

# The Simple Message of Law and Gospel

Mark 1:14—20

## Introduction

When Carol and I attended the orientation session at NBTS, one exercise we did was to show what we considered to be more important, God's judgment or His grace. This translates into the Lutheran doctrine of Law and Gospel. We see a plain example of Law and Gospel in Jesus' message: "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel*" (**Mark 1:15**).

## Law and Gospel Expounded

Have you ever read CFW Walther's **Law and Gospel**? How about Walter Pieper's **God's No and God's Yes**? A few years back, in preparation for the election of the Synod President, the **Lutheran Reporter** ran an article where the candidates answered some questions so we could have a better understanding of them. One question was, "What book, other than the **Bible** or the **Book of Concord** has affected your life the most?" Rev. Harrison's answer was, "By all means, Walther's **Law and Gospel**; that's where it's at!" **Law and Gospel** is a writing of a series of lectures based around Walther's 25 theses or principles of the doctrine of Law and Gospel. The book explains the work of each and how we should not commingle them or confuse what they do. I wasn't so impressed with this book, because, for me, it was too detailed. Many of the 25 theses overlapped. And the 25 lectures spanned two school years at seminary.

## KISS – Law and Gospel 101

I'm a big fan of KISS, Keep It Simple, Stupid. To that end, here's the basic definition of the doctrine of Law and Gospel. God speaks to us in two ways, through the Law and through the Gospel. Through the Law, He tells us about His holiness, showing us how sinful we are. This drives us to our knees in repentance. Then He speaks words of comfort to us in the Gospel, as He shows us how Jesus gives us forgiveness of sins through His death on the cross. I tell confirmands the easiest way to remember this is with the acronym SOS. The Law Shows Our Sins and the Gospel Shows Our Savior.

## Keeping Them Distinct

When Walther talks about commingling, he says we are to keep Law and Gospel separate or divided, to make sure we don't confuse them. I think a better word would be distinct. We don't want to separate them. They must work together. We'll get to that later.

## The Work of the Law

I've heard of people who don't like Divine Service Three because in the Confession we identify ourselves by saying, "I, a poor, miserable sinner." Some people don't like to be thought of as "poor, miserable sinners." We're all sinners, and if we aren't poor and miserable, we must not be penitent. **The Smalcald Articles** tell us we must acknowledge what we are before God to be prepared to receive His grace. In **Galatians 3:24**, Paul says: *So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.* The Law gives us an awareness and understanding of our sinfulness to bring us to Christ.

## The Work of the Gospel

The Law afflicts us by pointing out our sins. The Gospel comforts us with the promise of forgiveness in Jesus Christ. Keeping them distinct helps us to remember that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ alone. Maintaining the distinction between Law and Gospel, we see that only Christ saves. Peter and Judas both sinned against Christ that Thursday night. Judas' sin was not worse than Peter's. They both repented, but Peter repented in faith and received forgiveness. Judas was sorry for what he had done, but his repentance was not accompanied by faith. Instead of finding forgiveness, he took his own life.

## Keeping Them Together

Back to the exercise I mentioned at the beginning, most prospective students stood on the side of Grace or Gospel. A few thought that Judgement or Law was more important. Carol and I were the only ones who stood directly in the center. Our reasoning was this: only Christ can save and that is by Grace, the Gospel. But unless we are Judged and found guilty (Law), there is no need to be saved. Or, as we read in the **Apology**, Article XII A—Repentance, talking about Jesus' words, *"Repent and believe in the Gospel": In the first clause He convicts of sins, and in the second He comforts us and shows the forgiveness of sins. ... You also see here that the two parts are joined; contrition when sins are rebuked; and faith when it is said, "Believe in the Gospel."*

## Law and Gospel

So, Law and Gospel are distinct and must never be confused. But they work together and must never be separated. They are two sides of the same coin. Just as a coin is only valid if it has both a head and a tail, salvation is ours only when both Law and Gospel are allowed to do their work. Repent and believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

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*And the Peace of God,  
Which surpasses all understanding,*

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*Will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*

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