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# LAW AND GOSPEL AS HERMENEUTIC: MARTIN LUTHER AND THE LUTHERAN TRADITION

*Richard Hordern*

The idea of Law and Gospel is found in various Lutheran traditions. It generally refers to the idea that God's Word is expressed through two different ways of speaking. When God speaks Law the message is one of judgment and condemnation over the individual's failure to live up to the standards of the Law, thus arousing fear and guilt in the individual. This guilt should be destructive of the person's self security so that the person is then driven, by desperation, to the Gospel. The Gospel is God speaking a word of forgiveness, comfort, or promise. The Law is judgment, in diametrical opposition to the Gospel, which is grace. The Gospel can only be understood, according to a traditional viewpoint, when one first experiences guilt under the Law. The Gospel represents a total release of the person from the accusations of the Law and the guilt is removed by grace through faith alone.

In approaching "Law and Gospel" as a hermeneutic, which is to say as a method for interpreting the Bible, theological presuppositions must first be analyzed. Law and Gospel does not represent a "mechanical" method of exegesis. It can be viewed either as a theological conclusion, drawn from experience and the Bible, which is then used to establish a framework for further interpretation and understanding; or, as a method to evaluate the appropriate "impact" which a message will have on a particular audience. The way in which Law and Gospel will function hermeneutically will therefore depend upon both the theological understanding associated with that idea, and also the context in which a Law-Gospel consideration will be applied.

In the first two sections of this paper, I will outline the futility of using "Law and Gospel" as a theological principle to determine the content of Bible texts. All biblical

interpretation is done from within a theological framework. While there will be times when a Bible text challenges one's preconceived system of thought, most of the time the Bible is interpreted within a given framework of understanding. One's starting framework will include theological ideas as well as various social, cultural, and individual-psychological components.

## PROBLEMS WITH LAW AND GOSPEL

Law and Gospel is sometimes used as a theological idea to extract meaning from texts. But Law and Gospel is a problematic area of Lutheran theology. It produces problems and confusions, and is deficient on many important questions, especially as pertaining to Christian discipleship and sanctification. It cannot be used as a theological principle to shape or determine the content of meaning which will be assigned to specific texts because it represents, not so much the message of the Bible, but secondary interpretations of the Bible. The failure of most Law-Gospel theories to deal adequately with the content of Bible texts, while also being accountable to a wider theological system, can be illustrated by listing some of the difficulties or problems which generally arise when employing traditional Law-Gospel theories.

1) Lutheranism is the only Christian tradition that discusses "Law and Gospel." While the issues and concerns are noted by others, other Christian traditions have felt that a sharp opposition of Law and Gospel produces an unhealthy and unbiblical dualism. Furthermore, it is noted that Lutheran theology has always been deficient in understanding sanctification, a problem caused by failing to clearly distinguish justification and sanctification. Biblical interpretations of Law and Gospel should not contradict the reality of sanctification.

2) The phrase "Law and Gospel" does not appear in the Bible. Important aspects of the theory, including questions of the "third use" of Law (Law as a guide for Christian ethics), the "civil use" of Law (Law as the basis for all specific government legislation), and the idea that "Law always accuses," are never discussed in the New Testament, and only with very creative interpretation can biblical texts be forced into those categories of thought. Nor does the Bible see Law and grace as being in opposition. Thus we cannot elevate "Law and Gospel" to the status of doctrine. It is an idea that has appeared in different forms in Lutheranism, nothing more. Law-Gospel theories have tried to explain certain teachings of the Bible, but are not an actual teaching of the Bible itself.

3) Lutheran theology and biblical interpretation have been led to many unfortunate conclusions by forcing the Bible and theology into a Law-Gospel framework. Especially dangerous is interpreting Law and Gospel as referring to different entities, or spheres of life, or different moments of time. Luther was a dialectical theologian, and errors result when his dialectic is transformed into a dualism. A Law-Gospel dualism destroys the unity of the Christian's life by dividing it into competing spheres. It also destroys the unity of God's person and God's Word.

Law and Gospel must not be understood as matters of content, but rather as principles of methodology. The point is not "what is Law": or "what is Gospel" but rather "how can the Gospel be experienced?" The Gospel establishes the Christian in

wholeness and unity, rather than in a disunity of competing forces of Law and Gospel.

4) What was God's purpose in giving the Law? Was it from the start intended only to arouse guilt and judgment, and hence the Lutheran affirmation that the "theological use" (using the Law to expose and condemn sins) is the "primary use" of the Law; or, was the Law intended as a positive guide for living? It is impossible to read the Old Testament and conclude that the Law plays merely an accusatory role. It is affirmed as a means to life.

Likewise, why did Jesus give the Sermon on the Mount (and related teachings)? Simply to condemn the disciples as unworthy people? It is impossible to find such an intention in the texts, rather the Sermon on the Mount is clearly intended to be instruction for the disciples that will distinguish them from the ways of the world. The words are a great message of hope in terms of what God will bring about in the lives of believers. But Lutheranism has not been comfortable with the Gospels, and especially the Sermon on the Mount, seeing these as words of Law rather than promise.

5) There is a cluster of problems concerning the relationship of the Law to guilt. The tendency has been to understand guilt as resulting from the functioning of the Law. The Law-Gospel sequence has therefore meant that people cannot come to Christ and the Gospel unless they are first struggling with guilt. This is a difficult viewpoint to hold while, at the same time, affirming the baptism of infants.

In terms of the Christian life, the Law-Gospel sequence has sometimes been taken to mean that, every Sunday, the preacher must first preach Law, arousing the fear of God and guilt in the congregation, so that the audience can then appreciate the Gospel as a message of forgiveness. This pattern has also been attached to the process of one's daily renewal of the baptismal covenant through repentance. But for many years it has been recognized as inadequate to suppose that Christianity is merely the answer for the problem of guilt.

Furthermore, in order for guilt to be a problem, the preacher has to make it a problem. Then, having created the problem, the preacher just happens to have the solution for the problem. This is a dishonest way of promoting the worst aspects of religion. Healthy religion is not based on fear and guilt, in this case fear of God, death, and punishment; rather healthy religion must be based on love. Furthermore, this has left us without the Gospel to proclaim to the increasing numbers of people in our society who either are not wallowing in guilt, or else who have been trained to view guilt as a personal and psychological problem rather than as a religious or spiritual problem.

The Lutheran recognition of the reality of guilt in life, and the constant emphasis on the Gospel of forgiveness, has been one of the enduring strengths of Lutheranism, especially in terms of pastoral counselling. However, when Law and Gospel are studied within the wider theological context of sanctification, it is apparent that the association of guilt (or *Anfechtung*) with the Law is superficial and biblically inadequate. The Bible states many things about Law that are not related to guilt, and the reality of guilt far exceeds the legitimate biblical teachings on the Law. While there will be times when Law and guilt do function together, it is imperative to distinguish these

two realities and keep them separate much of the time.

6) The theology of sanctification presents major problems for Law and Gospel. Sanctification refers to the process whereby the baptized Christian grows in faith, leading to the final and total holiness of that person after death. Sanctification follows baptism and justification, and it includes the realm of Christian ethics and discipleship.

The Law-Gospel dialectic is related to the dialectic of *simul justus et peccator* (simultaneously justified saint and sinner). But the idea of *simul justus* can have many of the same problems as Law and Gospel. Can it be said that the baptized Christian is as prone to evil as the unregenerate? That would deny the power of God's grace in baptism that is working to negate the power of sin. The Christian has a different relationship to the Law than does the non-Christian precisely because being a Christian does make a difference, yet it must also be affirmed that the Christian is not magically immune from sin.

Because God accepts the Christian for the sake of Christ, God no longer uses the Law as a standard for measuring the "merits" of the individual. God's grace is not simply words of forgiveness: God's grace is also divine power to overcome sinning. The point is not whether or not we are living a perfect life by the Law, because we aren't, but the point is whether or not God's power is still working in our still sinful lives to help us come closer to a full reconciliation and unity with the Godhead. The Law-Gospel dualism cannot express this reality of sanctification.

7) One idea, unfortunately inserted into the Law-Gospel discussion is that "Law always accuses" (*lex semper accusans*). This idea has been the cornerstone for many in understanding Law, in particular the idea that because the Law is always playing an accusatory function, therefore Christians cannot use the Law for ethical guidance. There is no "third use" of the Law wherein the Law can be used as a moral guide apart from hearing a message of condemnation.

But the Gospel is the message of justification through faith apart from Law. When the believer is removed from living by the Law, and instead is offered salvation through Christ apart from Law, then the accusations of the Law become irrelevant for the Christian. Because salvation is no longer by Law, there is no need for the Law to accuse and arouse guilt, because the accusatory function of Law is properly directed towards those people who are trying to earn their salvation by good works. The real problem is not the Law, but the human quest for a works righteousness. The inability of any human being to fulfill the Law guarantees the impossibility of the Law as a means of salvation. When the Christian is removed from works righteousness, the Law can no longer accuse for failures, because the Christian is no longer measured by God according to the standard of the Law. Thus the Law cannot accuse the Christian in the same way that it would accuse those who are living apart from Christ.

The basic Christian understanding of sanctification is that, after baptism, Christ or the Holy Spirit indwells in the believer and works through the believer. We cannot claim any good work as being our own, because all good works we do are, in fact, the fruits of the Spirit. We claim no merit for our works because the merit belongs to Christ alone who is performing these works within us. But, having affirmed that, it is also clear why it cannot be upheld that the Christian is constantly being accused by the Law; this implies that the individual Christian is performing works by Law for

salvation and is faltering by the Law's standards. But if it is no longer we who are doing the works, but the Spirit within, the Law cannot accuse. If the Law "always accuses" then it is not meaningful to speak of "fruits of the Spirit."

## LUTHERAN VIEWS ON LAW AND GOSPEL

Having outlined some of the general problems and considerations in developing Law and Gospel as a theological principle, I turn now to some of the various theories of Law and Gospel found in Lutheranism. It can be seen that no one viewpoint satisfactorily resolves the many problems that must be taken into account. It is also clear that the many different interpretations of Law and Gospel make it impossible to use Law and Gospel as a clear theological guideline for interpreting the content and message of the Bible.

### Luther's View

What was Luther's understanding of Law and Gospel? This question is difficult to answer. As is the case with many of his ideas, it is hard to find a consistent and unified view of Law and Gospel throughout his career. There is a debate as to whether or not his view of sanctification presented in his *Lectures on Galatians* (1535) represents a rejection, or instead a mere modification, of his earlier viewpoint, and a decision on this is critical in evaluating his understanding of the role of Law and Gospel in the life of sanctification.

A clear verdict is not possible for me to make at the present because of the difficulty in separating "Luther's view" from the many different schools of interpretation of Luther. It has been my own personal experience that people tend to equate "Luther's view" with a particular school of interpretation of Luther, which is often identical to the particular school of thought that was dominant when that person attended seminary. In our own century, Luther has been interpreted as a Kierkegaardian existentialist, a Barthian, a Nazi, a Jeffersonian democrat, a defender of scholastic doctrines, a man of deep pietistic faith experiences, and a brave liberal challenging the existing authorities with his message of freedom. To add to the confusion, the Pope may someday declare Luther to have been a good Roman Catholic all along!

These ambiguities apply with special force to reconstructing Luther's view of Law and Gospel. But two important things can be said which summarize both the essence of Luther's concern and also the parameters for a valid understanding of Law and Gospel.

First, Luther developed his view against the popular religiosity of the day which preached that people could earn their salvation merely by doing good works. Luther correctly defines this as works righteousness, seeking justification and sanctification on the basis of a merely external righteousness. Against such a position Luther affirmed that the Gospel is the message of God's acceptance of sinners apart from the works and merits of the individual. In this sense "works of Law" are totally incompatible with the Gospel, for no one can, on their own, fulfill the Law so completely as to earn salvation.

Second, Luther articulated his view against an antinomian position which held that Christians, being freed from the Law in terms of salvation, therefore do not need the

Law as a guide for daily living. The Spirit alone will provide the guidance needed. Luther rejected this position, affirming that the revelation of the Law is needed as a guide for Christian living, and to remind one, in a healthy manner, of one's human shortcomings by the standards of the Law.

Thus Luther's essential position was articulated with respect to these two concerns emanating from his own particular context. To superficially apply his teachings to other contexts and situations will inevitably bring about a distortion of his thought. In looking at various Luther interpreters, great confusion soon enters as "Law and Gospel" is developed and applied within differing circumstances.

## Lutheran Scholasticism

An overview must begin with Lutheran scholasticism, or Lutheran orthodoxy.<sup>1</sup> The scholastic position was centered around the concept of *lex aeterna*, the Law as an eternal, abiding, and static principle of the world. All people are accountable to this Law, and righteousness is only achieved by meeting the demands of this Law. These demands are echoed in "natural law" and in many specific Bible texts. Salvation is possible because Jesus, in his person, fulfilled all of the demands of the Law, and therefore is able to be "our representative," taking upon himself the punishment we deserve for having faltered by the standards of the Law. God speaks two kinds of words, either a word of demand and condemnation, which is Law, or a word of comfort, mercy, and promise, which is the Gospel. Faith is the ability to assent to the propositions of forgiveness and promise, and the Gospel becomes the message that Christ has fulfilled the Law on our behalf.

A number of problems were later seen with regards to this system. 1) The position was seen as problematic in light of the nineteenth century's discovery of the history of revelation, and the fact that God's revelation always comes through specific historical events. This contrasted with the idea of the Law as an eternal entity and structure of revelation. 2) All statements of demand and moral guidance in the Bible were seen as aspects of Law, so that the whole area of Christian ethics became problematic. The implication was that if you try to follow the morality of the Bible, then you have lapsed into a legalistic works righteousness. 3) If only Jesus fulfilled the Law, then the entire mode of God's existence and relation to humanity prior to the coming of Jesus must have been wrath, contradicting the Old Testament witness to the presence of God's grace and mercy prior to the coming of Jesus. 4) If Jesus has satisfied the Law for all people, then salvation is no longer by grace, because being accepted before God for Christ's sake is now what all people deserve, instead of being an undeserved gift. 5) If Jesus ends the Law, wrath, and guilt, there is no way to account for the Christian's continuing struggle with guilt and sin, which will happen. 6) If Jesus' obedience to the Law made atonement and reconciliation possible, then salvation is still on the basis of Law, the only change from the Jewish context being that Jesus has obeyed the Law for everyone else, thereby confirming the Law as the means to reconciliation with God. But this contradicts the New Testament testimony that

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1. Gerhard O. Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate: An Interpretation of Its Historical Development* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1969), pp. 4-9, etc.

justification and righteousness are now apart from Law. 7) The scholastic position had difficulty in dealing with Luther's idea of *simul justus*. Instead of seeing Law/Gospel and wrath/grace as dialectical aspects of human existence, they became instead a dualism prematurely separating the sheep from the goats. 8) Christian discipleship was reduced to believing in the propositions of faith, unless one also posited a "third use" of the Law.

The major hermeneutical problem of the scholastic position was the dualism it imposed on the Bible.<sup>2</sup> Specific texts were either Law or Gospel. Thus the Sermon on the Mount, and the whole of the ethical teachings of Jesus, were regarded as simply parts of God's condemnation. Such texts serve no purpose for the Christian's life except to remind one of how far one has fallen from the perfection demanded by God, and therefore how much one needs the Gospel as forgiveness. Jesus was often portrayed as "perfecting" the Old Testament Law by making it impossible for people to ever live up to its demands. This "heightening" of the Law meant that Christian living could not be a life of discipleship, but rather an endless existential swaying between guilt and pardon, since all good works are condemned before they can be performed.

## The Debate Since Barth

In 1935 Karl Barth<sup>3</sup> seriously challenged the traditional Lutheran view of Law and Gospel. The title of his essay, "Gospel and Law," was symbolic of the extent to which he felt that the Lutheran viewpoint was backwards. He argued that the Law can only play its accusatory function if the Gospel is already presupposed, and that the primary purpose of the Law is not accusation but to shape the Christian's obedience more in accordance with God's will.

Indeed, said Barth, the Law cannot reveal sins unless one already knows the Gospel and God's grace. We do not properly understand the extent of human sinfulness unless we first understand the glory of God, and God's grace makes God's glory known. Furthermore, God's Word as Law is just as much a part of God's grace as is the Gospel. It is an act of grace that God reveals our sinfulness so that we will place our trust more firmly in God rather than in our own works.

In response to Barth's essay, many Lutheran theologians have attempted to revise the Law-Gospel theory.

A negative reaction to Barth came from Werner Elert,<sup>4</sup> who affirmed that there must be a radical separation of Law and Gospel, even within the context of sanctification and discipleship. There is no dialectic, but more of a dualism: God speaks either Law or Gospel, but not both. The Law cannot be an aspect of God's grace because

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2. See Joachim Jeremias, *Sermon on the Mount* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963).

3. Karl Barth, "Gospel and Law," *Community, State and Church: Three Essays* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1968), pp. 71-100. For Barth's response to subsequent Lutheran criticisms of his position see idem, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. 4 Part III, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.T. Thompson et.al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), pp. 427-428.

4. Werner Elert, *Law and Gospel*, trans. Edward H. Schroeder (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971). His view is also elaborated in idem., *The Christian Ethos*, trans. Carl J. Schinder (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1957); and idem, *The Structure of Lutheranism, Volume I*, trans. Walter A. Hansen (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1962).



Law always accuses. The Ten Commandments were not given by God to show people what to do to please God, but to show the futility of obeying the Law. The only purpose of the Law is to assist God in judging and condemning the world. The Gospel presents such a radically different mode of existence that the Law can never function as a guideline for Christian living.

By contrast, Regin Prenter<sup>5</sup> said that, in order to be faithful to the Bible, one must understand the revelation of the Law to Moses as an act of God's grace. Furthermore, "prophetic judgment" directed against God's people is only possible within a context of grace. Apart from grace, people will not perceive the extent to which they remain sinful. Apart from grace, the Law leads either to despair or to attempts at achieving works righteousness, but the Law alone never leads to the Gospel. Only within the context of the Gospel can the Law truly accuse, for the crucifixion is the greatest revelation of the futility of the Law.

This is demonstrated by the Old Testament prophets whose message of condemnation was directed towards those who already knew of the grace contained in God's covenant. This is also demonstrated by Jesus' attitude towards the Pharisees, who received a message of Law and judgment, in contrast to Jesus' offer of unconditional love and acceptance towards those who stood outside the covenant of grace. While the proper function of the Law is to reveal sin, and an awareness of sin must precede receiving the Gospel, yet the Law must be announced within the total framework of the Gospel. Regarding a "third use" of Law, Prenter says that the Christian life is rooted in faith, and from the perspective of faith Law and Gospel do in fact find a unity.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's silence on "Law and Gospel" reflects his profound mistrust of the idea. He saw the affirmation of natural Law and natural revelation as one of the bases for Hitler's claim of Aryan superiority (history itself teaches the superiority of the Aryan race), and the "civil use" of Law implies the need to give ultimate allegiance to the nation. Bonhoeffer also described the phenomenon of "cheap grace" wherein people are forever condemned of sin and then simply released from their guilt, without an ongoing commitment to discipleship. Bonhoeffer saw "cheap grace" as a problem that stems from the Lutheran concept of Law and Gospel. It is significant that his book *The Cost of Discipleship* was based on an interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, because Lutheran scholasticism had regarded these teachings of Jesus as merely Law to be used for condemnation. Instead, Bonhoeffer uses that material as the basis for understanding the nature of Christian discipleship in the world. The opening section, "Grace and Discipleship," is his alternative to "Law and Gospel."

In the prison letters, Bonhoeffer strongly condemns the use of guilt and fear as the basis of "bringing people to Christ," a condemnation of the traditional Law-Gospel

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5. Regin Prenter, *Creation and Redemption*, trans. Theodor I. Jensen (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), pp. 96-113.
  6. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship, Revised*, trans. R.H. Fuller and Irmgard Booth (New York: Macmillan, 1963). Also his *Letters and Papers from Prison, The Enlarged Edition*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Reginald Fuller et. al. (New York: Macmillan, 1978), pp. 203, 279-282, 311-312, 326, 336, 341, 362. Note some illuminating comments in Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Man of Vision, Man of Courage*, trans. Eric Mosbacher et.al. (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), pp. 473, 476, 613-614.

pattern. Bonhoeffer says that we should not limit God to the problems of guilt, despair, and fear of suffering and death, rather we should find God in the midst of the strengths of life. God is not the “answer” to the unanswered problems of life, rather God is to be found in the midst of all of life. The starting point of the Christian life is not fear and guilt, but rather the call to be disciples of Christ in the world. Through such concerns, Bonhoeffer laid the basis for moving beyond the Law-Gospel distinction.

Paul Althaus<sup>7</sup> felt that the problem of relating Law and Gospel to sanctification could be rectified by introducing a third term, “command.” He said that employing this term will help preserve the twofold truth that salvation is by the Gospel alone, while at the same time the Gospel does imply imperatives for Christian living. Although Law and Gospel are diametrically opposed in terms of justification, God’s will for the Christian’s life is not opposed to the Gospel, indeed the Gospel is the means for bringing about Christian discipleship. Thus, in the context of Christian discipleship, we should understand that positive revelation of God’s will as “commands.” Commands are not a third use of the Law, but a different mode in which God’s will is known. The Christian is freed from the Law but not from the command.

Yet another attempt to resolve Law-Gospel problems has been to focus on Luther’s spiritual struggles, and to provide an existentialist understanding of Law and Gospel. Law is that which accuses, regardless of source. The Law cannot be equated with any particular Bible texts or commandments, rather anything that accuses you and arouses guilt is Law for you. Likewise, anything that brings you an experience of forgiveness is Gospel for you. Any specific Bible text might be either Law or Gospel depending on its impact on the listener. Thus one can uphold the principle that “law always accuses” while also making it clear that specific texts or injunctions do not necessarily play an accusatory function at every moment.

The above survey shows the profound differences that have existed among Lutherans in trying to define the content of the idea of Law and Gospel. The various positions all appeal to Luther and the Bible for support. The differences make it clear why it is difficult or impossible to use “Law and Gospel” as a hermeneutical principle to clarify the *content* of the Bible’s message. However, as will be developed below, Law and Gospel can be used fruitfully as a *methodology* for relating a biblical message to a particular audience.

## LAW AND GOSPEL AS IMPACT

### The Audience

The reason that “Law and Gospel” remains an important concept is its ability to describe many of the actual experiences of Christians. But Law-Gospel cannot function as a general, universal principle. It has its validity only with respect to specific historical contexts, and the life-situation of the audience.

Whenever one approaches a biblical text for the purpose of interpretation, one can

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7. Paul Althaus, *The Divine Command: A New Perspective on Law and Gospel*, trans. Franklin Sherman (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966).

address questions to the text. What is found in the text will depend to an extent upon those questions. Questions can limit one's understanding of a text when the text is limited by the parameters of the questions. On the other hand, approaching texts with new and different questions can be an important way of hearing a message that has not been heard before. Lutheran scholasticism forced the interpreter to ask whether a certain text was Law or Gospel. Some theologies of a generation ago demanded that the interpreter find *both* Law and Gospel in every text. It is evident, however, that in both cases the question unnecessarily limits the meaning one can find in texts.

Questions always arise from one's historical context. There are an unlimited number of questions that can be addressed to texts, some of which will illuminate the texts, others of which will obscure the message of the text. It is certainly appropriate, however, to ask three kinds of questions of a text: what is the message as Law and judgment; what is the message as Gospel, forgiveness, mercy, and promise; and what is the message in terms of Christian discipleship. The answer will always be different for different people in different situations. A text might be Law for one person, Gospel for another, and a call to discipleship for a third, depending on their life situations. The interpreter must relate the text to these various possibilities, and sermons should be constructed with an awareness of the different kinds of impact any single sermon might produce in the congregation.

These three matters (Law, Gospel, discipleship) cannot be confused. A message of Law cannot be equated with a message of Gospel or discipleship. Any specific text may or may not be legitimately placed into any of these categories. The clear historical and literary contexts of many specific texts will demand that the preacher attempt a message of either Law, or discipleship, but not necessarily both to the same audience.

Thus Law and Gospel is an important hermeneutical guideline, especially for the task of preaching, so long as it is not regarded as a way of drawing forth absolute content from texts. It is a guideline for measuring the over-all impact the sermon will make upon members of the congregation. The message of the Gospel means that one must attack all pretensions to works righteousness, and show the basis for God's hope through God's promises of what shall be. The message of the Law means that one should always have a healthy guilt about how one is living life. To promote either a sterile moralizing of texts, or a paralyzing guilt, is to distort Law and Gospel. Law and Gospel must be seen together, and the Gospel must be the primary message of every sermon. The proclamation of the Gospel does not merely lead to a release of guilt, rather, the proclamation of the Gospel should make it possible for people to live in light of God's will and commands.

## Historical Context

As an example of the importance of historical context in determining Law and Gospel, let us consider the text of Jesus' first sermon in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-30).<sup>8</sup> At

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8. For these insights I am indebted to James A. Sanders, including "The Ethic of Election in Luke's Great Banquet Parable," *Essays in Old Testament Ethics*, ed. J.L. Crenshaw and J.T. Willis (New York: KTAV, 1974), pp. 246-271; and idem, "From Isaiah 61 to Luke 4," *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults: Studies for Morton Smith at Sixty*, ed. J. Neusner (Leiden: Brill, 1965), volume I pp. 75-106.

the start of his ministry, Jesus announces that his mission is to “preach good news to the poor . . . release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” Then follows a lively discussion and debate between Jesus and his audience, and at the end the audience is “filled with wrath” and attempts to kill him, but Jesus escapes to safety.

What caused the audience in Nazareth to be filled with wrath? Luke’s account of the debate is not polished, but two important points can be detected. First, in interpreting the mission of the Messiah, Jesus said that the Messiah would be going to the gentiles (citing Zarephath of Sidon and Naaman the Syrian). This directly challenged the then-dominant theological idea that the Jewish people were God’s only favored people, and Jesus was rejected for his perceived mission to gentiles. Second, Jesus said that the Messiah would focus upon the poor, the prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed (citing that Zarephath was a widow and Naaman was a leper). This directly contradicted the then-dominant theological idea that if one is poor, or a leper, or oppressed, then God is punishing that person for a sin which they or one of their ancestors committed. There was no Jewish expectation that the Messiah would be a suffering servant, and to exalt the outcasts of society was a message of blasphemy. After all, they said, isn’t it the rich who are being blessed by God? Thus Jesus’ sermon evoked guilt and anger in the audience because his sermon was essentially a prophetic condemnation of the theological ideals of the community, coupled with the assertion that God’s concern would go elsewhere. Jesus risked his life for that sermon which brought a message of Law.

However, by the time that this story was placed into Luke’s Gospel, the historical context had changed. By Luke’s time the Christian church was clearly established among the gentiles and the oppressed of society. In Luke’s context, then, the story became a message of Gospel, for it announces that salvation is offered to the gentiles and the oppressed. Luke’s audience would have received this sermon with great joy, in contrast to Jesus’ original audience. What has changed is not the words of the message, but the historical context and audience hearing the message. In one situation the words produced a message of Law, guilt, and anger; in another situation the very same words functioned as Gospel and brought tidings of great joy.

## Law, Gospel, and Discipleship

The interpretative technique of addressing questions of Law, Gospel, and discipleship to Bible texts can be illustrated by looking at Luther’s writing on *The Sermon on the Mount*.<sup>9</sup>

In his preface, Luther indicates his desire to rescue the Sermon on the Mount from the interpretation it received in the context of monasticism, wherein the commands of Jesus were voluntary precepts for those who desired to achieve perfection. Luther, with characteristic understatement, refers to those who would limit the application of Jesus’ commands as “vulgar pigs and asses, the jurists and sophists, the right hand of

9. Martin Luther, “The Sermon on the Mount (Sermons),” *Luther’s Works, Volume 21: The Sermon on the Mount (Sermons) and The Magnificat*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1956), pp. 3-6, 10-17, 26-29, 128-129.

that jackass of a pope and of his mamelukes.” At the same time, Luther condemns the Anabaptists who, he feels, have made these texts into a new Law which means that the fulfillment of the commands is seen as merely an external righteousness. Instead, says Luther, these commandments must be fulfilled by Christians in both an external and internal sense.

The Sermon opens with the beatitude “blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Luther has no trouble finding a message of Law: those who believe that riches are a special sign of God’s blessing on their lives stand condemned by these words. Furthermore, all those who are rich, which is to say greedy for material possessions, stand condemned before God. At the same time there is a message of Gospel: our lives are not evaluated externally by our worldly possessions and accomplishments, but on the basis of our disposition towards God. This is indeed good news for the poor, and at the same time it is a condemnation of the monastic ideal wherein it was felt that poverty was intrinsically virtuous, instead of being a scandalous condition to overcome. The Gospel message also contains a promise: if we are thus poor before God, “we are to have a beautiful, glorious, great, and eternal possession in heaven.” There is also the commandment for Christian discipleship: do not set your “confidence, comfort, and trust on temporal goods.” The Christian must be willing to sacrifice all material possessions, if God so requires, and otherwise we may enjoy our possessions as God’s temporary gift to us. This commandment, remarks Luther, can only be understood from within the perspective of faith.

Luther sees the blessing on those who “hunger and thirst for righteousness” as summarizing “all the good works by which a man may live right by himself in human society.” First, it is a message of Law and judgment against those who are not doing what is required of them. Such people the preacher should “warn, rebuke, and correct by whatever method or means he can.” Luther continues that the text is judgment on all those who would run into the desert or otherwise try to escape from society and its problems, people who “are so full of righteousness that they look down their noses at other poor sinners.” Second, the text also has a message of Gospel as promise: “those who hunger and thirst for righteousness shall be filled,” they shall see “that their work was not in vain and that at last a little flock has been brought around who have been helped.” Even if successes cannot be measured at the present time, from God’s perspective the eventual successes can be seen. Third, the message contains a commandment, the Christian duty to live in good relationship with other people, striving “to promote the general welfare.” Righteousness is a fruit of the Spirit and a good work of the Christian, flowing from faith. We must hunger and thirst for righteousness because, if our dedication is any less than that, the devil will put obstacles in our way. Luther says that the text calls for “a hunger and thirst for righteousness that can never be curbed or stopped or sated, one that looks for nothing and cares for nothing except the accomplishment and maintenance of the right, despising everything that hinders this end. If you cannot make the world completely pious, then do what you can.”

Finally, we can note Luther’s discussion of Jesus’ commandment to be perfect even as God in heaven is perfect. Those later interpreters who felt that the Sermon on the Mount served only to heighten the Old Testament Law often cited this verse as evidence of the impossibility of achieving perfection and, therefore, the impossibility

of living up to the Sermon on the Mount. But Luther's own approach is different. Luther relates the text to the previous verses calling for love of one's enemies, and now the message as Law is directed against those who say that one should only love one's friends. Instead of such an attitude, Luther says that the clear command to all Christians is to hold to correct and perfect doctrine and to regulate one's life according to it, which means "we should love not only those who do us good, but our enemies too." The message of promise and Gospel is that such a perfection is possible by God's grace, not by human striving alone. If one's life "does not measure up to this in every detail—as indeed it cannot, since flesh and blood incessantly hold it back—that does not detract from the perfection. Only we must keep striving for it, and moving and progressing toward it every day." This happens as the Holy Spirit works within us.

These words also show how Luther's view of Law and Gospel was quite different from the interpretation given in various Lutheran traditions. The Christian life does not end with baptism and justification, rather justification is only the beginning of Christian discipleship. Furthermore, Law and Gospel are always related to a specific audience. These tests are not a general condemnation of all people. Words of comfort and mercy for one person are Law and wrath for another. Blessings on the poor are a condemnation of the rich. Blessings on those working for a better world are a condemnation of those who would escape from society. The command to be perfect is good news for those who trust in God, and bad news for those trying to earn their own comfortable perfection.

The critical point in using Law and Gospel as a hermeneutic is the preacher's prior evaluation of the audience, their context, and the effect that a particular message might create. Luther was skillful in using texts to bring out the Law: first to condemn the Papists and Anabaptists, a message that aroused cheers in his audience; but then he could turn around the message to bring warning upon his immediate audience. Second, the message of the Gospel, hope in God's promises, always comes through as related to the specific situation at hand. The Gospel is not a universal statement, but rather a message that must always be appropriated within a specific context by specific people. Third, Luther had no problems in finding ethical imperatives in the Bible for Christian discipleship.

The scholastic position demanded that Bible texts be considered either Law or Gospel. Some Lutheran scholars have said that texts should be regarded as simultaneously Law and Gospel, an understanding that is not always possible nor adequate. Instead, we must look at the categories of guilt, Law, forgiveness, promise, hope, and discipleship, and understand how the message of any Bible text or sermon cannot be classified apart from the context in which the message is heard and the net impact created upon the audience. In doing this, the terms "Law" and "Gospel" are too limited in scope to encompass the problems and possibilities of the Bible's message.