held that "Those whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad."¹⁰ And I cringe when I remember the biblical equivalent of that: "God hardened Pharaoh's heart" (Exod 10:20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8). It may well be that this phase of Western history has no place for God in its scheme of things. That does not mean that God has no place for postmodern Western history in his scheme of things. He is as much the active Lord of this history as he was of the highly God-conscious Middle Ages.

Speaking of the active lordship of God at last brings me to God's law and God's gospel. The first thing that we need to remind ourselves is that law and gospel are not just a couple of baskets in which we can throw some biblical texts. In the first and in the final instance, law and gospel are the two ways in which God actively rules the world in the face of the world's sinful rebellion against the source of its own life.

Turning our attention to God's law, the first thing that we need to recognize is that God's law is addressed to the Old Adam: the human sinner who lives in every one of us, unbeliever and believer alike. As St. Paul once put it: "the law is not made for the righteous, but for the lawless and unruly, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane . . ." and there follows a list of ways that the Decalogue is violated (1 Tim 1:9-11).

The Old Adam, however, can never make up his mind as to whether he is an antinomian or a legalist. As an antinomian, the Old Adam thinks that if the law can not save – which it can not – then it can simply be dismissed. The antinomian attitude is revealed in the often heard question that goes something like this: If doing good will not help me get to heaven, why should I do good?

As legalist, the Old Adam plays into his own antinomian hands. He does that by making the fundamental mistake of thinking that the rationale of the law is to be found in the law itself. But thinking to find the law's rationale in the law, and not finding it there, the law always appears arbitrary. The attempt to find the law's rationale in the law itself is a

¹⁰ Sophocles, *Antigone*, l. 622.

fundamental mistake. Any law's rationale resides in a prior judgment about good and evil. This can be seen in something as common as a speed limit law. Just ask yourself the question: Which came first, the first limit on speed or the first accident? It is the accident which is judged to be bad. And then speed limits are established in the effort to limit the evil of accidents. Or in terms of much current discussion, the government provides certain tax advantages to married couples that people in other relationships are not granted. The perception, even, perhaps especially, among the cognoscenti, is that this is terribly arbitrary. If we can think beyond our legalism, it is definitely not arbitrary. The case really works like this: There is a recognition that stable marriages where husbands and wives stay together and raise children are a benefit to the society as a whole; therefore, legislation is put into effect to promote that good. The family that pays together stays together. All law finally works that way. First there is a judgment about good and evil, and then laws with their various penalties and rewards are set in place to promote the good and hinder the evil. It is no coincidence that as a radical individualism has become the content of the modern moral vision, likewise the law's promotion of stable marriage has disintegrated as a direct consequence.

But that in itself makes the critical point: to understand any law requires that you know the moral vision of the law's author. Since God is no legalist, to understand God's law, therefore, we need to seek after the moral vision of God. And that moral vision is to be found in the inner-trinitarian life of God himself – life together with an other in love. The key biblical text is Romans 13:8. "Owe no one anything except to love one another; for the one who loves the other [τὸν ἕτερον] has fulfilled the law." For some reason or another, the English translation tradition has rendered ἕτερον as neighbor. But Paul only uses the proper term neighbor at the end of the verse where he summarizes the commandments with the so-called Golden Rule: "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Rom 13:9). But while this Golden Rule summarizes the commandments, it is love of that which is other that fulfills the law. Why should that be so? Because the love that fulfills the law is rooted in the life of God himself, which moves out of himself in the primal decision to have a world which is not himself but nevertheless can receive and shares his life.

In the inner-trinitarian life, the persons of the Trinity are radically different. The Father, as the one font of divinity begets the Son and spirates the Spirit, but he himself is neither begotten nor spirated. The Son is begotten and does not beget and is subordinate as Son to Father, but this does not effect the equality of his divinity. Rather, his perfect obedience to

the Father is totally appropriate to his divinity. The Spirit neither begets nor is begotten nor does he spirate, but in proceeding from the Father his mode of existence is quite other than both Father and Son. He indeed points away from himself and points to the obedient Son and in this finds his greatest fulfillment in his own anonymity – willing to be the Spirit of the Father and the Son. Nevertheless, this in no way diminishes his divinity but appropriately fulfills it. In each case, the love that defines the inner-trinitarian life is love of that which is other.

When God, the holy Trinity, moves outside of himself in love, he does not produce another divinity but rather a creation that is not divine, so that there can be an *other* as the appropriate recipient of the love which is love for that which is different from God himself. Within this creation, moreover, the design of love for that which is other is carried out. Human beings are created as male and female, who will join in the creation of families made up of parents and children. They will live together with other families created by exogamous marriages, a constant reproduction of *others* to share in the creator's love.

It is this moral vision of God that stands behind the law of God, which seeks to promote such life together in love of the other for his human creatures, a law that in the first table prohibits the worship of gods made up of fellow creatures. Idolatry might be described as *homolatreia* ("worship of the same"). In the second table of the law, God directs love to what is not ourselves: spouses, parents or children, and other neighbors.

Since all life comes from God, the second table of the law will always be dependent on the first, for it is the God of the first commandment whose moral vision establishes the content of the law, and which is the content and measure of justice in the world. This is why revisionist projects can never be content with ethical reconfiguration but must always attack the doctrine of God. Since God is not properly known apart from his word in its scriptural norm, the attack on the doctrine of God will therefore always have an enthusiast (*Schwaermer*) element as well.

The law of God, while not the moral vision of God in and of itself, functions in two ways in this world that resists the moral vision of God. I will use the classical Lutheran terminology. First, the law functions civilly – to civilize the Old Adamic beast that strives against God. While normatively expressed in the Bible's Decalogue, this law is active in the world whether or not we accept the Bible's authority. If anyone does not want to believe that, just have them check the death rate. It remains at a constant one hundred percent. The way in which the law civilizes us is by confronting us with our own mortality. Where sexual license, for example,

replaces marital fidelity, the risk of disease and most horrid death rises. Where property is not honored, all our lives are in jeopardy. Where parents are not honored, the aged are in danger. The problem with a youth culture is that nobody remains a youth. The result of this confrontation with God's law is the great variety of human law. This human law is natural law, not in the sense that the discreet detail corresponds to some natural underlying law code, but in the sense that every law, even the most perverse, is rooted in the effort to deal with our sense of mortality.

This function of the law is connected to what is usually called human reason. This remains as long as we remind ourselves that reason at this point does not refer to the hyper-rationalism that we encounter in any variety of enlightenments or intellectualist movements. Luther's term for this reason with which the law in its civil use is apprehended is "*Vernunft*," which is much more akin to what we might call common sense—the ability to recognize on which side the bread is buttered and to make use of that to our own advantage. That is why Luther also talks about the law as the rule of sin. In the civil function of the law, God uses sin against itself. The creator's world is so designed that we ignore or abuse the other at our own peril.

At the very same time that the law is at work civilizing us, it is also performing its second function. It is exposing our sin to ourselves. This is a tricky business, however, and while the law is at work civilly whether we recognize biblical authority or not, the theological use of the law is always connected with a preacher of the biblical word. For while we might well recognize social breakdown when we see it, it is not very likely that we will connect that breakdown with our own rebellion against God without a preacher to make the connection for us. Indeed, this confrontation with the law apart from a biblical preacher is as likely to lead to idolatry as it is to anything else, since in our despair we are liable to clutch at whatever straws are at hand and whatever offers of help are made.

It is at just this point that the gospel enters with its peculiar moral significance. Most efforts to attribute a moral significance to the gospel usually end up with a gospel that is compromised as gospel, while at the same time compromising the law as law. What happens is that some feature of the New Testament record is taken—perhaps the teaching of Jesus or the example of Jesus—and then moralized, connecting it with any number of shoulds, oughts, or wouldn't it be nice ifs. Yet it is difficult to see how that is any good news at all, just a few more things that we fail to do. Since this regularly gets coupled with ideas that God does not so much

care if you get it done as he does only that you are sincere and try hard, it is also somewhat of a failure as law, since it is never really allowed to get its teeth into us.

But in order to see the gospel's real moral significance, we need to begin by letting the gospel really be the gospel: the unconditional forgiveness of sins granted freely for Jesus' sake, which alone justifies the ungodly. In this gospel the triune God is once again living out his own moral vision of love for that which is other; only now that which is other is not merely other as creature to creator but as sinner to the righteous God. Here, in the gospel, God loves what is other by forgiving their sins for Christ's sake without any conditions of merit whatsoever. The faith through which this forgiveness is received is not a precondition to be fulfilled in order to merit forgiveness (Believe in Jesus, and God will let you off the hook of your well deserved damnation); rather, this faith, hanging your heart on the gospel word alone, describes the state of those forgiven sinners when the magnanimity of their divine forgiver at last penetrates their thick skulls and rock-hard hearts.

And it is precisely this gospel that allows the law really to be the law. You see, in order to save us, God really does intend to kill us with the law so that, from the debris of the executed Old Adam, he can create entirely new creatures. Proper repentance is neither a sorrow nor a terror nor a vow to change so that we can escape the divine death sentence. Proper repentance is to accept the rightness of the death sentence and to submit to it—to submit to being put to death under the law. Without the real gospel that is never done. As Article V of the Formula of Concord puts it, without the gospel the veil is kept on Moses's face; which is to say, without the real gospel we try to avoid the law, domesticate the law, and pull the teeth out of the law.¹¹ The law, however, is supposed to kill us. That is its contribution to our salvation. There is no salvation apart from dying and rising, and the law's role is to kill us. When it comes to the law, the good news is not "God really wants you to try hard." When it comes to the law the good news is "You're gonna die."

To stand under the law is to hear its proclamation of our death sentence, with the specific commandments supplying the evidence to sustain the verdict. To stand under the gospel is to hear the word that raises the dead. The task of all hermeneutics is to interpret so that we stand under the Bible, benefiting from understanding both ourselves and God. It is to allow both law and gospel to do what each alone can do: the law to kill; the gospel to make alive.

¹¹ Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 500–501, 581–586.