

A Stab at Describing the Law/Gospel Distinction

Colleagues,

First came America's Thanksgiving—a Thursday holiday, for those of you in other lands—and then a week more filled than usual with demands of the regular calling. So again you saw a gap in posts. Your editors, grappling with the fullness of life on the one hand and their limitations on the other, have been mulling on the notion of moving from a weekly to a monthly schedule, no longer Thursday Theology, but Third Thursday Theology. That may well be in the offing, especially as one of us prepares for her first child, due early in 2015. For now, we'll stumble on as best we can, with weekly posting as our aim. I'm pleased to suspect that we'll be able to keep that going through most of January, though if all you get two weeks from now, on Christmas Day, is the undersigned's sermon from the night before, don't be surprised.

This week and next we're sending you a piece that Steven C. Kuhl has been working on for a few months. It's meant eventually for the Crossings website, as a description of the principle that governs the work that appears there. Most of you know it well, the distinction between Law and Gospel, or to get fussy about it, the *proper* distinction between those two, the universe of theological discourse being rife with distinctions that are downright improper. One takes it for granted that many who visit a site like Crossings will have been steeped in impropriety, and charity suggests that one be proactive in addressing their disappointment when they fail to find the clues they seek for pleasing God by obeying Moses. So much the better if we can help them grasp why they're getting their noses rubbed

in Christ.

In any case, that's the challenge Steve is taking on, with a 2015 audience in mind. I mention the latter, because audiences change. If the minds of people today still ran smoothly in channels familiar to Americans of the nineteenth-century Midwest, we could simply slap [C. F. W. Walther's estimable theses](#) on the website and let it go at that. (For what it's worth, I have yet to see anybody address the rampant misery of faith-as-work—"Do you *really* believe?"—with the pithy clarity that Walther achieved in Thesis XIV.) But that was then, this is now. Confusion about the Word of God and how to hear it keeps bubbling up with fresh angles, twists, and improprieties, and, in that bubbling, keeps inviting fresh accounts of how to hear the Word well, in a manner that results in the objectives God has for it.

Steve's fresh account comes to you in two parts. The first is a synopsis of sorts, or as Steve calls it in the provisional draft he shared with us, the "Simple Version." Next week we'll send you the "Fuller Version." In both cases, and with Steve's consent, we invite comment and reaction, and not only from those of you who wallow in theological literature and argument as pigs do in mud, but even more from those of you who do not, and wouldn't know Barth from Boethius. ("C'mon, we're lay people!" Answer: indeed you are, and you're also among the colleagues in this grand adventure of delivering Christ and his benefits to people who need them.)

So for all of you, the question—a key question, because the matter at stake is *the* key matter, the one that drives whole the Crossings project: is Steve clear? Do you follow what he's saying? And after that a second question: did you catch yourself itching to argue with him at any point, or even wanting merely to put up your hand and grab his attention, and if so, where,

and why? Do give thought to that, please, and then get back to us. Your responses will be gladly received and much appreciated as the work of polishing goes on.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

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

Simple version:

The “proper distinction between Law and Gospel” refers to a theological rule of thumb or interpretive insight for understanding the workings of God in the world. It asserts that God operates in two distinct ways: Law and Gospel. The Law refers to that activity through which God both places demands upon us (summarized by Jesus in the two love commandments: love of God and love of neighbor) and evaluates us in accordance with those demands. Those who fall short of God’s demands are described as “sinners” and inevitably reap the due consequences of that judgment. The Gospel, by contrast, refers to that activity through which God graciously promises to reconcile sinners to himself by joining them, through faith, to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Trusting this promise of God in Christ, sinners are adopted as children of God, regarded as holy and precious in God’s sight for Christ’s sake, and made new creatures by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The proper distinction between Law and Gospel is the insight that informs both a faithful interpretation of Scripture and an honest understanding of the Christian life. It has its roots in Jesus’ own teaching as expressed in the New Testament Gospels and is the organizing insight of the Epistles as they seek to

ground and clarify the Christian Message for the early church and its heirs. Throughout history this rule of thumb has emerged to guide the Church when it found itself adrift on choppy theological seas: whether it be Irenaeus against the Gnostics, Athanasius against the Arians, Augustine against the Pelagianists, Luther against the Neo-Pelagianists, Walther against the New Measures, Elert against the Barthians or Bonhoeffer against the pseudo-Lutherans. The Crossings Matrix is offered as a methodological tool to help Christians practice the art of properly distinguishing Law and Gospel as they wrestle with Scripture and think about their own vocation as Christians in the world.

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