

## Articles and Sermons :: What is this law and gospel thing?.

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An interesting article,cant say iv herd this before, but i think i agree with whats being said ..

This is only for thoses interested ,please reframe from debating , eneeough of thats is allready happening.....

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What Is This "Law & Gospel" Thing?

Rick Ritchie

Printer Friendly Version Email Link to a Friend Image for ArticleThe Law must be preached in its full rigor to make people guilty before God.16 The Gospel must be preached in its full sweetness to make people righteous before God. If we try to do anything else, we are following our own agenda, and not God's.

The feisty early church leader Tertullian was so impatient with error that he rejected their right of false teachers to quote the Scriptures. He esteemed classical learning so inferior to Christian teaching that he dismissed it with the question, "What hath Athens to do with Jerusalem?" Are we to expect a man like this to express any gratitude toward a heretic? Will such a firebrand ever thank an enemy of Christ for expounding a neglected Christian doctrine? Never! Yet this is exactly what Tertullian did, saying of the heretic Marcion that "Marcion's special and principal work was the separation of the law and the gospel." (1)

Surely Marcion's teaching even in this area would not have earned Tertullian's approval, but Marcion constructed a thick barricade between Law and Gospel which Tertullian saw fit to leave in place, even as he looked forward to the day when Marcion's other teachings would lay in ruins.

If it hadn't been for Marcion, the Scriptures themselves would still have forced the church to distinguish between law and gospel, but now we have not only a doctrine of law and a doctrine of gospel, but a doctrine of law and gospel. We are all aware that the law and the gospel differ, but as in the case of two children who sprang from the same parent, we are best able to tell them apart when we examine them together.

Getting our Terms Straight

The words "Law" and "Gospel" are surely familiar to all Christians. What Christian doesn't know that the way of salvation is called the Gospel? The word "Law" is common enough in daily life that even the most unchurched pagan would, from the very words "God's Law," have some inkling of what those words meant. While the terms "Law" and "Gospel" are familiar to all Christians, how the two terms relate to each other is often rather murky.

For some of us, we were never taught that these were categories through which to understand Scripture. Perhaps we always assumed that as Christians, everything that we believed was Gospel. The Law was for those born in another time and another place. Or maybe Law and Gospel were both pertinent to us, but only in the past, at conversion. We were ready to move on to bigger and better things. Why study the Gospel when it has already done its work? Let us immerse ourselves in the study of the new life that follows the Gospel. Sanctification or spirituality or signs and wonders are the business of the already-saved Christian. Why return to the "milk" or the "elementary principles"?

Why indeed! If the Reformers were correct, we must study the distinction between Law and Gospel because in a real sense, Scripture never presents us with anything else. Even when we speak of sanctification, we will either be talking about it in a legal sense (Law), or an evangelical sense (Gospel). We will be talking of something that God requires of us (Law), or something that God gives to us (Gospel). We never move beyond this.

The Reformers were so certain of the importance of this doctrine that they declared that without it no one would be able to make sense out of Scripture. Luther even declared of the person ignorant of this distinction that "you cannot be altogether sure whether he is a Christian or a Jew or a pagan, for it depends on this distinction." (2) In agreement with Luther is C. F. W. Walther, known in his own day as the American Luther. Walther says:

The true knowledge of the distinction between the Law and the Gospel is not only a glorious light, affording the correct understanding of the entire Holy Scriptures, but without this knowledge Scripture is and remains a sealed book. (3) The Bible will be an impenetrable mystery as long as we are confused about its intent. If the reformers were correct, Scripture contains two different messages which thread their way through both the Old and New Testaments. One message, the Law, "is a divine doctrine which teaches what is right and God-pleasing and which condemns everything that is sinful and contrary to God's will." (4) The other message, the Gospel, "teaches what a man who has not kept the law and is condemned by it should believe, namely, that Christ has satisfied and paid for all guilt and without man's merit has obtained and won for him forgiveness of sins, the 'righteousness that avails before God,' and eternal life." (5) These two doctrines are similar in that both are the word of God, they both pertain to us, and both should be preached. They differ from each other in that the Law condemns while the Gospel saves. Small wonder then that confusing these two doctrines will cause problems. If we present Law to people thinking that it is Gospel, they will return home from the morning's sermon feeling condemned - because they have been! It is vitally important that we learn to recognize the difference between these two doctrines. We will do this by studying various ways in which people confuse these doctrines.

#### Confusion #1: The Gospel is a New Law

Have you ever heard preaching which left you certain that you could not get to heaven by keeping the commandments of Moses, but suggested that you would get to heaven by fulfilling the commandments of Christ? This type of preaching is the worst violation of the distinction between Law and Gospel. As Walther says:

The first manner of confounding Law and Gospel is the one most easily recognized--and the grossest. It is adopted, for instance, by Papists, Socinians, and Rationalists and consists in this, that Christ is represented as a new Moses, or Law giver, and the Gospel turned into a doctrine of meritorious works, while at the same time those who teach that the Gospel is the message of the free grace of God in Christ are condemned and anathematized, as is done by the papists. (6) Few evangelical churches are likely to promote this depth of confusion in their teaching. Nevertheless, this gives us a good starting point in understanding what the distinction between Law and Gospel is really about. The first thing to note when you make a distinction is that the two things being distinguished are two things and not one. The first point at issue in the Law/Gospel distinction is that the Gospel is not a Law. When stated outright like this, the point is so obvious that we wonder that it needs to be made at all. If we take a deeper look at the issue, however, we might find that this point needs to be made over and over again even with people who otherwise seem to understand their Bibles well.

Our Roman Catholic friends, for instance, are certainly not so ignorant as to believe that they will be saved by keeping the Ten Commandments. Where they get tripped up is in believing that there is a Law, the fulfilling of which could get us into heaven. In an article written in 1939, Gertrude Anscombe, a believing Roman Catholic (and reportedly the only individual ever to beat C. S. Lewis in public debate), wrote concerning the justice of participating in her government's war with Germany. For her, properly appraising the morality of the war was an issue of salvation or damnation, for salvation would be attained by following natural law. (7) In the canons and decrees of the Council of Trent, the church said that we are saved "on the condition of observing the commandments," and that "Christ Jesus was given...as a legislator whom to obey." (8) In the case of both Gertrude Anscombe and the Council of Trent, there was a place for Christ's work on the cross, but it was not central.

Before we decide what Christ was doing when he delivered the Sermon on the Mount, we had better clarify what he was not doing. Christ did not come to give us a law superior to Moses' which could save, for "law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression" (Romans 4:15). If law brings wrath, we know that Christ did not come to bring it, "for God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:17). If Christ was not sent to condemn, and law condemns, Christ was not sent to bring us more law.

Yet Christ does speak of commandments and laws. In the Sermon on the Mount, he sternly warned that "anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:19), and Paul exhorts us to "fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). Christ did speak of law in the sternest of language.

Christ spoke of law, but he did not give law. These are two unavoidable facts. The only conclusion that can be drawn is that Christ spoke concerning a law which had already been given. In the Sermon on the Mount, the law which had been given was the law of Moses. Christ cleared the Law of Moses.

Why would Christ preach about the Law of Moses? In order for Christ to do his saving work, the people he intended to save needed to know that they needed him. The Jewish religious leaders had "tamed" the Law, twisting it to make it easier to fulfill. Some of Jesus' hearers thought that they had pulled it off. For the sake of his saving work, Jesus had to preach the Law in its full rigor so that it would "lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith" (Galatians 3:24). (9)

It would be bad enough if we had only to contend with the teaching that the Gospel was a new law and Christ a new law giver, (10) but problems do not stop there. Those who are subject to these errors go further, condemning those who teach otherwise, as we find in the Council of Trent, where it is said that:

"If anyone says that justifying faith is nothing else than confidence in divine mercy, which remits sins for Christ's sake, or that it is this confidence alone that justifies us, let him be anathema." (11)

At this point the Roman church condemned those who believe the Gospel. It is to be hoped that the Catholics that we know do not hold to this teaching, but it is important that we recognize that those who confuse Law and Gospel often go further and condemn those who do not.

Confusion #2: Law and Gospel are Mingled

If the first manner of confusing Law and Gospel, that of making the Gospel into a new law, is rarely found in the evangelical churches, the second manner of confusing Law and Gospel is more common. Walther describes this confusion as follows:

In the second place, the Word of God is not rightly divided when the Law is not preached in its full sternness and the Gospel not in its full sweetness, when, on the contrary, Gospel elements are mingled with the Law and Law elements with the Gospel. (12)

When Law and Gospel are properly distinguished, the Law is stern and rigorous, the Gospel free and sweet. When the two are confused, an element of sternness is introduced into the Gospel, making it demanding, or an element of laxity is introduced into the Law, making it more attainable.

It is not at first as easy to see why this would be considered a confusion. Is not the New Testament Gospel demanding? Sure, the promises are sweet, but what about the way Jesus turned away his reluctant followers (Matthew 8:18-22)? What about Paul's example of chastening his body so that he would not become a castaway (1 Corinthians 9:24)? Or the dozens of other warnings and exhortations given in the New Testament? The Gospel is sweet, but surely it is not pure sweetness, is it? And in the same manner, can we not find some laxity in the Law? The Reformers could not be correct in stressing the unattainable harshness of the Law in the Old Testament. There was room for weakness. What else was the sacrificial system set up for? (13)

When we ask questions like these, it is clear that we have missed what the distinction between Law and Gospel is about. We have fallen into the belief that the line between Law and Gospel is drawn between Matthew and Malachi, at the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New. What we have missed is that Law and Gospel are two different ways that God speaks to us. If he is speaking Law to us, his purpose is to hold us accountable, not to give us anything through that Law. As Paul says: "we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather through the Law we become conscious of sin" (Romans 3:19-20). We must recognize preaching to be Law whenever it is making us accountable to God.

There are two things to keep in mind here. First, we must brand all Scripture which holds us accountable to God as Law. This will be true even when, or I should say, especially when the Bible speaks of the necessity of love for God or others. Jesus said that love for God and neighbor was at the heart of the law (Matthew 22:37-40). As evangelicals we are good at recognizing law if it has to do with the Ten Commandments, but we often miss it when it has to do with love. Love sounds so much more comforting.

How often have we heard (or told people) that "Christianity is not a religion, it is a personal relationship"? This is always said to make Christianity more attractive. Who would prefer having a list of rules to having a friend? This emphasis on love must be good news!

No, it isn't! At least not always. It is exactly in the area of love that we do not measure up. This is what so many of us find when we have torn up the list of rules and regulations in order to just focus on loving God and neighbor. If it all turns out this way, what am I to think when I am unloving? How come the good news seems like such a burden sometimes?

If the Law really has love at its heart, and the Law was given to hold us accountable to God, then we must conclude that God holds us accountable especially when he sets forth a standard of love to which we do not measure up. We have been summoned to the divine court room not for some picky infraction of a ceremonial code, but for being unfaithful and unloving in our relationships with God and man.

The breach cannot be healed by our trying to be more faithful and loving. So much bad evangelism makes it sound as if God were lonely and needed someone to love Him. Remember: Eden may have been lost by our bad conduct, but the problem now is that we have been kicked out, not that we ran away. We cannot tell people to "Come back to God" to solve their problem. The problem is that they got banished, not that they walked out.

This is a pretty grim situation if even passages which speak of love are used against us. But what else does Paul say? He says that "God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all" (Romans 12:32). The severity of the Law leaves us all guilty, but that very guilt creates an opportunity to show forth God's mercy. We are held accountable for being faithless, and God uses the situation to show how faithful he is. We are judged for being unloving, and in response, God pours forth his love on us.

The problem is that if we mix Law and Gospel, neither of God's intentions is carried out. He desires to shut people up under disobedience, holding them accountable, and then has mercy on them. To accomplish the first goal, the people have to know that they are disobedient. Not only that they have been so, but that they cannot be otherwise. Not only that they cannot be otherwise, but that they have no desire to be otherwise. (14) We need to preach the Law in such a way that nobody is left standing. We all try to squirm out of God's hand by telling ourselves that some day we might pull it off. Maybe we fall short now, but some day we will do better. After good Law preaching, we realize that we don't even really want to do better. We just want to go to brunch and forget the sermon so that we can feel better when the pastor starts a new sermon series.

If this is grim, let us remember the ultimate end. We want to shut people up under a death sentence so that God can have mercy on them. Until the people are "caught," they won't feel any need for mercy. Not real mercy.

Again, the overall intention of God tells us why the Gospel cannot be made demanding. If we make demands of the potential convert, are we really presenting him or her with mercy? Mercy of a sort, perhaps, but what we have really done is to put the debtor into a debt repayment plan. (15) This always implies that the debtor can still repay, and never pushes the individual to the point of realizing that he or she is now really at the mercy of God.

We never really want to use Law and Gospel the way God intended them to be used. God wants to condemn and to pardon. We want to chide and to bargain. God is more stern and more generous than we are comfortable with. We want results now. We forget that God's punitive justice is hell and his generosity heaven. We want to combine equal portions of each to make a kinder, gentler earth. When we mix Law and Gospel, we only prove that we don't want a God, we want a moral policeman.

Law must be preached in its full rigor to make people guilty before God. (16) The Gospel must be preached in its full sweetness to make people righteous before God. If we try to do anything else with God's threatenings or promises, we are following our own agenda, and not God's.

### Confusion #3: The Gospel is Turned into a Preaching of the New Life in Christ

The next confusion is probably the most common among those whose preaching is otherwise very clear in distinguishing Law from Gospel. In many churches, real grace is preached to the potential convert. Christ is preached in such a way as to leave no doubt that his benefits are even for the vilest of sinners. It is the long-since-converted workaday Christian who gets ground in the gears of this kind of preaching.

Sometimes we must assume that when pastors paint the new life in Christ in glowing terms, the intent is to make the potential convert long to be part of God's eternal plan of salvation. At other times, however, this preaching is directed precisely to those who have already been converted, or think that they have been converted.

When this type of preaching is directed at those who merely believe that they are converted, it is understandable that the pastor would choose to preach like this. This type of preaching is law preaching. It is intended to drive the carnally secure to despair so that they might fly to the saviour.

The problem comes when the careless pastor addresses preaching like this to the saved in the congregation. Law preaching will be Law preaching no matter to whom it is directed. The real problem will not be that the pastor has directed Law preaching at the regenerate flock, but that the pastor does not follow up with Gospel. Pastors often forget to do this precisely because they believe that what they have been preaching is the Gospel! Some of this confusion comes because we have rightly been taught that God is the source of the new life and all of its wonderful results. The cheerful obedience, the spontaneous love for the brethren, the patient endurance of trials--all of these things are said to be God's gracious gifts. How could this be Law?

Again we must return to the definitions which we derive from Scripture. The Gospel, by definition, is good news (the literal meaning of the Greek word). In contrast, the Law is God's demand upon us (Matthew 5:17-20). God demands that we cheerfully obey him (2 Cor 9:7), that we spontaneously love the brethren (Galatians 5:14; 1 John 4:7-8), that we patiently endure trials (2 Timothy 2:12). This is demand, and there is promise of reward for living up to them, and threat of punishment for falling short.

It is biblical for a pastor to issue these demands to his congregation. The pastor should issue them as serious calls to a new way of life. It must be recognized that the congregation will continually fall short of these demands, however. When they begin to realize this, and the better the preaching the more obvious this will be, they need to hear the Gospel. It can not be taken for granted that they already know the Gospel and have moved beyond it. As Luther said, no man can preach the Gospel to himself. Christians need to hear it preached to them again and again.

#### Conclusion

For many of us, true Law and Gospel preaching would be a new discovery. Our pastors preached from biblical texts, but they never left us certain how God is disposed toward us. Sometimes the pastor presents the Gospel as a new Law. At other times, the pastor tones down the Law so he doesn't sound too negative, and tones down the Gospel so he won't "give people the wrong idea" that even really bad sinners can be saved. For the lucky few, the Gospel was preached as a message of free grace when we came to church as potential converts, but the descriptions of the new life in Christ have been so different from anything we have experienced that we begin to doubt the genuineness of our faith.

To all of us, whatever our situation, the real Law does not serve to inspire us to greater devotion, but drives us to terror. There really is a God out there to whom we are accountable. We do not live up to what he has called us to, either in his creative work or his redemptive work.

To the terrorized, the Gospel then comes as a message that all has been done for us. All has been done for us even if we are already Christians. There is grace even for those who grew up in the church! The banquet is set. Come and eat. The ransom has been paid. You are free. The death has been died. Go and live. Hell has been suffered. Heaven is open to you.