

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth¹: An Introduction to the Distinction between Law and Gospel

Mark A. Seifrid

Mark A. Seifrid is Ernest and Mildred Hogan Professor of New Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He has served as Visiting Lecturer at Wheaton College and at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Along with several dozen articles, Dr. Seifrid is the author of *Justification by Faith: The Origin and Development of a Central Pauline Theme* (Brill, 1992) and *Christ Our Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Justification* (InterVarsity, 2001). In addition, he has also co-edited (with D. A. Carson and Peter T. O'Brien) the two-volume *Justification And Variegated Nomism* (Baker 2001, 2004), and (with Randall Tan) the bibliographic work *The Pauline Writings* (Baker, 2002).

Introduction

As *evangelical* Christians, we profess to be committed first and foremost to the proclamation and preservation of the Gospel. Yet it is worth asking ourselves afresh if the Gospel truly has grasped our hearts and lives. Indeed, that is the essence of being a Christian. Whether we find ourselves discouraged by failure or elated by success, we must again and again grasp the word of the Law and the word of the Gospel in their distinction from one other. This distinction is not a truth which may quietly rest in an outline of systematic theology, but bears fundamental hermeneutical implications. Through this distinction the Bible offers its own interpretation,² and does not remain merely a book that I read, but is “the book that reads me.”³

In this light, it is worthwhile to listen to the complaint—in all its length—that at least one disappointed Christian has voiced concerning his own experience of an evangelical church:

I experienced what happens when Law and Gospel are not understood and thus not distinguished. My Christian life, truly begun by grace, was now being “perfected” on the treadmill of the Law. My pastors did not end their sermons by demanding that I recite the rosary or visit Lourdes this week in order to unleash God’s power; instead, I was told to yield more, pray more, care about unbelievers more, read

the Bible more, get involved with the church more, love my wife and kids more. Not until . . . some 20 years later, did I understand that my Christian life had come to center around my life, my obedience, my yielding, my Bible verse memorization, my prayers, my zeal, my witnessing, and my sermon application. I had advanced beyond the need to hear the cross preached to me anymore. Of course, we all knew that Jesus had died for our sins, and none of us would ever argue that we were trying to “merit” salvation. But something had changed. God was a Father all right, but a painfully demanding one. I was supposed to show that I had cleaned up my life and was at least grateful for all the gifts that had been bestowed. . . . The Gospel was critical for me at the beginning, critical now to share with others, and still critical to get me into heaven, but it was of little other value. The “evangel” in Evangelicalism was missing.⁴

Would this person’s experience have been any different at any other evangelical church? How many of our churches truly live up to the name “evangelical”? Should the Gospel be reserved only for the beginning of the Christian life, or an invitation at the close of the sermon? Is the hymn by Charlotte Elliott, “Just As I Am?” to be reserved merely for evangelistic crusades? Or is it for the daily life of every Christian? If this hymn and others like it become part of our daily thought and life, are we resigning ourselves to weakness and defeatism—an impotent

faith that brings no growth?

Before we take up these questions, a brief confession is necessary. I omitted a brief, but central element of Craig Parton's story: it was as, he says, he "came to the Lutheran Reformation," that he was able to see his way through the faults of the teaching to which he had been exposed. Although it is not entirely absent from the Reformed tradition, the insistence on a sharp distinction between Law and Gospel is much more characteristic of Lutheran thought. As an all-to-brief introduction to this topic, it is worth tracing some of the historical lines of thought centered upon the interpretation of Scripture as Law and Gospel. Naturally, we can only touch on the surface of matters that require discussion in considerable historical and theological depth. Yet perhaps it is possible to provide a basic orientation.

The Law/Gospel Distinction

It was Luther who not only first formulated this distinction, but also associated it with his very conversion and reformational discovery:

I learned to distinguish between the righteousness of the law and the righteousness of the gospel. I lacked nothing before this except that I made no distinction between the law and the gospel. I regarded both as the same thing and held that there was no difference between Christ and Moses except the times in which they lived and their degrees of perfection. But when I discovered the proper distinction, namely, that the law is one thing and the gospel is another I broke through.⁵

For Luther, "Law" expresses God's demand on us in all its clarity and as a result condemns us and delivers us over to death. He uses the term "Law" as an overarching description of God's demand on us, whether that demand is expressed

in the Old Testament or the New, or written in the heart of the human being by the Creator. Yet as Luther's own usage shows, this summary category contains plenty of room for both the variety of biblical terms that describe God's will for human conduct and for its own fulfillment outside itself in Jesus Christ.

A protest often already arises at this point, especially from Old Testament scholars: "the Law was an expression of God's grace given only after the Lord's deliverance of Israel in the Exodus, as a *gift* to his people." Apart from a necessary qualification as to what is meant by "grace" in such a protest, Luther most likely would have gladly agreed with it—and nevertheless insisted that Law and Gospel must be kept as far apart from one another as "heaven and earth." Although it is not without its resonance in Reformed theology, as we shall see, this protest now often represents a reaction against a Kantian (or neo-Kantian) rejection of external moral constraints.⁶ The protest is legitimate as such, but it entirely misses Luther's point. Scholars also are prone to speak of "negative" and "positive" statements about the Law in Paul's letters. But these categories, too, represent little other than a Kantian hang-over. For Luther, as for Paul before him, even in its strange, condemning work, the Law serves the proper and good purpose of God. For this reason, Luther speaks rightly of "the blessed death" worked by the Law.⁷ We shall return to this matter further below.

It is important to observe first of all that Luther, along with other Reformers, recognized that the Law appears in more than one "function" (or "office") within the Scriptures. It quickly becomes apparent in the Decalogue, for example,

that the Law reckons with the presence of evil in the human heart. Although it provides no means by which that evil may be removed, it does pronounce injunctions by which evil may be curbed. The commandments, “You shall not murder,” and “You shall not commit adultery,” presuppose that hatred and lust reside in the human heart.⁸ In a significant measure, these and other prohibitions (and threats) of the Law prevent human beings from acting upon those evil desires.⁹ While the fallen world is not thereby tamed, the Law serves to preserve human society and to further its natural development as God’s creation, even in its fallen condition.¹⁰ This divinely-ordained function of the Law came to be known as the “first” or “political” use of the Law (*usus civilis*). It is not to be confused with the “second” or “condemning” function of the Law, which serves God’s larger saving purpose (*usus theologicus*). Simply because I refrain from murder under threat of punishment, does not mean that I have been forgiven and redeemed from the evil of hating another human being in my heart! Out of his own particular theological perspective, Luther’s fellow-Reformer, Philip Melancthon came to speak of a “third use of the Law,” the use of the Law as instruction and as a pattern of life for the regenerate.¹¹ This category, although extraneous to Luther’s understanding of Law and Gospel, nevertheless can be encompassed within it, so long as it is recognized that the “third use of the Law” in the end is nothing other than the first and second uses of the Law at work in the life of the believer.¹²

The Condemning Function of the Law

In the relation of the Law to the Gos-

pel, we are first and foremost concerned with the condemning function of the Law, much as Paul was in his letter to the Galatians. That condemning function, it must be pointed out, does not at all entail the idea that the Law is evil. Admittedly, for Luther the Law becomes the tool of sin and of the devil, who works sin and despair in us through it. Nevertheless, the Law remains in God’s hand, just as sin and the devil also remain ultimately in God’s hand. In the light of the Gospel it becomes clear that the Law has a “strange,” but necessary purpose. As Paul tells us, evil lies not in the Law, but within *me* (Rom 7:14-25). It is for this reason that the Law condemns me.

Yet another objection regularly arises: “why would God give a Law that no one can fulfill?” We may respond with two observations on the usual function of civil law. In the first place, in making laws, the primary question is *not* whether human beings will be able to keep those laws, but whether the laws are just and beneficial for society. Unhappily, our sinfulness sometimes expresses itself in fraud, embezzlement, robbery, murder, and other crimes. Obviously, the criminalization of such behavior is intended to induce conformity to the norm through the threat of punishment. Nevertheless, some persons in some situations cannot keep themselves from acting in such ways. That does not normally hinder the development of law. It would hardly be appropriate, for example, to exempt alcoholics from drunk-driving laws because they may lack the ability to keep themselves from drinking and driving. The Law of God likewise was given because it is right and good: more on this point in a moment. Secondly, when a police officer has pulled over a driver who is obviously intoxicated, the officer

nevertheless administers certain tests to that driver. Why should the officer ask the person to walk a straight line or attempt to touch their finger to their nose, if they can see from the start that the person is not able to do so? They do so because it has to be *established* openly and publicly that the person is intoxicated. The Law has the same function. The Lord's gift of the Law to Israel, which held the offer of life and blessing to Israel, if Israel would only obey it, served to expose Israel's need for the Lord to make its heart new, so that Israel would love the Lord, as the Law requires it to do. Yet from the very start, Israel's conduct in the wilderness anticipated its disobedience once it received the commandments (Deut 8:2, 9:7; 29:2-4; 30:1-5). According to Deuteronomy, the Lord (and, for that matter, Moses, too) knows that Israel is a "stiff-necked" people that will rebel against the Lord and his good Law (Deut 9:6-7). But it was necessary to establish the matter openly, *so that Israel itself comes to know its condition*: that is one of the fundamental lessons of Israel's history of repeated rebellion, punishment, and restoration. Along with Israel, the Law addresses all human beings with the good and beneficial demands of God the Creator, even though we are unable to yield the obedience that they require from us. Our sinfulness is so radical, so fundamental to our person, that we are in a state of blindness, a sort of drunkenness on our own pride (and, sometimes too, despair). We cannot see, feel or know our sin without a voice from without which exposes us for what we are. That is the function of the Law, not only at the beginning of the Christian life, but throughout our entire earthly journey. God's Law is like the knife in the hand of the surgeon with which he first must wound us in

order to work our healing.

The Hermeneutical Significance of the Law/Gospel Distinction

For Luther, the distinction between Law and Gospel was of such a fundamental nature that the ability to draw the distinction between them determined whether or not one was a "theologian," i.e., whether or not one was a Christian:

Therefore whoever knows well how to distinguish the Gospel from the Law should give thanks to God and know that he is a real theologian. I admit that in the time of temptation I myself do not know how to do this as I should.¹³

Elsewhere he in fact speaks of the ability to distinguish between Law and Gospel as an "art" which the Holy Spirit alone can work.¹⁴ As Luther himself points out, at the theoretical level, the distinction between demand and gift is not at all difficult to grasp. But Luther has in view the practical distinction between God's demand and God's gift that we must make in the temptations and trials of life. Although we unfortunately do not have space to pursue the matter here, the hermeneutical implications are large. Luther understands the distinction between Law and Gospel to be *fundamental* to Scripture, so that God speaks to human beings concerning salvation in the words of Scripture in these two distinct ways. God's address to us in these two ways in the Scriptures, moreover, is *direct*. The promise of Isa 54:13, that "all your sons will be taught of the Lord" is fulfilled in the words of Scripture themselves.¹⁵ Interpretation and application cannot be separated from one another into two distinct acts, but remain together in the single act of *faith*, which grasps what God has done for us in Christ in its significance

for the present moment of our life. Otherwise, the interpretation of Scripture and preaching almost inevitably become the presentation of ideal (or a warning drawn from a pattern of disobedience) that we then are encouraged to follow (or avoid), an image of truth which we are to bring to reality. Naturally, we generally are urged to do so “by the power of the Spirit,” and not in our own strength. Nevertheless, as the disappointed evangelical sadly observed in the citation above, the crucified and risen Christ is now strikingly absent from such preaching.¹⁶ As Christ is absent, so too is the work of the Law, which calls us to account and judges us, so that we might know freedom from our sins. Preaching which takes this form does nothing to further Christian living. In fact, in so far as it furthers the illusion that we are basically good and merely weak, it is detrimental.

Needless to say, this approach to Scripture calls for a radical revision of our usual pattern of thought, according to which we first complete our exegesis and then seek to apply it to life. Without in any way calling into question the need for careful, methodical study of the text, we may ask if the model to which we generally are accustomed properly acknowledges the way in which the Scriptures *interpret us* before we interpret them. To imagine that we can sit down with a text of Scripture, employing certain rules of study and using the linguistic tools at our disposal, determine the meaning of the text and then go on to apply it prayerfully is to deceive ourselves: we imagine that we master the text, when in fact it discloses its meaning only as it masters us. If the reformational affirmation is true that *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres* (“Scripture interprets itself”), then we must follow

the pattern that Luther commends to us. We begin with prayerful entrance into Scripture, continue in meditation on the words of Scripture, and experience the testing of the Gospel in us, in the trials and temptations of our life.¹⁷ As those who believe and therefore already have been interpreted by the word of God, and driven by our trials, we enter into Scripture praying that God will open us to the Scripture and the Scripture to us.¹⁸ That prayer continues through the whole task of interpretation.

Calvin and the Law/Gospel Distinction

We have mentioned already that while the distinction between Law and Gospel is present within Reformed thought, it does not play the same role there as it does in a Lutheran framework. The difference on this matter goes back to Calvin himself. Calvin is able to speak of the condemning function of the Law with the same vigor as Luther himself (e.g., *Institutes* 2.7.1-7). Yet in his eagerness to resolve the question of the unity of Scripture, he speaks of the Law as functioning *within* a larger covenant of grace that comes to its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.¹⁹ Apart from grace the Law brings death (*nuda lex*), but seen within its larger setting, in its witness to Christ, the Law does not bring death but serves another purpose (*totus lex*). According to this perspective, Law and Gospel do not address the *believing* human being in radically different ways, but only in differing degrees according to the measures of “grace” present within them. Within the Reformed tradition, then, a kind of “salvation-history” became the fundamental paradigm by which to explain the difference between Law and Gospel, a “difference” that could become either

large or small. Either continuity or discontinuity between the Law and the Gospel could be stressed. There were times in which the Reformed tradition could approach the Lutheran paradigm, but rarely, if ever, do Law and Gospel appear there as “words” which are *irreconcilable* this side of glory.²⁰ The embedding of the Law within grace qualifies its demands: while the Law works the death of sinners, it has a different effect on the righteous. For them the Law is no longer a “hard taskmaster,” who exacts full payment. It rather urges believers on to the goal of their lives, exciting them to obedience. In describing how the regenerate experience the Law, Calvin appeals directly to the Scripture psalms, Ps 19 and Ps 119, to which we shall return below. In itself, of course, the Law is able to impart nothing. Charged with grace, however, the Law is “of utility to the regenerate” (*Institutes* 2.7.12-13). Consequently, *in his own way* Calvin takes up Melancthon’s “third use of the Law” and makes it the “principal use.” In a manner distinctly different from the later Formula of Concord, the Law serves first and foremost to instruct the regenerate.

As a result, there is a certain instability within the Reformed tradition on the question of the relationship between Law and Gospel. A few brief examples will have to suffice for illustration. There are some who draw a sharp distinction between them, as does, for example, Isaac Watts in the following hymn:

The Law commands and makes us
know
What duties to our God we owe;
But 'tis the Gospel must reveal
Where lies our strength to do His
will.

The Law discovers guilt and sin,
And shows how vile our hearts

have been;
Only the Gospel can express
Forgiving love and cleansing
grace.

What curses doth the Law
denounce
Against the man that fails but
once!
But in the Gospel Christ appears
Pard'ning the guilt of num'rous
years.

My soul, no more attempt to draw
Thy life and comfort from the Law;
Fly to the hope the Gospel gives;
The man that trusts the promise
lives.

Yet, especially in the wake of the development of covenant theology, there was also a tendency to take up the other side of Calvin’s thought, and that in ways of which he would not have approved. The conjoining of grace and Law in a single “covenant of grace,” led, for example, to the notion within the Church of Scotland in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries that repentance and holiness were conditions of the covenant of grace.²¹ The attempt by the “Marrow men” to correct this error led to considerable controversy, including the charge against them of “antinomianism.”²² Although it has larger dimensions, the “new perspective on Paul,” has been most fiercely debated within the Reformed tradition: here, one might suggest, those who see an extreme continuity between the Law and grace have been opposed by those who recognize a clear distinction between them (at least with respect to the unregenerate).

Returning to Luther and Calvin, we may say that there are at least two fundamental differences between them on the relation of Law and Gospel. In the first place, they differ on the question as to where the unity of Scripture is to

be found, a question that is profoundly related to God's identity. Calvin seeks to maintain the unity of Scripture through a covenantal structure by which the Law is encompassed within grace. Although there certainly is a mystery of God's grace for Calvin, for him the final unity of Scripture is perceptible and rationally available to us already on this side of glory. Luther, in contrast, while certainly affirming the unity of Scripture, especially as it is manifest to us in the crucified and risen Christ, leaves the final resolution of the relation between Law and Gospel *hidden in God*. The affirmation of the unity of Scripture is a matter of faith, not of sight. These differing approaches to Scripture entail, at least tendentially, differing conceptions of God. Does grace finally serve Law, so that in the last analysis God appears as the Law-giver who in the mystery of election grants grace in Christ? Or does the Law serve the Gospel, so that in the last analysis God appears as absolute Giver, who through the "strange" work of the Law opens the way to his "proper" work in the Gospel, by which he communicates his self-giving love to me, his fallen and condemned creature? Does the mercy of God point us beyond itself, so that we learn to contemplate on God's majesty? Or does the mercy of God teach us to see, find, and know the majesty of God only as it is revealed to us in that mercy?

Luther and Calvin correspondingly differ in their conception of the human being, particularly the regenerate human being, who believes in Christ. As is apparent from his understanding of the "third use of the Law," Calvin regards the Law as addressing the believer *as a regenerate person*. This "regeneration" is not fully effective in us, but weak and impeded by the "sluggishness" of the flesh. Con-

sequently, we require the exhortation and urging of the Law's commands, which no longer condemn us but show us God's goal and purpose for us (*Institutes* 2.7.12). Luther, on the other hand, finds within Scripture, especially within the letters of Paul, a radically different picture of the human being. In such passages as Gal 5:17-26, "flesh" and Spirit" do not appear there as capacities or qualities of a unified human person, but two different descriptions of the *whole* person. The old, fallen human being in Adam exists along with the new creation that God has made us to be in Jesus Christ. We must hasten to add that the relationship between the two is unequal. Our sinful self, which is incapable of faith and obedience to God, has been crucified with Christ (see, e.g., Gal 5:24-26; Rom 8:7-8). Although our fallen person, "the flesh," remains present until the end of our earthly life (Rom 7:24), that fallen existence is present now only as *a conquered reality*. Luther employs a number of images in order to communicate this rather difficult concept, none of which captures it fully: we now stand at the dawning of the day, so that from one perspective we stand in the light, yet from another the darkness is still with us; the new life is like Israel's conquest of the Land, the battle already has been won, yet we must enter in to possess that which is already ours; the old Adam is like an outlaw, who once roamed freely wreaking havoc, but now has been placed in chains; we have a mortal illness, yet so long as we trust our Physician and remain under his care, the illness shall be healed. Underlying all of these images, and distinct from Calvin's perspective, is the understanding that God deals with sin in the human being, even the regenerate human being, not by removing sin from the human

being, but by removing *the human being* from sin. The Christian life consists in our “putting to death” our former self by *our new self*, present in the Spirit who dwells in us (Rom 8:12-14; Gal 5:16-17).

As is the case with Scripture and our understanding of God, so it is with us for Luther: the unity of our person lies outside of us in Jesus Christ. We grasp it now by faith, but it is only in the resurrection that it shall become visible.²³ Until then, we still live within the experience of the wretched person of Rom 7:24. At the same time, in faith, like Paul, *in the same breath* we joyfully offer to God the shout of thanksgiving found in Rom 7:25: he has delivered us from our old self “through Jesus Christ, our Lord.” *In so far as we are led by the Spirit*, we no longer need Law or instruction: the Spirit produces fruit in us, just as a healthy tree produces its fruit without any commandments or instruction. That is the sense of Paul’s description of the “fruit of the Spirit” in Gal 5:22-23: “against such things, there is no Law!” It is of critical importance, of course, that we do not imagine that we have rid ourselves of “the flesh” or that it is even possible to do so in this life. We cannot remove sin from our hearts, we must learn to daily overcome it by the Gospel. That means, of course, that we must also hear God’s demands in all their force, so that they expose not merely our sin and guilt (as if they were extrinsic to us), but *us* in our sin and guilt. Only in this painful yet necessary look in the *mirror* of the Law do we see *ourselves* in such a way that we grasp the Gospel.²⁴ The Law remains absolutely essential to the Christian life, even though properly speaking it operates outside the new life that is given to us in Christ.

Especially with respect to the human being, the difference between Calvin and

Luther on the distinction between Law and Gospel now becomes quite clear. Calvin regards regeneration to effect a new state within the human being, which is *partially* present and active. The “flesh” likewise is present as a power that exerts *partial* influence on us. His conception of the “third use of the Law” and the primacy that he assigns to it are bound up with this understanding of the human being. The most important function of the Law lies in its speaking to us as *regenerate persons*, urging us onward to the goal that lies before us. In speaking to the regenerate, the Law has lost its condemning function: it no longer works our death, but only furthers the new life which is partially present in us already. Luther, as we have seen, finds a radically different anthropology in Scripture. The old, fallen creature exists as a whole alongside the new creature, who is likewise a whole. The picture of the human being is either darkness or light, without any shading of tones. There is no “intermediate state” in which we receive instruction but escape condemnation. In so far as the Law deals with our salvation (and does not merely guide our outward conduct), it pronounces our condemnation. The Law speaks to us, even to us who are regenerate, *as fallen human beings*. Being a Christian means again and again, in all the trials and temptations of life, hearing and believing the Gospel which overcomes the condemnation pronounced on us by the Law and by our own consciences in which that Law is written. In so far as we are grasped by the Gospel and live by faith, we live beyond the Law.

Three Objections to Luther’s Understanding of the Law/Gospel Relation

There are at least three fundamental

questions—or, really, objections—which Luther’s understanding of Law and Gospel regularly raises. First, is this understanding of Law and Gospel, which appears most directly with the apostle Paul, confirmed or undermined by the rest of Scripture? Does it allow for progress and growth in the Christian life, or are we not left in a sort of ethical paralysis? Must not preaching which follows this paradigm become repetitive and mechanical, so that it becomes a bit like an exercise-wheel on which a hamster runs? Obviously, the first question in particular requires a much lengthier answer than we can supply here. But perhaps we can trace a few lines of thought that may prove helpful.

Does the distinction between Law and Gospel run through Scripture? One might begin in Gen 1, where both human existence and the entire creation (including the commandment concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil) appear as unmerited *gifts* of God the Creator, and the will of God later expressed in the Law is already present within the heart of the human being: the Gospel opens the door to paradise again, so that we know, see, and give thanks to the Creator for his gifts.²⁵ We might then turn, as Paul does, to the saving work of the Creator in his unconditioned promise to Abraham, which not only came before the Sinai covenant, but in its unconditionality, stands apart from it as distinct. Or we might turn to the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus simultaneously sharpens the demands of the Law and announces its fulfillment in his own person. This latter text is of particular relevance, since here it becomes clear, as Luther recognized, that the new covenant does not abrogate the Law, but brings it to fulfillment *outside of us in Jesus Christ*. Yet for our purposes at

the moment, it is useful to glance briefly at the Scripture psalms, which seem to many interpreters to be at odds with Paul’s own experience of the Law as he describes it in Rom 7, at least if we understand him to speak of an aspect of his life as a believer. But is that the case? Psalm 119 strikingly ends on the same note as Rom 7:24: “I have gone astray like a lost sheep. Seek your servant! For I do not forget your word” (Ps 119:176). The whole psalm is summarized in this closing statement. The one who delights in the Law of God, who recounts it, meditates on it day and night, and clings to it, nevertheless does not yet *know* it in his heart and experience, and repeatedly appeals to the Lord to *teach* him. As he implicitly confesses in the opening of the psalm, his ways are not yet “established” in keeping the Lord’s statutes. He still is ashamed when he considers them (Ps 119:5-8). In view of these petitions and the closing of the psalm, there is good reason, contrary to usual practice, to render the whole of Ps 119:9 as a question: “How shall a young man purify his way? How shall he keep it according to your word?” This petition recurs in varying forms, as the psalmist looks *beyond the Law* to the Lord, whom he asks to teach, instruct, and revive him (e.g., Ps 119:12, 18, 25-26, 29, etc.). The condition of the psalmist is not essentially different from that of the believing Paul, who likewise delights in the Law of God, but finds a different Law at work in him that makes him a prisoner of sin. What the psalmist sought from the Lord (and undoubtedly in faith received) is found, Paul with joy announces, in the crucified and risen Christ (Rom 7:25). In Ps 19, too, the psalmist, even after his exalted praise of the Law which “refreshes the soul” (i.e., brings refreshment and delight to

the heart; Ps 19:7), confesses that *a saving work of God beyond the Law is necessary in his heart*: “Who can discern (their) errors? Make me innocent of hidden sins. . . . Then I shall be blameless and innocent of great transgression” (Ps 19:11-13). Admittedly, Ps 1 lacks this element of confession. But the shadow of the cross lies across this psalm: who among us can claim to be that person here and now? As the psalm itself suggests in its promise that “his leaf does not wither,” the path of the righteous one whom it describes leads through testing and trial on its way to the “season” of fruit (Ps 1:1-6). These brief reflections by no means answer the larger question as to how the distinction between Law and Gospel fits the whole of Scripture. But perhaps they provide some hints.

Second, does the distinction between Law and Gospel represent a sort of defeatism that leads to laxity in Christian living? Undoubtedly, when it is loosed from its biblical moorings, it can lead to this result, as Luther himself was aware. Yet the alternative, which supposes that the regenerate merely need instruction in their sluggishness and not the radical remedy of the Gospel is the more dangerous thought. Here it is appropriate to point yet again to Rom 7. We fail miserably to understand Paul if we imagine him to be telling us that we should simply surrender to our sins and wallow in the misery of them. That is not how the deceptiveness of sin works. We generally are insensate to the sins operating in our hearts and lives: “The heart is desperately perverse and incurably ill, who can understand it?” (Jer 17:9). The sins of which we are aware, dangerous though they may be, are not the most dangerous ones. These hidden faults are more deeply rooted in our person and being than we can imag-

ine, and finally consist in the desire to do away with God and to possess that which properly belongs to our neighbor. This sin, in all its various forms, repeatedly requires the mirror of the Law to expose it. It is this encounter with the commandment of God that brings Paul to see the awful truth about himself, and which he describes in Rom 7. In the hand of God, the Law exposes our sin not in order that we might despair, but in order that we see and believe what he has done for us in Christ, as, again, Paul himself does in Rom 7:25. Without in the least detracting from our conversion, we must not imagine that the turn from unbelief to faith is behind us and complete. It lies before us at every moment.

But where does progress lie in this encounter with the Law? Admittedly, this perspective robs “progress” of its ultimacy. The goal and end of the Christian life is given to us already at its beginning in Jesus Christ. But this displacing of “progress” from its place of primacy prevents us from taking upon ourselves burdens that we were never meant to bear. We “progress” in that we progress into that which already is given and done for us by God in Christ. That is the sense, for example, of Paul’s image of being clothed with Christ. Christ has become ours (and we his) at the start of the Christian life in faith and baptism (Gal 3:27-29). Yet Paul also exhorts mature believers to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 13:14). He is not playing some strange mental game. We have Christ, and yet we must *more fully enter into the experience of having him*: the word of God has been tested in our heart and lives. We must taste it. As Paul tells the Philippians, progress in the Christian life is progress *in faith*, in which we more fully grasp that which is already given to

us (Phil 1:25; 3:8-11). That progress in faith is a turning again and again away from unbelief and to God in faith as he gives himself to us in the Gospel. Our progress is *not* progress away from the cross and resurrection of Christ, as common thinking about sanctification would lead us to think (as if we were working ourselves away from needing Christ), our progress is progress *into* the cross and resurrection of Christ. We enter more deeply into the beginning of our Christian life rather than becoming ever more distant from it. Is it any wonder that Christians, especially older, more mature Christians never tire of singing about the cross?

That brings us finally to the question of preaching Law and Gospel. If Luther is right, as I think he is, we will never master this art here on earth. We desperately need the Holy Spirit to teach us how to “rightly divide the word of truth.” One matter is certain: this preaching cannot rest with mere abstractions or doctrinal formulas. Those who gather as a church for worship often (but not always!) already know and confess that they are “sinners” in need of grace. What they need, and what those need who do not feel themselves to be sinners, is the careful, gentle, yet direct exposure of *their* sins, corporately and individually: not merely the faults of our society or problems in our culture, not merely sinful activities, although now more than ever pastors have to confront churches with what the Scriptures teach about our created sexuality, but finally the root sins of self-seeking, pride, lust, envy, greed by which we deny God and mistreat one another. The “practical atheism” which infects our daily lives without our seeing it must be exposed and judged so that we see afresh precisely what it is that Christ has done *for*

us. While form and order of presentation may vary, the preaching of the Law would be incomplete and perverted without the clear announcement of the Gospel, God’s unconditioned gift of himself to us in Jesus Christ. As Luther underscored, the preaching of the Gospel is not merely the preaching of Christ in a general way, but the preaching of Christ *for you and for me*. If we are to avoid useless abstraction and generalities, this “for you and for me” must also be quite specific: it must, so to speak, name us as those persons whom the Scriptures confronts with their sins here and now, in our concrete circumstances. As Nathan once confronted David, it must say to us, “You are the one!” (2 Sam 12:7). *Then*, as those whom the Law concretely and definitely condemns, we may hear the Gospel afresh that gives us life and makes us new creatures. *Then*, faith in the Gospel means quite concrete acts in our hearts and lives, that only the Holy Spirit, not the preacher, can communicate to us. *Then*, we must ask, as Paul himself did, “Who is sufficient for these things?” And *then*, finally, we may echo Paul’s confident answer.

ENDNOTES

¹The expression (“show yourself a worker”) *orthotomounta ton logon tes alētheias* describes the proper *ministry* of the divine word, i.e., not merely exegesis or interpretation, picturing it as walking or cutting a straight path in the face of useless, yet popular distractions and heresies (cf. LXX Prov 3:6; 11:5). In context, this “word of truth,” the “word of God” is clearly equivalent to the gospel of the crucified and risen Christ, who is the seed of David (2 Tim 2:8-13).

²The distinction is implicit in the words of the risen Christ to the disciples on

the Emmaus road (Luke 24:25-27) and on the evening of the day of the resurrection (Luke 24:44-49). The whole of the Scripture is fulfilled in *his* suffering and resurrection, to which the Law of Moses indeed bears witness, but from which it is distinguished as a body of requirements (e.g., Luke 2:2:22; 16:19; Acts 13:38-39; 15:1-21).

³The words come from a woman in an African village, who was asked by her neighbors why she read only the Bible, see Hans Rudi Weber, *The Book that Reads Me* (Geneva: WCC, 1995).

⁴Craig A. Parton, *The Defense Never Rests: A Lawyer's Quest for the Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2003), 18. I discovered the citation through John T. Pless, *Handling the Word of Truth: Law and Gospel in the Church Today* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2004), 56.

⁵The statement comes from the mature Luther (1542). I have drawn it in slightly altered form from Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 54: Table Talk* (ed. J. Pelikan, H. Oswald and H. Lehmann; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999, c1967), 442.

⁶Scott R. Murphy (*Law, Life, and the Living God: the Third Use of the Law in Modern American Lutheranism* [St. Louis: Concordia, 2002]) takes up the outworkings of these sorts of debates.

⁷As, for example, in Luther's mocking reply to Jerome Emser's interpretation of "the Spirit" and "the letter," which retains its validity for certain current readings of Paul:

Therefore, it is impossible for someone who does not first hear the law and let himself be killed by the letter, to hear the gospel and let the grace of the Spirit bring him to life. Grace is only given to those who long for it. Life is a help only to those who are dead, grace only to sin, the Spirit only to the letter. No one can have

the one without the other. Therefore, what Emser calls the letter and death is, in reality, nothing but the veil, the harmful misunderstanding of the letter, and the damnable flight from this blessed death.

See Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 39: Church and Ministry I* (ed. J. Pelikan, H. Oswald and H. Lehmann; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999, c1970), 185.

⁸The Law, which also enjoins love of neighbor (Lev 19:18), thus bears an internal tension which points forward to Jesus's teaching (e.g., Matt 5:21-26) and work.

⁹The Law reflects the natural law that, however obscured, is already written on the human heart (Rom 2:12-16). While this natural law is to be understood as universal (and not, for example, in terms of something like a nationalistic, German *Volksnomos*), the Law given to Israel retains its priority above all other cultural expressions of natural law (Deut 4:5-8), an observation relevant to Christian preaching and ethics.

¹⁰See especially Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luthers Theologie: eine Vergegenwärtigung* (2nd ed.; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2003), 134-38.

¹¹Now it is not God who uses the Law, but the human being! See Timothy J. Wengert, *Law and Gospel: Philip Melancthon's Debate with John Agricola of Eisleben Over Poenitentia* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).

¹²The Formula of Concord, Epitome, VI nicely walks a very fine line, preserving Luther's position while allowing for a certain understanding of a *tertius usus legis*, in the wake of the debates that had broken out on the matter.

¹³Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 26: Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1-4* (ed. J. Pelikan, H. Oswald and H. Lehmann; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999, c1967), 185.

ann; St. Louis: Concordia 1999, c1963), 115.

¹⁴Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 54: Table Talk* (ed. J. Pelikan, H. Oswald and H. Lehmann; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999, c1967), 125 (No. 1234).

¹⁵See John 6:45; 1 Thess 4:9.

¹⁶Bonhoeffer found only this kind of preaching. In part, this experience led to his agreement with the thesis of Thomas Cuning Hall (in a manner that the author did not intend) that American Christianity represents "Protestantism without Reformation." See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Barcelona, Berlin, Amerika: 1928-1931* (ed. Reinhardt Staats; Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke, Vol. 10; Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1991), 270-71, 276-77.

¹⁷See, e.g., the well-known preface to the Wittenberg edition of Luther's works (19539): Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 34: Career of the Reformer IV* (ed. J. Pelikan, H. Oswald and H. Lehmann; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999, c1960), 282-87.

¹⁸As my own pastor, Chuck Fuller, often rightly prays before preaching.

¹⁹Karl Barth, who was primarily concerned with *revelation* itself rather than Scripture, then brings all of God's dealings with the created order within the circumference of God's gracious dealings in Jesus Christ.

²⁰Although other factors were at work in it, Dispensationalism, particularly in its early form, may be regarded as an attempt to recapture the sharp distinction between Law and Gospel that one finds in Scrip-

ture *by means of temporal distinctions*. It may therefore be regarded as a radicalized form of the Reformed approach, despite its obvious distinctives. The strictly temporal "solution" had to be revised because of early errors (such as the idea that Old Testament saints were saved through the Law), yet even in its revised forms this reading tends to *separate* Law and Gospel rather than (properly) *distinguishing* between them. Again in this case, the attempt to explain the unity of Scripture fully here and now results in a hermeneutic that rests in a temporal scheme rather than solely in the incarnate, crucified and risen Christ.

²¹See James B. Torrance, "Covenant or Contract? A Study of the Theological Background of Worship in Seventeenth-Century Scotland," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (1970): 51-76.

²²The Lutheran reformation had already been forced to deal with this issue in Agricola's controversy with Melancthon, and then again in a similar manner after Luther's death.

²³This is the emphasis above all else of the work of Rudolf Hermann. See his *Luthers These »Gerecht und Sünder zugleich«: Eine Systematische Untersuchung* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann/"Der Rufer" Evangelischer Verlag; Hermann Werner Nachfolger, 1930).

²⁴Calvin very nicely describes the Law as a mirror in this sense. Yet he restricts its use in this way to the unregenerate in *Institutes* 2.7.7.

²⁵The work of Oswald Bayer, in which the creational dimension of justifica-

tion plays a prominent role, is most fully accessible to English-speakers at the moment in the summarizing work of Mark Mattes, *The Role of Justification in Contemporary Theology* (Lutheran Quarterly Books; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 145-73.