

Describing the Law/Gospel Distinction: The Fuller Version

For our first post of 2015, here at last is the “Fuller Version” of Steve Kuhl’s explanation of the proper distinction between Law and Gospel, written for publication on [the Crossings website](#). He passed it along to us at the same time as the “Simple Version” that we published in [Thursday Theology #843](#). Note, therefore, that this “fuller” text does not yet reflect any of the feedback submitted by you, our readers, after #843.

Again, please do let us know what you think of this longer text. (Does it make sense to you? Are there points with which you are inclined to argue? If so, which points?) As before, we’ll pass your feedback along to Steve, and we’ll be grateful for the chance to refine this text which will play such an important role on the website.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

What is Meant by “The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel”?

Fuller version:

“The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel” refers to an overarching rule of thumb or governing insight for understanding and organizing the Christian Message as a whole. It informs both the way biblical texts are interpreted (see [Text Studies](#)) and

the way the Christian Message is related to contemporary hearers (see the [Blog](#)). As a rule of thumb, it functions to remind Christians that the central concern of the Christian Message has to do with our standing before God (as blessed or cursed, righteous or unrighteous, under law or under gospel) instead of immediately seeking what actions we should or should not do.

Foundational to the distinction between Law and Gospel is, first of all, Jesus' own teaching as presented in the New Testament Gospels and most vividly stated in the Gospel of John, where the contrast between Moses and Jesus is a constant theme, beginning already in the very first chapter (John 1:17). It then becomes a major organizing principle in the Epistles as they address issues in the first Christian congregations. We see this especially in Paul's central assertion that the ungodly are justified before God by trusting in the *Gospel* of Jesus Christ and not by obedience to the *Law* (cf. Rom. 4:5, 3:28; Gal. 3:22). Here Paul is proclaiming that the Gospel puts the ungodly in a new, justified standing before God in a way that is impossible for the Law to do. Throughout the ages, this central assertion has guided the ship of the Church through many stormy theological seas. While the Crossings Community tends to look to Luther [1] and the signers of the *Augsburg Confession* and its *Apology*[2] as our primary teachers in the art of distinguishing Law and Gospel, it is important to remember that they themselves deny that this way of thinking originated with them or is their exclusive domain. Far from being originators of the teaching, they claimed to have learned it through a careful study of the Old and New Testaments [3], the writings of the Church Fathers, especially Augustine [4], and numerous other figures in Church history, providing extensive citation to back up their claim. Therefore, we regard the art of distinguishing Law and Gospel as having ecumenical standing in Church History.

The proper distinction between Law and Gospel recognizes both

the substantive difference between Law and Gospel and the logical correlation of the two [5]. In a sense, Law and Gospel relate the way problem and solution relate. The Law is ultimately concerned with identifying humanity's problem before God; the Gospel is ultimately concerned with identifying the divine solution for humanity. For this reason the Crossings Matrix is organized as two parts: Diagnosis and Prognosis, language used by Crossings co-founder Robert Bertram for its pun-ability. The diagnosis refers to the way God, through the Law, "sees through us," like an X-ray technician, to expose a basic conflict with God at the root of our existence; the prognosis, by contrast, refers to the way God, through the Gospel, "sees us through," like a surgeon, by reuniting us to God through the death and resurrection of Christ. The Diagnosis progressively identifies the human-divine problem beginning with our outward circumstances; moving to our internal rationalizations, convictions, and discontents; culminating in God's deadly way of dealing with us as sinners. The Prognosis picks up where the Diagnosis leaves off and progressively identifies the divine-human solution, beginning with God's gracious intervention on behalf of sinners by Christ, moving to our internal appropriation of that solution by faith, culminating in a new engagement with our outward circumstances on the basis of that solution by love.

The need to distinguish Law and Gospel emerges from the fact that God himself (as necessitated by the Event of Jesus Christ and attested to by Scripture) engages the world in one of two fundamentally different ways. Through the Law, God, in his righteous judgment, exposes and condemns sinful humanity and, ultimately, sentences us to death: "the wages of sin is death..." (Rom 6:23a). Through the Gospel, by stark contrast, this same God, in his unfathomable mercy, promises sinful humanity reconciliation and eternal life for the sake of Jesus Christ,

the Son of God. Through the Gospel, God approaches sinful humanity with a magnanimous promise of reconciliation to God and life with him in eternal blessedness for the sake of Christ: "...but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 6:23b).

Through the Law we see that the human condition consists of the triad of our sin, God's Law and the sentence of death (cf. 1 Cor. 15:56). Although the Law is "holy and right and good" (Rom 7:12) in its condemnation of sinners, the dark side of the Law is that it ultimately offers no help or hope to sinners.

What the Law of God could not do because of sin—namely, endear us to God—the Gospel of Jesus Christ does for those who trust in him. The Law of God is a word that requires something of us and, because we fail to meet those requirements, always ends up accusing us, designating us, in biblical language, as sinners. It is in this demanding and accusing capacity that the Law functions civilly to restrain sinners and spiritually to condemn sinners. The Gospel of God, by contrast, is a different sort of word, an offer that brings relief to sinners, that "solves" the consequences of the "problem" of failure. In that capacity, it is, at once, a report concerning what God has done for sinners in Jesus Christ and a direct address inviting sinners to follow Christ through death into life.

Intrinsic to the distinction of Law and Gospel is a theology of the cross, meaning that God works his saving deeds counterintuitively, through the sign of the opposite. The counterintuitive nature of the Gospel is seen in its single-minded invitation to sinners to die to self and rise with Christ (cf. Mt 16:24-26). The death the Law pronounces on sinners happens! "In Adam all die!" (1 Cor. 15:22a). But when that death is accompanied by Christ (which by faith it is), that death is surpassed by Christ's resurrection, which becomes the believer's

own resurrection, too! "In Christ all are made alive!" (1 Cor. 15:22b). Through the Gospel, then, a new human condition (Paul calls it the new creation in Christ) comes into existence. It exists now, already, in hope, in the form of new impulses of faith towards God and love towards others. It will exist in the age to come as something that surpasses human imagination.

Integral to the distinction of Law and Gospel are (at least) four closely aligned corollaries.

The first is the distinction between faith and works. To assert our works in the face of the Law's accusations is to aggravate God's righteous wrath and to heap further condemnation upon ourselves; to repent of self and trust in Christ's work not only honors the truth of God's Law, but puts an end to the law (Rom. 4:10): for faith in Christ means victory over the Law, sin and death (1 Cor. 15:56).

The second is the distinction between life under Law and life in the Spirit. Those who live by faith alone in Christ live not by the prodding of the Law, but by the power of the Spirit (cf. Gal. 5:13-26). Paul calls such a way of living freedom. "For freedom Christ has set you free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1), aka, the Law.

A third corollary is the idea that the Christian person is simultaneously sinner and saint: a sinner when measured by the works of the Law, a saint when measured by faith in the Gospel. Christians are never righteous in themselves, but only by virtue of faith in Christ. This side of the grave, Christians constantly struggle with sin (aka unbelief), and they daily experience the accusation of the law; but inasmuch as they believe the Gospel, even though their faith be only the size of a mustard seed (Mt. 17:20, Lk 17:6, etc.), they are covered by the forgiveness of sin and the righteousness of Christ, which

trumps the Law's accusation and endears them as saints, holy in the sight of God.

The fourth corollary presupposes the third corollary and relates to the role of the Law in the life of the believer. The proper distinction between Law and Gospel does not reject the role of the Law in the life of the Christian, but it does reject any attempt to fashion the Law into a source or motive for the Christian life, including the ethical life. As corollary two stated, the Christian lives by the Spirit not the Law. True, the Law performs the same two functions in the lives of Christians that it does in the lives of non-Christians: it exposes sinners (the theological function of the law) and holds sinners in check (the social function of the law). But what distinguishes Christians from non-believers (making them saints, holy and righteous in God's sight in spite of the findings of the Law) is their faith in Christ. Because of faith Christians welcome the Law's accusation for the purpose of repentance and they still support the Law in its social function to check evildoers for the sake of the common good, but they do so as people who are free from the Law and who walk in the Spirit which is freedom. As such, the proper distinction between Law and Gospel rejects the idea of a Third Use of the Law, as Melanchthon and Calvin taught, that binds the Christian life to the measure of the Law.

Throughout the Crossings website you find many articles that employ the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. Some of them explicitly explain and expand on the idea. Others simply put it into practice for interpreting a biblical text or supporting the vocation of Christians in the world. In general, the proper distinction between Law and Gospel is like a finely crafted tool whose use is refined only by practicing it. We invite you to learn more about the practice of distinguishing Law and Gospel by using the resources on this site, by receiving our weekly text studies and blogs, and by joining us in one of

our many seminars, conferences, and workshops.

Endnotes

[1] "Whoever knows well how to distinguish the Gospel from the Law should give thanks to God and know that he is a real theologian." *LW* 26:115

[2] "All Scripture should be divided into these two main topics: the law and the promises," *The Book of Concord: The Confession of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, Editors, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.

[3] See, for example, Hosea 6:6; Jer. 31:31ff, John 1:17; Mt. 9:13; Gal. 4:21ff; 1 Pet. 5:5, to name a few. Interestingly, many of the summary statements about distinguishing Law and Gospel in the New Testament are quotations from the Old Testament.

[4] See, especially, Augustine's *On the Spirit and the Letter* in which he sets forth the distinction between of Law and Gospel as the heart of Paul's theological method and the basis of his critique of Pelagianism.

[5] No twentieth-century theologian pounded home the importance of affirming a substantive distinction between Law and Gospel more than Werner Elert. This he did to counter what he saw as major deficiency in Barth's theology and Barth's assertion that the distinction between Law and Gospel is merely a semantic one. See especially, Werner Elert, *Law and Gospel*, translated by Edward H. Schroeder, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967, p. 5.