

# LAW & GOSPEL

Mark Menacher

## What is the law? What is the Gospel?

The doctrine of justification by faith is the hallmark of the Lutheran churches. Lutherans teach that God's word alone creates the faith which alone makes believers right (just) before God. Only God's word, and not human words, can create this justifying faith. For Lutherans, then, it is essential that one can distinguish between words which are of God and words which are not. In order to do this, Lutherans employ a method of interpretation (or hermeneutic) called law and gospel. The gospel creates faith, but the law does not.

The Lutheran Reformation was not simply an effort to restructure the Roman church of the 1500's. More importantly, the notion of reforming and restructuring the church developed from the Lutheran Reformers' new understanding of the nature of the Word of God.

Why would something like a method of interpreting Scripture be important enough to cause the Reformation? What's so important about how we interpret the Bible?

In Luther's day there were two main ways to understand biblical texts, either literally or figuratively (or spiritually). These two categories were based on the scriptural passage in II Corinthians 3:6 which states that "the letter kills but the spirit gives life." With this notion in mind, scholars believed that the literal or plain understanding of the text was basically of historical value only and thus was "dead." In contrast, the figurative or allegorical meanings "behind" the plain text were thought to be spiritual and living.

Scholars conceived of three spiritual understandings of the biblical text based on the philosophy of Aristotle and on the Christian virtues of faith, love, and hope (I Corinthians 13). In this scheme, the spiritual virtue of faith was connected to the church as the body of Christ. The virtue of love was interpreted figuratively as pertaining to the moral life. The virtue of hope represented symbolically matters of eternal life and the end times. Because these spiritual meanings were thought to be hidden in the literal meanings of the text, their correct interpretation was generally established by the church.

What does it mean to say the church established the correct interpretation of Scripture? What does that say about the ability of people to understand the Bible?

In contrast, Martin Luther, like Augustine before him, considered the literal meaning of the biblical text itself to be spiritual. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, Luther considered Christ to be the center of the entire Bible. Secondly, by virtue of Christ's resurrection and ascension Luther held that through the Holy Spirit, Christ enlivened the literal meaning of the biblical text and thus made it spiritual. So, for Luther, the literal meaning was spiritual until human beings started to tinker with the biblical text in search of the supposedly hidden, spiritual meanings.

For Luther, then, the Bible did not need special interpretations by church authorities. Instead, because Christ was the center of Scripture and because Christ's spirit brought the biblical text to life, Luther taught that through Christ the Scriptures not only interpret themselves but also interpret

- **Law** - the word which kills, convicts sinners, condemns godlessness
- **Gospel** - the word which gives life, creates faith by which sinners are justified

human reality to the reader/hearer of the text. Thus, the principle of “Christ alone” bestows a proper understanding of letter and spirit of God’s Word in Scripture. As Luther writes, “In the Holy Scriptures it is best to differentiate between the letter and the spirit, for this truly makes one into a theologian. The church has received this solely from the Holy Spirit and not from human understanding” (WA 3: 12, 2-4).

What’s the difference between saying ‘people interpret the Bible’ and ‘the Bible interprets reality for people?’ How does the Bible interpret reality for us?

Luther’s developing method of interpretation did not rest there. With the theologian’s task of preaching in mind, but also through his disputes with the Roman church and with the radical elements of the Reformation, Luther’s understanding of letter and spirit gave rise to a new method of interpretation which has transformed theology. This form of interpretation is known as the law and gospel hermeneutic.

Again, conceiving of Christ as the center of Scripture and conceiving of Christ as God’s Word making himself present in preaching, Luther observed two ways in which God’s Word addressed the human conscience. For Luther, God’s Word speaks to the conscience either as the Word which makes certain (as gospel and therefore as the basis of faith and life) or as the Word which convicts sinners and condemns their godlessness (as law and therefore as the message revealing faithlessness and death). In other words, the law describes the reality of being human in the condition of sin, separated from God as the source and giver of life. In sharp contrast, the gospel is God’s unequivocal promise to heal our broken relationship with God. This promise came and still comes through Jesus Christ as the resurrected and victorious Word of God, but how?

Seeing an interaction between letter and spirit and law and gospel, Luther formulated an answer. If a biblical text at any given time does not speak God’s Word in the present, then Luther considered the passage to be a “dead letter.” This dead letter is the law which either convicts and condemns or sometimes says nothing at all. By contrast, a biblical text which communicates God’s promise of forgiveness through Christ is the gospel which creates faith. In other words, this Word made alive by Christ’s spirit is the gospel (or good news) that God desires to reconcile sinners to himself.

How does Luther define the Law? How does he define the Gospel? Think of some of your favorite Bible verses. Using Luther’s definitions, would you say they are law or gospel?

The interplay of letter and spirit and of law and gospel converge in the task of proclaiming the Word of God. In any given situation or time, the preacher needs to ascertain which elements of the text are “dead letter” and which ones are Christ speaking in the present. That is, the preacher needs to see and understand how the biblical text speaks to the consciences of the hearers here and now as both law and gospel. How does this work?

In order for proclamation to happen, Jesus Christ through his spirit firstly makes the biblical text “alive” for the preacher so that the preacher can ascertain a message from the text which speaks both law and gospel to the hearing consciences in the present. Secondly, when proclamation happens God’s Word as law clears the way for the promise of God’s Word in the gospel. Again, the gospel creates the faith through which sinners are justified before God. In this respect, Lutheranism is rather simple. The focus and mission of a Lutheran church are the Word (as law and gospel), faith, and justification by faith.

For Luther, knowing how to distinguish between law and gospel both in the biblical text and in the act of proclamation were essential for conveying God’s Word in any age. Without this distinction, preachers fall prey to preaching “dead” sermons which are full of human words but devoid of the Word of God. The distinction between law and gospel was so important for Luther that he comments, “Nearly all of Scripture as well as the understanding of all theology depend upon the right understanding of law and gospel” (WA 7; 502, 34f). “Whoever knows properly how to differentiate the gospel from the law, that person may thank God and may know that he (she) is a theologian” (WA 40; 1; 207, 17f).

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In a Lutheran understanding, theologians are not necessarily those who hold theological degrees. Instead, anyone in the priesthood of all believers who knows how to differentiate between the letter and spirit and between law and gospel is truly a proper theologian. With Christ at your side, perhaps you too are one of these theologians.

What are some instances, in addition to preaching, in which the proper distinction between law and gospel might be helpful or appropriate? How might this distinction be useful in daily life?