

Firm Foundation

LAW AND GOSPEL

(Understanding the difference between Law and Gospel.)

resource material
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Introduction

Everything in the Bible can be put into one of two categories. Those categories are Law and Gospel. As a result, it is important for the serious Bible student and the Christian growing in faith to be learning the relationship of the Law and the Gospel on the basis of Scripture. The Christian Religion is a religion of the Gospel. All other religions are the religion of the Law. This type of distinction can be made in many different areas of systematics (study of doctrine) including doctrine of God, doctrine of sin, doctrine of grace, the Work of Christ, the study of the system of salvation, Conversion, and there is more. The Christian doctrine of the justification of man before God is taught correctly only when this distinction is meticulously observed, that is, when everything that is Law and work of the Law is carefully weeded out. When this is done then we can know the means of grace because the means of grace is operative only in the context of the Gospel. In the doctrine of sanctification and good works it is necessary to emphasize that not the Law, but only the Gospel produces sanctification and good works. The Gospel is the only God pleasing motivation for any action.

Many modern theologians have no use for a discussion on the distinction between the Law and Gospel. The Law and the Gospel look alike to them because they do not hold to the complete and substitutionary (vicarious) satisfaction of Christ's work on the cross. Eventually, with this kind of thinking, the Gospel must be discarded. At the same time these people will use the term "Gospel" and claim that they have a deeper understanding than anyone else.

We will study the distinction of the Law and the Gospel in seven related categories.

1. The Terms Law and Gospel.
2. What Law and Gospel have in Common
3. Law and Gospel as Opposites
4. Their Mutual Relation and Joint Use in Practice
5. The difficulty of Properly Distinguishing Between Law and Gospel
6. The Importance of Making This Distinction
7. The Confounders of Law and Gospel

The Terms Law and Gospel

In this discussion, it is necessary that we understand the difference between the Law and the Gospel.

The Law in the proper sense is the Word of God in which God demands of men that in their nature and in their thoughts, words, and acts they conform to the standard of His commandments and pronounces the curse on those who fail to comply.

Sol.Decl.,V,17 _____

Epit.,V,2 _____

The Law is used in its proper or primary sense in Scripture when it refers to what does not exist on faith, but demands perfect observation on the part of man.

Gal. 3:12 _____

Gal. 3:10 _____

Rom. 3:19 _____

Rom. 3:20 _____

The Gospel in the proper sense is the Word of God in which God makes no moral demands whatever on men. As a result, He does not hold the law and sin against them. On the contrary, He promises His grace for the sake of Christ's vicarious satisfaction to those who have not kept the divine law.

Epit., V, 4 _____

Luther: "The Gospel is such a doctrine or Word of God as does not demand our works nor enjoin us to do something, but bids us simply to receive the offered grace of the remission of sins and eternal salvation and accept it as a present" (St. L. IX:803).

The term "Gospel" is used in its proper sense in Holy Scriptures when it refers to what does not call for works.

Rom. 1:1617 _____

Acts 20:24 _____

Rom. 10:15 _____

Eph. 6:15 _____

Eph. 1:13 _____

2

What Law and Gospel Have in Common

They have three things in common.

1. Both Law and Gospel are the Word of God. _____

2. Both the Law and the Gospel apply to all men. _____

3. Both the Law and the Gospel are to be taught side by side in the Church and by the Church up to the Last Day.

Rom. 1:183:20 _____

Rom. 3:215:21 ff _____

Sol. Decl., V,23 _____

Further reading is suggested in the Book of Concord in Articles V and VI of the Formula of Concord (Epitome and Solid Declaration).

3

Law and Gospel as Opposites

The Law and Gospel can be described as exact opposites. In fact Luther says that they "differ most widely from each other and are separated farther than opposites." While the Law demands that man perfectly comply with its precepts in his nature and his conduct and proclaims God's wrath to all who ignore the means of grace,

the Gospel makes no moral demands whatever on man and therefore reproves no transgressions not even the sin of unbelief but rather, without regard to any good quality or works on their part, promise God's grace for Christ's sake to all sinners condemned by the Law. We must not lose sight of this that the Law accuses; the Gospel acquits of guilt and frees from condemnation. In its promise of grace the Gospel knows of no difference between great and little sinners, between such as conducted themselves properly and such as did not conduct themselves, between the more guilty and the less guilty.

Rom. 3:22 ff _____

The Gospel indeed demands faith. This sounds like Law. But this is the way the Scriptures speak and so should not be criticized.

1 John 3:23 _____

Is faith a work? Eph. 2:89 _____

To further show the dissimilarity of Law and Gospel one can examine the promise each offers and how this promise is obtained.

The Law is referred to as the promise of **CONDITION**.

The Gospel is referred to as the promise of **GRACE**.

What is the goal of the Law?

Gal. 3:12 _____

Scripture then makes it clear that the Law promises life only to those who have actually and in all respects kept the Law.

Luke 10:28 _____

When we look in the Scriptures to find what it says about the promise of grace we discover how persistently it stresses the truth that the Gospel promises righteousness and life to those who have not kept the Law.

Rom. 3:21 _____

Rom. 3:28 _____

Eph. 2:9 _____

Gal. 2:16 _____

Let us compare the promise of Law and the promise of Gospel in other words.

Faith in the Gospel is faith in the God "that justifies the ungodly" (Rom. 4:5).

The term condition can cause problems. It is susceptible to different interpretations. We may not forbid anyone to designate the promises of the Gospel "conditional promises," because the evangelical promises, too, frequently have the grammatical form of conditional statements. Rom. 10:9: "If thou . . . shalt believe in thine heart . . . thou shalt be saved." Those who understand and maintain the difference between Law and Gospel point out that in legal conditional clauses the term "condition" actually denotes a human accomplishment, e.g.: "If you keep the Law, you will obtain life"; but in evangelical (Gospel) clauses, e.g.: "If you believe, you will be saved," "believing" does not denote a product of work of man, but merely the mode and manner of appropriation (*modus applicationis*). The sense of the sentence: "If you believe, you will be saved," is not: "If you furnish the faith, you will be saved," but rather: by way of faith, without any goodness or accomplishment of your own, you will be saved."

Another problem arises in preaching the Law and Gospel. When is each to be announced? How is the hearer to know when the Law or the Gospel applies to them? The minister has the same problem in applying the Word to people. Should he say "Thou shalt surely die" (2Sam.12:5) or "The Lord also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die" (2Sam.12:13). Some have concluded that the Gospel should only be announced to those who have mended their ways. Is this the proper solution? Let us examine the Scripture on this point.

Matt. 5:1718 _____

Gal. 3:10 _____

Rom. 1:18 _____

So the Law must be preached, but only for one purpose.

What purpose is that? _____

This is not simply church regulation but a divine requirement that terrified hearts should not hear the Law, but only the Gospel which assures them that just as they are Christ has earned remission of sins and salvation for them, without the Law or works of the Law.

Rom. 10:4 _____

Is. 61:1 _____

Luke 4:18 _____

This line of demarcation between Law and Gospel is clearly fixed in the Scriptures of both the Old and New Testament.

2 Sam. 12:13 _____

Luke 7:47 _____

Acts 2:3739 _____

Acts 16:2731 _____

1 Cor. 5:15 _____

2Cor. 2:68 _____

The Law and the Gospel differ also in the way that they are known. The Scripture goes to great lengths to call attention to this difference between Law and Gospel.

Rom. 2:1415 _____

1 Cor. 2:6 ff _____

While natural man still knows the Law, no thought of the Gospel has ever come of itself to even the wisest and civilly most righteous among men. Solely through God's revelation of it in the Word has the Gospel become known among men.

For this reason all other religions, being religions of the Law, have no resemblance whatever to the Christian religion. As a rule, modern studies of comparative religion assert a similarity between, or even a basic identity of, Christianity and all other religions. They arrive at this conclusion by eliminating the Gospel of Christ Crucified from the Christian religion as unessential.

Actually, this confusion can be expected. Why? _____

1 Cor. 1:23; 2:14 _____

Apology, IV, 265 (page 146) _____

4

Their Mutual Relation and Joint Use in Practice.

While the student of the Scripture must differentiate sharply between Law and Gospel he must in practice join them intimately. This is how Luther expresses this thought. "Though these two in content are very far apart, they are at the same time most intimately joined in one and the same heart. Nothing is linked more closely than fear and confidence, Law and Gospel, sin and grace. For they are so bound together, that the one is swallowed by the other. Therefore there can be no mathematical combination that equals this." (St. L. IX:454.)

Only the sinner whom the Law has brought to a knowledge of his deserved condemnation will in faith accept the remission of sins offered in the Gospel.

Acts 16:30-31 _____

Acts 11:21 _____

What does this suggest concerning the proclamation of the Gospel?

There is also a connection in content. The Gospel furnishes and presents man with the fulfillment which the Law demands.

Gal. 4:45 _____

Matt. 5:17 _____

From what have we been saved, the Law or the curse of the Law?

Gal. 3:13 _____

Is. 53:46 _____

The preaching of Law cannot be removed as some would want. Luther writes: "If the Law is removed, no

one knows what Christ is, or what He did when He fulfilled the Law for us." Again: "What will you retain of Christ when the Law, which He fulfilled, has been removed, and you do not know what He has fulfilled?" Again: "Whence shall we learn what Christ is, what He has done for us, if we are not to know what that Law is which He has fulfilled for us, or what sin is, for which He has atoned?"

Is the Law still necessary for the Christian? _____

1 Tim. 1:9 _____

Jer. 31:33 _____

Solid Decl. VI, 5, (p. 564) _____

S.D. VI, 6 _____

But the Christian, as he exists in this world, is not entirely a new man; he still has the old man dwelling in him. And in this respect the Christian still needs the Law in all its uses, no matter how these uses are divided or designated. Luther would say: "A Christian is in two realms at once. So far as he is flesh, he is under the Law; so far as he is spirit, he is under grace."

Epit. VI, 34 _____

Sol. Decl. VI, 21 (p.567) _____

Sol. Decl. VI. 20 _____

Sol. Decl. VI. 1011 _____

Sol. Decl. VI. 19 _____

Sol. Decl. VI. 24 _____

5

The Difficulty of Properly Distinguishing Between Law and Gospel

To properly distinguish between Law and Gospel is difficult. Of course, not in theory, for it is easy to say what is Law and what is Gospel; but in practice the difficulty is present, particularly in one's own heart and conscience. Luther reminds us again and again that the proper distinction between Law and Gospel exceeds the powers of natural man and is achieved only through the action of the Holy Spirit. The reason lies in man's natural condition. Natural man looks for grace and salvation through the Law, that is, he strives to secure through the Law what can be obtained only through the Gospel. The *opinio legis* is an obsession with him, and continues to be an obsession, until God's grace and power turns his heart from the Law to the Gospel.

Also from this standpoint discriminating the use of Law and Gospel it again becomes evident that man's conversion, or coming to faith, is solely a work of divine grace and *omnipotence*, without any assistance on the part of man. In the psychology of conversion the divine verdict of condemnation, spoken by the Law, is replaced by the divine verdict of justification, pronounced by the Gospel. But the conscience-stricken sinner can believe the Gospel verdict only by God's gracious and mighty operation.

John 6:44 _____

Phil 1:29 _____

Eph. 1:19-20; Col. 2:12 _____

To come to Christ, or to believe in Christ, is in fact nothing else than properly distinguishing between Law and Gospel in one's heart, to believe the verdict of the Gospel over and against the contrary verdict of the Law. Men have argued that it is unthinkable that Christ describes the entrance into the Kingdom of God, which always takes place solely by faith, with the words in

Matt. 11:12. _____

They consider it inappropriate to think of faith, which does not lie in the power of man, as an act of violence. We must not forget that "believing" means to claim the promise of amnesty in the Gospel in the face of the condemnatory verdict of the Law. Since this is a feat exceeding human powers and always a work of the creative power of God, faith is described as "a man of violence." This is obvious when we understand that faith, which makes man a member of the Church, is not a dormant quality of the heart, but rather an active quality, a divinely worked act of distinguishing between Law and Gospel, that is, claiming as one's own the justifying verdict of the Gospel in the face of the condemning verdict of the Law.

And as the first separation of Law and Gospel, making man a Christian, is so difficult that it can be brought about only by divine operation, so, too, the continued lifelong separation, by which man remains a Christian, lies entirely beyond the reach of human ability. The Scripture says it in the following verse.

1 Peter 1:5 _____

Luther says: "It is not in the power of man to shake off this frightful terror caused by the Law or any other sorrow of the heart." Therefore he regards it wise for a Christian not to be alone, but to seek the companionship of a Christian brother, so that, when the reign of the Law and the reign of the Gospel begin to struggle in his heart, the Christian brother is at hand with a word of Gospel to set in motion the divine power of the Gospel against the condemnation of the Law.

Finally, the theory is easy; quickly we can explain how the Law is another Word and doctrine than the Gospel; but to divide them in practice and to apply them to the art of living, that is trouble and hard work.

6

The Importance of Making This Distinction

It is through proper discrimination that a person becomes a Christian and remains a Christian. This discrimination distinguishes the Christian from all others.

The Christian doctrine of justification is virtually identical with the discrimination between Law and Gospel. The Law must be eliminated completely from the doctrine of justification. Justification cannot hinge on even one devout Lord's Prayer if our teaching is to retain its Christian and consoling character.

There needs to be a precise distinction made and maintained.

Gal. 2:21 _____

Gal. 3:10 _____

There can be no thought of the certainty of salvation by grace, which Christians should have (Rom. 4:16), till man in his conscience before God is completely free from the Law, that is, by the Holy Spirit's working in the Gospel believes that God does not demand of him even a single work to secure grace and salvation, but for Christ's sake receives him as he is, without regard to what he did or omitted to do.

Finally, this is the only way in which we can understand the Scripture correctly.

Sol. Decl., V, 1 _____

Gal. 1:89 _____

Rom. 11:6

There remains but one way of understanding Scripture: We must let both the words of the Law and the words of the Gospel remain in full force, but distinguish between Law and Gospel in this manner, that we confine each to the realm assigned to it by God. The Law is given to reveal sin, not to forgive sin. Forgiveness is the task of the Gospel. When therefore the Law has revealed sin, it is to be muzzled, and only the Gospel is to have and hold the floor, as we have shown again and again. This way and only this way will Scripture be understood.

7

The Chief Confounders of Law and Gospel

Rome

Calvinists

Synergists

Of what should we be reminded when such mixing of Law and Gospel takes place?

Rom. 3:23²⁴

NOTES
&
BIBLE PASSAGES TO REMEMBER ON LAW & GOSPEL

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.