

# C.F.W. Walther On Law and Gospel Toward a Revival of Lutheran Hermeneutics

Robert W. Bertram, Paul G. Bretscher, Albert G. Huegli, O.P. Kretzmann, Edward H. Schroeder, John Streitmeier<sup>11</sup> (This typist was able to distinguish only those items written by Bertram and Schroeder. After each thesis, the writer is indicated.)

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*(Editor's Note: This month marks the 100th anniversary of the death of C.F.W. Walther, first President of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod and one of the giants of American Lutheranism. To commemorate the centennial, the Cresset is pleased to reprint the following essay, which first appeared on these pages in March, 1962, under the title, "The Orthodox Teacher and the Word of God." We do so in the deep conviction that Walther and his theological emphases still have much to offer us perhaps especially at this critical turning-point in American Lutheranism.)*

## PREFACE

(O. P. Kretzmann)

There is nothing more exciting in the world than the disinterment of a doctrine which has been lost in the dust of history and now suddenly reappears, a voice from the past, to speak to a new age with curious relevance and power. This some

of us at Valparaiso University discovered several years ago when we began to look again at the famous theses and lectures of C.F.W. Walther on "*Gesetz und Evangelium*."

One reason for our interest in this voice from a quiet classroom in St. Louis almost a century ago was the fact that the first scholarly work to emanate from our newly acquired University in 1927 was a translation of these thesis and commentaries by the sainted Dr. W.H. T. Dau, the first Lutheran president of the institution. We are his successors and we want to stand where he stood. Beyond this personal reason, however, there was the dawning realization that in these theses there was something which the Lutheran Church had seemingly forgotten and certainly under-emphasized. In the place of the scriptural truth contained in them much of Lutheranism had succumbed to a completely alien fundamentalism, a shallow moralism, and a painful parroting of old words and phrases which had never passed through the purging fires of hard study of the Word of God. There was still power, we felt in the old ways and the old paths of the classic Lutheranism which rang through Walther's theses. It is no accident that the last twenty- one of them began with: "The Word of God"...

In these bewildered days all of us are concerned about the state of the Church. Following Luther and Walther we at Valparaiso University feel that that state of the Church is to a very high degree dependent on the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. This is the heart of our problem. Those who find it elsewhere no longer share the concern of our fathers.

The proper distinction between the Law and the Gospel is in Walther's own words our "second most important doctrine." Justification by faith comes first, but it is never vitally understood unless we use the sharpening and clarifying principle of Law and Gospel in our interpretation of Calvary. We must

always begin and end with the Gospel, and the Gospel begins and ends with the Cross. This is the magnificent “Einmaligkeit” of the Christian faith. The doors of Heaven have handles only on the inside. The distinction between Law and Gospel is the Lutheran description of the way in which these doors are opened and closed. By the proper distinction between the Law and the Gospel the centrality of justification by faith is maintained. As we have seen again in recent years, any other emphasis leads only to bitter controversy and tragic confusion.

To use another picture: If we compare doctrine to a wheel in which all of the doctrines are spokes radiating from the central doctrine of justification, then the distinction between Law and Gospel may be described as the rim which holds each spoke in place and keeps it oriented to the center.

Our studies have persuaded us again that here we are standing in an unbroken Lutheran line which extends back from Dau and Walther to the orthodox theologians of the preceding centuries and the Confessors of our days of early glory. For example, Walther quotes Gerhard: “The distinction between the Law and the Gospel must be maintained at every point. Remember this well – *at every point*. There is no doctrine which does not immediately require us to properly divide Law and Gospel.” There is much evidence that Walther’s burning concern for orthodoxy has survived, especially in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. There is much less evidence that his definition of orthodoxy remains the standard by which orthodoxy is evaluated. The very fact that it is quite fashionable to discuss theological problems of all kinds without any reference to the doctrine of justification – the love of God in Jesus Christ – indicates that we have come a far way from the Friday evenings in St. Louis in 1880. And so it has become possible for brethren to separate in the dark atmosphere of misunderstanding, confusion, and error. Still gathered around the Cross, they turn away from it and from

one another because our own darkness at noon has hidden the lifting and lighting glory of Jesus Christ.

With the publication of these theses and the commentaries written by various members of the University we hope to make our own small contribution to the sesquicentennial of Walther's birth. It is our hope, too, that the study of these great principles will persuade many of our brethren to look again to the rock from which we were hewn. Here there is no slanderous controversy and no reviling of brethren but only the green, peaceful pastures of the Word. To be sure, these theses contain a polemical principle, but the weapon they give us is fashioned by the majesty and mercy of God and not by human opinion and sub-scriptural theories. Clinging to these truths the Church will never be broken by the humanness of the Church Militant; and as a truly charismatic Church will become once more, in the words of St. Augustine, "a heavenly city which has truth for its king, love for its law, and eternity for its measure."

## THESIS I

**(Robert W. Bertram)**

*The doctrinal content of the entire Holy Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, consists of two radically different teachings, the Law and the Gospel.*

The problem, says Walther, is this: The Bible, more than any other book, seems full of contradictions. It seems to contradict itself not merely at the edges but at its center: How can we be saved? For instance, the Bible reveals the King who mercifully "forgave you all that debt." Yet the same King withdraws His forgiveness because "you do not forgive your brother from your heart." Does the King forgive freely or only conditionally? On the one hand, "God who is rich in mercy loved us even when we

were dead to trespasses.” On the other hand, “blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy.” Which is it? Merely to answer, both passages are biblical and therefore true, only tightens the tension. To solve the riddle we must remember that Scripture contains two radically different doctrines, Law and Gospel.

What distinguishes Scripture as Law from Scripture as Gospel? Is one human and the other divine? No, they are both the Word of the living God. Is this the difference: The Gospel is necessary, the Law may be dispensed with in a pinch? No, both are indispensable to each other. Without the Law the Gospel is unintelligible, without the Gospel the Law is unconstructive. Perhaps Law is the Old Testament, Gospel is the New? No, both Law and Gospel are in both Testaments. Then what differentiates them must be their different goals: Law is for condemnation, Gospel is for salvation. No, that is not the difference either. True, the Law condemns and does not save. But its condemnation should prepare men for the Gospel, for salvation.

Still, the Bible as Law differs radically from the Bible as Gospel. The Bible itself reflects their differences. For one thing, see how differently the Scripture says Law and Gospel are revealed. The revealed Law (say the Decalogue) people find familiar. It sounds like something they have heard before, at work in their own hearts, “their conflicting thoughts accusing or perhaps excusing them.” Not so with the Gospel. This is “the mystery which was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed.”

Or see how Scripture distinguishes the demands of the Law from the gifts of the Gospel (“Thou shall love the Lord thy God” – “God so loved the world that He gave...”); the conditional promises of the Law from the unconditional promises of the Gospel (“Do this and you shall live” – “By grace you are

saved"); the threats of the Law from the comfort of the Gospel ("Cursed is he who confirms not all the words of the Law to do them" – "Come unto Me and I will give you rest"); the death of the Law from the life of the Gospel ("When the commandment came, sin revived" – "created in Christ Jesus unto good works"); the candidates for the Law from the candidates for the Gospel ("The Law is not laid down for the just but for the sinners" – :He has sent Me to preach the Gospel to the poor,...the heart-broken,...the captives,...the blind,...the bruised.")

## THESIS II

(Edward Schroeder)

*No one is an orthodox teacher simply because he presents all the articles of faith according to Scriptures. An orthodox teacher must also properly distinguish the Law from the Gospel.*

Orthodoxy means correct doctrine. For Lutherans there is ultimately only one doctrine, justification by faith for Christ's sake through the Gospel. To keep this doctrine distinctive is the life's work of the orthodox teacher. Therefore the truly orthodox teacher must distinguish the Law from the Gospel in order to keep this one doctrine distinct as he goes about his business of teaching all the articles of faith according to Scripture.

Accepting verbal inspiration says nothing, in itself, about the orthodoxy of a teacher. Pharisaic Judaism and Roman Catholicism assert as fully to the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures as does any Fundamentalist, but neither has been orthodox in its proclamation of the one doctrine of Christ which alone comforts sinners.

The orthodox teacher, therefore, subjects even so familiar a

proposition as this, that everything in Scripture is an article of faith and must be believed, to the test of the principle set forth in this thesis. Scripture clearly states that “the soul that sinneth, it shall die.” It states just as clearly: “He that liveth and believeth in me shall never die.” To apply the same rubric – “teachings found in inspired Scripture” – to both of these statements is to become guilty of what Walther calls confusion, a fusing together of diverse elements which ought to be kept distinct. The Gospel of Jesus Christ, a message wholly unique in itself, can not be fused together with any other word of God (the Law) or any word of man. It is not merely one of the many truths that the Scriptures teach. It is not even one of the two equally important Scriptural truths. It is “*the power of God unto salvation*” and, as such, must be kept distinct and unalloyed.

## THESIS III

*Properly distinguishing the Law and the Gospel is the highest and most difficult art of Christians in general and of theologians in particular. It is taught only by the Holy Spirit in the school of experience.*

Coming immediately after Walther’s definition of an orthodox teacher, this thesis warns us that orthodoxy is a goal toward which the Christian pastors and teachers strive, rather than an achievement upon which they rest. It is the result of a long lifetime of work and study and suffering, not a thing which any confirmand or seminarian may get easily and cheaply at confirmation or at graduation from a seminary or even from the laying on of hands at ordination.

Until a man has experienced in his own heart the full judgment and condemnation of the Law and the healing power of the Gospel, he has not “spiritually discerned” the Scriptures. And as he

wrestles in agony with the Scriptures, he will welcome all the assistance and illumination he can get both from traditional formulations of their teachings and from all studies which add to his capacity to understand, experience, and proclaim the Word of God.

For the pastor or teacher, the decision as to whether a particular statement in Scripture is Law or Gospel meets its ultimate test in the use to which the Holy Spirit puts it in His dealings with men. If it drives men to despair, it is Law. If it conveys the forgiveness of sins, it is Gospel. But it does neither of these in the abstract. Neither Law nor Gospel can be preached effectively unless one knows to whom he is speaking and what it is they need to hear. The ability to distinguish between surface appearances and the real needs of men's hearts comes only with experience in dealing with real people who have real problems. In the process of developing this ability every Christian, especially the pastor or the teacher, will make mistakes. He is entitled to expect that, when his brethren overtake him in an error, they will properly distinguish between Law and Gospel in their dealings with him.

## THESIS IV

*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.*

Walther perceived a danger confronting the church in his time. "May God who has kindled this light for us also preserve it," he said. "I am thinking particularly of you when I say this. We, who are old, will soon be in our graves. The light began to shine once more in our time. See to it that it does not go out again."

The “glorious light” in Walther’s thesis is very necessary for any understanding of Holy Scripture. Technical and philosophical discussions of “inerrancy,” “truth,” and “contradictions” can generate far more heat than light. Apart from the context of Law and Gospel, we cannot even rightly know what Scripture says about itself.

Scripture must be read for what it is – God’s stern message of Law and God’s comforting assurance of His love in Jesus Christ our Savior. Not all of Scripture is Law, for that would deprive it of the joy and hope for which we prize it. Not all of Scripture is Gospel for that would reduce its impact upon complacent hearts which, ignoring God’s Law, would treat the good news of God’s love with contempt. Neither is the Gospel of Scripture to be made into a club like the Law, nor the Law to be made into a new grace or way of salvation. Confusing the two would surely result in undermining the effect which Scripture must have on the hearers of the Word. In such confusion, even when Scripture is carefully read, it remains a closed book. Its message cannot be understood.

The Bible must be accepted for what God intends it to be – His *errorless* Word. It is written in men’s language with men’s grammar by human penmen. The ultimate author is God. Some Biblical statements are hard for finite minds to grasp. But the truths of God’s Law and Gospel are clearly stated. The clear passages must be permitted the role of interpreter for all of Scripture.

Both Law and Gospel are found in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. Law and Gospel may sometimes even be found in the same passage. But the great purpose of all Scripture is to bring men to the knowledge and appreciation of God’s love for them in Christ. Thus Scripture becomes “profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that

the man of God may be perfect..."

## THESIS V

*The first method of confusing Law and Gospel is the most easily recognized and the grossest. It is the method of the Papists, the Socinians, and the Rationalists. Christ is made over into a new Moses or Lawgiver and the Gospel becomes a teaching about good works. At the same time those who proclaim the Gospel of the free grace of God in Jesus Christ are condemned and anathematized, as the Papists, for example, do.*

So close does this proposition lie to the core of the Reformation controversy concerning the Gospel, that no pastor in our church will fall overtly into this kind of error. Yet the temptations to distortion are sufficiently seductive that a constant wrestling with the Word and self-judgment on our own preaching are called for.

Our willingness at times to inject the term, "Romanizing tendency," into the arena of liturgical controversy suggests that we may be losing sight of what the concern of the confessions for "Romanizing" really is, namely, the misunderstanding of the Law as Gospel, or of the Gospel as Law.

Suppose, for instance, that we feel called upon to urge our people not to externalize their religion and obedience into a mere formalism "as the Pharisees, Catholics and some Lutherans do," for this readily becomes salvation by works. So far so good. But what is the alternative? If we now suggest the need for a "faith that works by love," if we assert that genuine love eliminates the superficiality of the formal and becomes concretely helpful to the brother – have we then preached the Gospel?

The fact is that love or even faith, so demanded as the prerequisite for the truly Christian work, is only more *Law*, and like all Law its net effect is wholly condemnatory. Lutheran preaching is alert to this. It can exploit the condemning reality of man's incapacity to love. But it always returns to the Gospel, to the transforming dynamic, the new life, the dignity and joy of free sonship which is ours by baptism in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins. To make this continually alive and relevant is both the agony and the joy of the preacher.

Anything less than this is mere moralizing. It reduces the Gospel to a teaching about good works. It obscures the full condemnation of the Law. However true and strong the accent on love and its effects may be in itself, it leaves the net impression that Jesus' achievement was to revitalize the Law with the motivating force of love, and that His own perfect demonstration of this summons us to this kind of obedience. Thus Christianity becomes a form of humanism, and Christ is robbed of His honor as Savior.

## THEESIS VI

**(Robert Bertram)**

The Word of God is not properly divided: 2) when the Law is not preached in its full sternness and the Gospel is not preached in its full comfort but, on the contrary, Gospel elements are mixed with the Law and Law elements are mixed with the Gospel.

The theory of this thesis is easily stated. Its practical application is considerably more difficult. Walther himself rejected the topographical division of the sermon into one part Law and one part Gospel. He recognized that a single sermon could contain both Law and Gospel. In spite of all his clear

theory, however, Walther's own sermons frequently divide Law and Gospel topographically or even contain no Gospel at all. And Walther's practice has at this point at least found as many followers as his theologically more sophisticated theory. It is only a step from this topographical method to the equation of Law preaching with hell-fire and damnation preaching. And Walther's own comments on the preaching of Law have paved the way for that equation in a way that Walther consciously rejected.

The purpose of the preaching of the Law is not to make people think that they are worse off than they really are. It is not even to make them feel bad. The preaching of the Law prepares the hearer for the Gospel by showing him his need. Law preaching at its best shows a man to himself as he really is. The Law does not create a new situation in the life of the hearer; rather it reveals the existing situation. One of the most effective barriers to the proclamation of the Gospel is the hearer's pride in what he is and does. This may be pride in his good works; it may also be pride in his contrition and godly sorrow. As the Law exposes this pride its function may be compared not only to radical diagnosis but also to the surgical knife. It leaves neither proud self-confidence nor masochistic self-abasement untouched. At its best the preaching of Law touches each of us at the point where our own ignorance and distrust of God are the basis of our existence. The Law's revelation of the false center of our existence results in anxiety and terrors of consciences, both in the unregenerate and in the Christian man.

The evangelical preacher can and must touch on the sore spot of sin which lies within each of us in order to give us a new kind of existences at precisely that point through the comfort of the Gospel. He can dare to expose the most basic anxieties and to allow all the terrors of conscience to become conscious because he has a Gospel which overcomes each and all of them by creating

a new existence in his hearer through the forgiveness of sins.

There are two dangers here. One is that the preacher does not speak the Law directly to the hearer where he is. The preacher may even evade the Law because he is afraid to deal with the sins that are actually troubling the hearer. The other is that he finds it easier and more popular to really "give 'em hell" about sins which are obviously not problems in his congregation. In the latter case he may even succeed in inducing a vicarious satisfaction in this participation in the condemnation of sin. He cannot, in either case, work that repentance in which faith comes into existence.

Whichever road is chosen, the real tragedy is that the full comfort of the Gospel is not preached to people in their sinfulness. The preaching of the Gospel is meaningless to the unrepentant and the preaching of the Law has no value in and for itself but only as preparation for the proclamation of the Gospel. The preacher whose insights into the sinfulness of his hearers are shallow cannot possibly show deeper insight in his proclamation of their forgiveness.

## THESIS VII

(Edward Schroeder)

*The Word of God is not properly divided: 3) when the Gospel is preached before the Law; when sanctification is preached before justification; when faith is preached before repentance; when good works are preached before grace.*

The distinctiveness of the Gospel depends on its placement in the actual presentation. Numerous recent catechetical instruction materials, when weighed by this thesis, are found wanting. In some of them the Ten Commandments are presented with

“positive” meaning – a model of minimum moral instruction. When this is done, and the Commandments are still left at the beginning of the catechism, the catechumen is being taught sanctification before justification, good works before grace, Gospel before Law.

Other catechetical manuals apparently circumvent this danger by putting the Decalogue last in the sequence as a teaching of the fruits of faith. Baptism or the Creed then frequently moves into first place. But this falls under Walther’s strictures against faith before repentance.

Walther, like Luther, has theological reasons for his conviction that the Decalogue must come first and remain Law. Since neither the Decalogue nor Luther’s explanations of it mention Christ, they can hardly be Gospel. For the catechete who has forgotten why the Decalogue must come first and come as Law this constitutes a temptation to “improve” on this chief part by making it “more evangelical.” But actually this only dilutes the Decalogue and, worse yet, diminishes the extent of sinfulness which the genuine Gospel, can forgive. To inject or to discover something “positive’ in the Law is to remove some of the positive comfort of the Gospel, to diminish and detract from the merit and benefits of Christ.

The fact that catechumens are spiritual children does not mean that the Decalogue must be handled with kid-gloves for them. We know no alternative for leading children (and adults) to repentance except the one way Christ led all to repentance, i.e., by radical confrontation with the one central commandment in each part of the Decalogue, to wit, “You ought to bear and love and trust God 100 per cent, but you don’t.”

By deadening the Decalogue, we weaken the Gospel. While we may say that we are giving spiritual milk to infants, it may

actually be chalk-water and ultimately deadly. For before very long the catechumen discovers that God's Law gets at him anyhow and exposes his worry, unbelief, personal hatreds, even his hatred of God. When forced to face up to the severity of the Law as it actually does its condemning work on him, he despairs, for the Gospel he has learned to believe is not big enough to take care of this sever accuser. The hallmark of the maturing Christian is his ability to face up to the *full* severity of the Law because the greater good news of the Gospel is that, when a man is in Christ, even this great accuser cannot ultimately get at him.

## THESIS VIII

*The Word of God is not properly divided: 4) when the Law is preached to those who are already in terror on account of their sins or the Gospel to those who live securely in their sins.*

So does this mean that every Christian must be a clinical psychologist? How can the untrained person distinguish between a genuine conviction of sin and a guilt complex? How can anyone look into another man's heart and determine whether he is a true child of God or a hypocrite?

"The Lord knoweth them that are His" – and we do not. And yet we must, in our preaching and teaching, proceed from some assumption about the spiritual health of those with whom we deal. We ought, therefore, to be grateful for any tool, any method, that enables us to base our diagnosis of a man's condition on something more substantial than mere hunches. We should eagerly appropriate to our Lord's service whatever insights secular science may offer us into the complexities of man's mind and behavior.

The Law is intended to serve as a schoolmaster to bring men to

Christ, as dynamite to blast the hardened sinner out of his security. But appearances are often deceptive. Apparent hostility to Christ and to the Gospel may be the mask of a terrified heart, while a pious “front” may conceal the heart of a Pharisee. Following the example of his Lord, the evangelical pastor or teacher must know when to speak forgiveness to publicans and harlots and to denounce the sins of scribes and Pharisees.

We must, of course, reject any notion that the strong medicine of the Word is intended merely to produce well-adjusted personalities or to create peace of mind in sinners who are not at peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. But above all we must remember that the medicine of the Word is strong – strong enough to kill if it is improperly prescribed.

## THESIS IX

*The Word of God is not properly divided: 5) when sinners who have been struck down and terrified by the Law are directed, not to the Word and the Sacraments, but to their own prayers and wrestlings with God in order that they may win their way into a state of grace; in other words, when they are told to keep praying and struggling until they feel that God has received them into grace.*

In Walther’s opinion, this thesis was one of the most important in the entire series. Here we must examine our concepts of “faith.” Do we know what “faith” means, and how it is called forth?

Lutherans and Reformed are in outward agreement on the doctrine of justification. They point to Christ as the Savior of all mankind. But Lutheran and Reformed differ in their attitude toward the means of grace. To the Lutherans, saving faith is

wrought by the means of grace – the preaching of the Gospel and the administering of the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Their effectiveness does not depend upon human efforts at all. Many of the Reformed sects teach differently. They would have the sinners who truly confront their sin writhe in agony and utter sighs until they think they have experienced forgiveness. As soon as we direct people's attention to their own feelings and away from what God is doing for them through the means of grace, we are confusing Law and Gospel.

Walther felt that this error was common to the Reformed of his day. That is one reason he devoted five lectures to this one thesis. But our own times have seen the perpetuation of the error. Apparent agreement between Lutherans and others on certain doctrines like justification or inspiration of Scriptures provides a simple excuse for overlooking fundamental differences. Those who teach that the way to salvation is self-abasement and self-conscious breast-beating are misguided guides. Those who encourage sinners stricken by the Law to purge themselves until they feel clean again in God's presence are placing the assurance of salvation on the precarious basis of emotions.

The truly Lutheran approach is quite different. Its emphasis is not on human resources which fail, but on divine resources which fail not. It points the stricken sinner not to the Judas-rope of spiritual suicide, but to the gracious love of God extended in Word and Sacraments.

Walther associates the error condemned by this thesis with a low opinion of the means of grace. He would not allow any depreciation of the significance of the Sacraments in favor of the Word. Those who rightly understand the distinction between Law and Gospel also understand the proper use or abuse of the means of grace.

# THESIS X

*The Word of God is not properly divided: 6) when the preacher describes faith as though the mere acceptance of certain truths, even while a person is living in mortal sins, makes a man righteous before God and saves him; nor is the Word of God properly divided when the preacher describes faith as justifying and saving because it produces love and renewal of life.*

The caution conveyed in this thesis is the more necessary in any era, like our own, in which the church wrestles for the preservation and continued affirmation of its orthodoxy. There is the danger that in the very hardening of battle lines orthodoxy becomes self-conscious, fearful for its own survival, and that it seeks security in subjecting itself to forms and definitions rather than in judging and creating them.

Anxiety for orthodoxy to the point of sterility is expressed in the confession of a pastor, "Every time I write a sermon I pray to God to preserve me from preaching false doctrine." To the extent that this kind of negative self-consciousness dominates sermonizing, one may well wonder whether "faith" has not been reduced already to the "mere acceptance of certain truths," and whether this kind of "faith" is legitimately urged as the key to the unity of the church.

Let us attempt a distinction. We ought not confuse our *proclamation* of Christ with the *expounding* of the body of doctrine. Faith is born when Christ is so proclaimed that hearts let go every delusive hope, seize Him, find in Him all good, and turn to Him for refuge in all distress. The body of doctrine comes afterward. It is the product of faith, not visa-versa. This faith alone can produce and preserve both unity and orthodoxy. It alone is qualified to formulate its confession and to declare it to today's world in the face of today's enemy.

“Faith” as the acceptance of the body of doctrine or the conviction of orthodoxy is powerless. When we think and speak thus of faith, we readily fall prey to the danger Walther cites in the second part of the thesis. In the face of the failure of such “faith” to bear fruit, we find ourselves urging upon our people what a living faith ought to be and do – as though by the warning against unfruitfulness a living and fruitful (therefore a truly saving) faith can be created.

## THESIS XI

(Robert W. Bertram)

*The Word of God is not properly divided: 7) when we offer the comfort of the Gospel only to those who are contrite out of love for God and not to those who are contrite out of fear of God's wrath and punishment.*

This thesis, despite its resistance to English translation, is still up to date. People still make the mistake of saying, as a Lutheran, theologically-trained psychotherapist recently did: “A Christian is sorry for his sin, never because he fears God's anger, but only because he regrets disappointing the God he loves.” Presumably, if some poor Christian should fret over God's wrath, the therapist assumes (as other Lutherans do who have forgotten their theology) that there is no such thing as divine wrath against sin.

But suppose the poor penitent does let his sin terrify him, what then? Well, then, the therapist concludes that obviously there must be something else wrong with the man, something else than sin. Sin, supposedly, is not that terrifying. What the man needs, it is said, is not the Gospel (that would be talking past his “real needs”) but psychotherapy. The Gospel is thus reserved only for those with a special brand of sorrow, those who are

sorry they have let God down and have hurt His feelings. But to worry about the divine wrath would be, as the jargon goes, immature and unworthy of a well-adjusted personality.

“Unworthy!” Roman Catholic theology, Walther recalls, would say that too: The penitent who repents out of mere fear is not worthy to be forgiven. His sorrow is not yet rarefied enough to merit the priest’s absolution. Instead of absolving the man, says Walther, the priest would probably advise him, “Why don’t you go to a surgeon and have your blood let? Perhaps when you are rid of your sluggish blood you will feel better.”

But Roman theology was not the only offender. Walther was at least as angered by the pietists. The too expected, as a precondition of the Gospel, a sorrow which was spiritually refined and reasonable. Craven fear, especially for one’s own neck, was still too crassly self-centered to meet their standard of genuine contrition. Today pietism only sounds more clinical: The client who is frightened by his resentment of God suffers from an “illusion” and needs first to come to terms with “reality.” (Luther, by this standard, becomes a theological embarrassment, and so do David and Peter and Paul.)

The fallacy here, whether papistic or pietistic, is again the confusion of Gospel with Law. According to this fallacy, to deserve the Gospel a penitent is first expected to have that kind of love for God which, really, he cannot possibly have unless the Gospel is spoken to him first. Thus Christ, the Friend of sinners, is reserved only for very apologetic, very mannerly sinners – a rare species, in any case.

Imagine, says Walther, how the pietists would have to rewrite the case-histories in Scripture. For example, Peter on Pentecost. He flatly accused his hearers of murdering the Messiah, and “when they heard this they were cut to the heart.”

They reasoned, "If we have done that we are doomed." They did not say, "Oh, we feel so sorry for having grieved our faithful God." Nor did the Apostle say, "My dear folks, we must first investigate the quality of your contrition, whether it stems from love of God or fear of hell." No, he accepts their repentance by baptizing them "in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins."

## THESIS XII

(Edward Schroeder)

*The Word of God is not properly divided: 8) when contrition is placed on a level with faith as the cause of the forgiveness of sins.*

The distinctiveness of the Gospel suffers in American Christianity because of this in our day. Although, as Walther says, it is unlikely that a Lutheran preacher would ever consciously acknowledge this perversion, it frequently happens that preachers who claim to be true Lutherans mingle Law and Gospel by the way in which they describe contrition. Either they say too much or they say too little about contrition.

The notion of contrition and repentance common in the piety of our people (and therefore in our preaching?) is that contrition is "feeling sorry for my sins." And for the man who cannot find this feeling in himself, who does not feel sorry, there is no forgiveness.

Ironically enough, this notion of contrition as a psychological state is basically the medieval scholastic notion which drove young Martin Luther to despair. His 95 Theses, the manifesto of the Reformation, criticize this arch-Roman tendency as enmity against the Gospel. These theses point the sinner away from his

feelings of remorse or lack of the same to the true treasure of the church, God's Gospel.

Walther reminds his hearers that there are no emotional or psychological criteria for contrition. The minimum that a man *must* do in contrition is acknowledge that God's condemnation of sinners is indeed true of him. This may be accompanied by certain feelings, but *need* not be. In fact, Walther maintains from personal experience that a man can have contrition without being aware of it.

When contrition is perverted, the Gospel is also debilitated. Frequently it is even completely circumvented with such expressions as: "If you feel sorry for you sins, God will forgive you." This sounds as though there were a necessary connection between my feeling sorry and God's *having* to forgive me – as though my contrition triggered the whole process and compelled the forgiveness.

If this were true, then the Gospel of Christ's suffering and death for me is only a part of the story. It is no accident that the Scriptures never say: Feel sorry for your sins, and God will forgive you. Rather they say: Repent and believe in the Gospel: Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.

God forgives sinners for Christ's sake, not for contrition's sake. That's the Gospel's truth.

## THEESIS XIII

*The Word of God is not properly divided: 9) when the preacher appeals for faith as though a person could make himself believe or at least cooperate in coming to faith instead of preaching faith into a person's heart by proclaiming the promises of the Gospel.*

It is no comfort to the despairing sinner to be hounded by exhortations to “believe the Bible” or to “decide for Christ” when the whole nub of his problem is that he lacks the power either to believe or to accept. Indeed, the logical alternatives of these appeals demonstrate their inherent “lawishness.” And the use of such appeals merely generates deeper despair which may finally take the form of a refusal to expose one’s self to the painful frustrations of this kind of exhortation.

The Gospel never commands; it only invites and promises. The power to accept its invitations and promises does not reside in the man who hears them, but in the Holy Spirit. Truly evangelical preaching concentrates, therefore, upon proclaiming Christ, certain that this word will not return void and that, through it, the Lord will add to His church those who shall be saved.

The man whose faith is grounded in some effort of the will or in some response of his emotions can never be free from the nagging fear that some weakening of his will or some change in his emotions might rob him of his faith. But the man who recognizes his faith as the response of the Spirit bearing witness within him to the promises of the Gospel has the certainty that, whatever fluctuations there may be in his will or his feelings, “He which hath begun a good work in him will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.” Evangelical preaching at its best directs men away from concentration on their own faith to concentration on the sure promises of God spoken to them in Baptism and in the Gospel of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

## **THESIS XIV**

*The Word of God is not properly divided: 10) when faith is required as a condition of justification and salvation, as if a*

*person were righteous in the sight of God and saved, not only through faith, but also on account of his faith, for the sake of his faith, and in view of his faith.*

Faith is not an end but a means to an end. By itself the act of believing has no intrinsic value. James said: "The devils also believe, and they tremble." Mere believing that the weather is clear does not dispose of the storms. But faith in the work of Christ is effective because it harnesses us to His power. It is the redemption of the Savior which saves us, not our strong faith or our firm convictions. Faith is important as the hand that receives the Bread of Life.

It is strange how men have distorted the place of faith. Some would suggest that God waits to save us until He sees whether we will offer Him the obedience of our faith. Walther strenuously opposed that mistaken notion. He had to resist the false teaching that the reason some are saved while others are lost is that God knew from eternity which ones would believe. It was as if the ability to believe made all the difference. Here was surely a confusion of Law and Gospel

Human ingenuity devises all manner of means to provide human beings with some credit for their salvation. Even the simple invitation to "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved" becomes distorted into an injunction to "believe, and because of your belief you will be more entitled to the grace of God." It is hard for men to confront the fact that not even the act of believing is to their credit in the balances of God. The truth is we do not want to concede that we have nothing at all to do with our salvation. Yet it is a free gift of God in Christ. That is the meaning of the Gospel. To permit ourselves the luxury of so small a contribution as our readiness to believe waters the Gospel down with our fulfillment of a requirement. And a Gospel which is watered down with even this

little bit of Law is no Gospel as God would spell it out. Neither does it provide the comfort we need. Who could tell whether we then had enough or the right kind of faith to save ourselves?

The glory of the Gospel is that we have nothing to offer, while God has everything to offer. And He does so freely when He justifies us for Christ's sake, through faith.

## THESIS XV

*The Word of God is not divided properly: 11) when the Gospel is turned into a preaching of repentance.*

One of the most difficult tasks confronting nineteenth-century Lutheranism was the resolution of this dilemma: We are supposedly saved through faith without the works of Law. The Law, however, demands faith. Faith is, therefore, a work of the Law and we are not, in fact, saved without the works of the Law.

Some Lutherans attempted to resolve the problem by denying that the Law demands faith. The Law demands works. The Gospel demands faith. This, however, resulted in a second problem. If faith is required not by the Law but by the Gospel, then unfaith must be condemned by the Gospel. Since un-faith is the basic sin, it would follow that the Gospel both condemns unfaith and calls us to repentance. The Gospel had become a preaching of repentance. At this point it seemed impossible to avoid the position of the antinomians who held that since unfaith was the basic sin, the preaching of repentance was to begin with the Gospel rather than with the Law.

The problem proved to be a most difficult one for Walther's contemporaries. Walther, however, clearly outlines the basic elements of its solution. He first establishes the fact that

faith is not our work in response to the Law but rather God's gift to us through the Gospel. He then points out that the man who does not have this justifying faith has unfaith and that this unfaith, like all sin, is condemned by the Law. The first commandment reveals and condemns all unfaith and distrust of God without offering any possibility of forgiveness or salvation from sin. The Law, therefore, knows nothing of justifying faith. The Gospel offers forgiveness but does not condemn the lack of faith in that forgiveness.

It is impossible to maintain the distinction between Law and Gospel if faith is understood as man's obedience to God rather than man's receiving the gracious promises of the Gospel from God. The same difficulty in maintaining the distinction between Law and Gospel arises whenever the attempt is made to preach the grace of God on the basis of the Commandments.

## THESIS XVI

**(Robert Bertram)**

*The Word of God is not properly divided: 12) when the preacher tries to make people believe they are truly converted as soon as they had ridded themselves of certain vices and engage in certain virtuous practices.*

True, the future pastors to whom Walther addressed this thesis were not likely to preach moralism publicly. But moralism, nonetheless insidious, might easily infect their private ministrations, especially their exercise of church discipline. Walther cites examples. A drunkard, suspended from church membership, now manages to stay on the wagon. A habitually profane parishioner, admonished by the congregation, overcomes the habit. A delinquent communicant, pastorally prodded, begins to reappear at the Sacrament. A stingy congregation, pressured

by a stewardship program, becomes generous. In the face of such conspicuous reform, the pastor is terribly tempted (and even more, his people) to equate the new look with spiritual rebirth. If he succumbs to this fallacy, he is a hireling and not a shepherd.

But spiritual rebirth there must be, if the work of a congregation is to count for anything – anything more, that is, than rotten fruit from a rotten tree, a stench in the nostrils of God. Still, to talk of rebirth nowadays would sound like a platitude. By now our Lord's advice to Nicodemus to be born again seems a truism, self-evident and hence irrelevant. Nicodemus' astonishment is even hard to imagine. It is a wonder he did not yawn and say, "Of course I must be born again, but what really counts is..." What we suppose our people need is a shot in the arm and not repentance, certainly not daily repentance. What is repentance good for? (The truth is, what is anything good for without it?) Who has time to worry about the parish's penitential life the way he worries, say, with its stewardship life? (The truth is, what is an annual pledge worth, or a debt retirement, without repentance?) Repentance? Why, there is not even a committee for that, also nothing in the budget. Does "Repent" still mean what it once did: Change your mind, replace yourself, go dead and come back alive? If not, aren't we speaking mere words when we speak of "church life?"

But where there is rebirth, by water and the Spirit, where the old man drowns and dies daily and the new man daily arises, there everything is alive and good, not only church work and sober activity but also Christian leisure and play. Walther liked Luther's remark: If Adam had retained his original innocence, he could have spent his life doing anything he pleased, fishing for trout, catching robins, planting trees. Walther dares to add, to seminarians at that: Whatever a repentant, reborn man does is godly – "even when he treats

himself to a hearty meal, eats or sleeps.”

## THESIS XVII

(Edward Schroeder)

*The Word of God is not properly divided: 13) when faith is so described – in its strength, in its conscious presence, and in its fruitfulness – that it does not apply to all believers at all times.*

The Gospel loses its distinctiveness when a Christian is described as anything more than a Christ-covered forgiven sinner. The distinction between believer and unbeliever is not the difference between saint and sinner, but between forgiven sinner and unforgiven sinner, between Christ-covered sinner and uncovered sinner. The uncovered sinner is only sinner. The believer is sinner *and* saint. The description of any existing believer must acknowledge both aspects.

The believer's life is a struggle between his two selves, and the victory of saint over sinner in him is not complete in his lifetime. Any preaching which leads him to think that this victory is or ought to be complete drives either to despair or to pride, i.e., to disbelieving the Gospel as God's true description of him. "Forgive us our trespasses" is the constant prayer of the believer, not the unbeliever.

Walther attacks the following false descriptions:

1. A Christian is free from all anxiety, doubt, and unpleasant feelings.
2. A Christian has a gentle temper.
3. A Christian is as patient as Job.
4. A Christian never commits a gross sin.
5. A Christian does not fear death.

6. A Christian is always fervent in prayer.

These exaggerated views of a genuine Christian are false and incorrect. Most Christians are excluded by such criteria, even saints no less than St. Paul or Martin Luther. Most incriminating is the fact that these descriptions exclude the Gospel – the Gospel which says that the merits of Christ are big enough to make and keep me a Christian in the face of my doubt and despair, my irritable temper and impatience, my gross sins and fear of death, and even my lack of fervency in prayer. The opposite qualities may be present in any particular Christian's life, as *signs* of God's work in him, but they are not necessary elements of the universal description that fits all believers at all times.

## THESIS XVIII

*The Word of God is not properly divided: 14) when the description of the universal corruption of mankind creates the impression that even true believers are still under the control of ruling sins and are sinning purposely.*

God speaks nothing but judgment upon those who are not in Christ Jesus. But to those who are in Christ Jesus there is no condemnation. Therefore, even though they daily sin much and, indeed, deserve nothing but punishment, it is equally true that it is not they that sin, but sin which dwells in them. The Christian's anguish is not, therefore, a kind of despair beneath the wrath of a still-angry God, but a painful yearning to be delivered from the fleshly body of death which prevents him from doing the good that he wants to do and which compels him to do the evil that he does not want to do.

Here is where Luther's insights into the Christian as a man *simul justus et peccator* (at the same time just and a sinner)

becomes a valuable guide to the evangelical preacher. The Christian as *peccator* is indeed a transgressor of the Law and must be told so. But this same Christian—*justus* because God Himself has pronounced him so—is free from both the power and the condemnation of sin. He is to be addressed as one who shares God's hatred of sin, not as a willing servant of sin.

Evangelical preaching does not attempt, therefore, by enumerating sins to drive the believer to despair. Its purpose, rather, is to warn the believer against the power of the flesh which still wars against the spirit within him, and to remind him of his need for those means of grace through which the heavenly Father has promised to renew his strength. So long as he continues to avail himself of these means of grace, it is to be assumed that he is a fellow believer, however strong the flesh may still appear to be within him. The judgment that he has become a heathen man and a publican is not properly based upon the nature of his transgressions but upon a contemptuous attitude toward the means of grace.

## THEESIS XIX

*The Word of God is not properly divided: 15) when the preacher speaks of certain sins as if they were not of a damnable, but of a venial nature.*

During Walther's early ministry in America, the grip of Puritanism had not been loosened. God's Law had many supplements supplied by religious men. The periodic revival movements frequently found their most enthusiastic response when the terrible punishments of eternity were graphically described for all sins great and small. The Romanists provided a convenient alternative for more easy-going Christians. They divided sins into those that were damnable and those that could somehow be worked out.

Now Walther was opposed to all who would teach for doctrines the commandments of men. God's Law was severe enough. But he also denounced every effort to minimize the ugliness of that which violated the holy will of God. Where God's Law had been broken, there could be no glossing over the offense. The Apostle James said that "whoever offends in one point, he is guilty of all." No human agency could relieve the burden by declaring some sins to be of no real consequence. Every sin flouts the Law, and God's justice cannot accept a human satisfaction for even a part of the wrong.

In our day the nature and consequence of sin have lost their punch for most people. Sin assumes flagrant forms so often, and the will of God is scorned so easily, that we become accustomed to wickedness. Evil-doers get by man's laws and seem to suffer no ill effects from breaking God's Laws. It is no longer polite to speak of the damnation that awaits sinners who fail to repent. The whispy illusion is held that somehow God will overlook human frailties.

But Walther's emphasis in this thesis is upon the fact that divine Law is the Law of a just and holy god. To make it less than that is to deceive ourselves. If we do not keep it, we must face the awful consequences. By recognizing the full significance of the Law in our lives, we are more ready to understand and appreciate the glorious blessings of the Gospel of Christ. Unless Law and Gospel receive their due place in our thinking, our confusion can lead to our disaster.

The joy of the Gospel is that it covers every sin, great and small. Thank God that we do not have to reckon with "venial" or small errors which we must balance with a certain amount of good behavior. We have comfort in knowing that our Lord has paid the full price.

# THESIS XX

*The Word of God is not properly divided: 16) when fellowship with the visible orthodox church is required as a condition of salvation, and salvation is denied to every person who errs in any article of faith.*

Walther's proposition is not satisfied if we merely grant that people in heterodox churches may also be saved. Any *degree* to which orthodoxy is interposed as a condition must also be rejected.

This thesis expresses Walther's concern for distortions possible in connection with what we are accustomed to call "the true visible church." Catechism question 184 defines it as "that denomination...which *has, teaches, and confesses the entire doctrine of the Word of God and administers the sacraments according to Christ's institution.*"

On this point the times demand a lively and free discussion in our church. To some this statement is a joyful and unapologetic affirmation of the treasure of our Lutheran heritage. To others, however, it appears to inject an element alien to true Lutheranism.

What the Catechism seems to do, is to make the purity and entirety of our doctrine the basis for an appeal to loyalty. This is a subtle shift, however. The call at this point is not for loyalty to Christ, but to the denomination, namely our own, which conforms to the definition. Thus an alien suggestion enters, offering a church with its purity of doctrine as an object of faith and source of security, rather than Christ alone. What is created, then, is a certain zealotry for one's own particular denomination.

How often men have said: "We are small, misunderstood,

slandered, persecuted. But we possess the highest treasure, the pure doctrine. We are the true visible church. Since any deviation from the truth of the Gospel imperils souls, we offer men their greatest security." Is this the consequence of our doctrine? If so, have we not turned men's eyes from the cross to the church, from Christ to denominations, from the Word of forgiveness to doctrinal systems free from error? Does not this obscure the Gospel and rob Christ of His honor?

The reply, of course, is that we have done nothing of the kind. By the insistence on purity of doctrine we exalt the cross of Christ as the only hope of sinners; for any perversion of divine truth at any point is a deadly dagger aimed at the heart of our faith.

But is not even this a distortion, an inversion? Does the doctrine defend the Gospel, or the Gospel the doctrine? Rather than say "Let us keep the doctrine pure in order to defend the Gospel," ought we not be pleading, "Let us cling to the heart of the Gospel. Let us magnify the merits of Christ and permit nothing to detract from His glory. Let us constantly measure all of doctrine from this core, for only so do we keep any and all doctrine pure!"

Perhaps the consequences of an insistent emphasis on this definition of the "true visible church" are more devastating than we have ever imagined. Certainly this problem merits our earnest and prayerful study.

## THESIS XXI

(Robert Bertram)

*The Word of God is not properly divided: 17) when we teach that the Sacraments save merely through their superficial performance*

(*ex opere operato*).

Walther smarted under the attack from the “fanatics.” Lutherans, it was said, like Roman Catholics, neglect conversion and rely on the merely superficial fact that they are baptized and communed. What chagrined Walther was that the criticism (much as it misconstrued the Lutheran Confessions) unfortunately had some basis in fact, among some off-beat Lutheran theologians and among Lutheran communicants generally. Walther might have felt the same embarrassment today.

Then, as now, some “high church” Lutheran theologians differentiated themselves from the Calvinists by thumping for a new sacramentalism which, alas, was neither Lutheran nor authentically catholic. They repudiated their Lutheran heritage, which, with Augustine, had located the power of the Sacraments in the sacramental *Word*, the *visible Verbum*. They disliked saying that the Sacraments, like the Word, had the power to forgive sins only through faith. They preferred to say that Sacraments conferred benefits different from those of the Word and without the Word’s strict need of faith. They claimed that persons once baptized were unalterably members of Christ’s Body and, in the Lord’s Supper, enjoyed His glorified life, independently of their faith or “unfaith” in His promises. Thus the power of the Sacraments was not the Word, and the effect of the Sacraments was not faith. This is *ex opere operato* – an act effective simply by the doing of it.

Ironically, Lutheran communicants – the very “low church” ones, in fact, who may protest the foregoing sacramentalism – come under the same condemnation. Says Walther: “Many Lutherans determine by the calendar whether it is time for them to go to Communion again, because they imagine that going to Communion is a *work* which a Christian must perform and which he cannot afford to neglect. Thus they approach the altar and eat and drink death

and damnation to themselves...It is a pity that many think and say: "I have been brought up to consider it my duty to go to Communion. If I perform this duty, then I feel sure of my salvation." This, too is *ex opere operato*.

For both kinds of "operators," the Wordless sacramentalists and the calendar communicants, Walther has an evangelical corrective. To the former he says: "It is an act of great kindness on the part of God, knowing how slow we are to trust even after we have become believers, to add external signs to His Word, for...the gleaming star which beams from the Sacraments is His Word." And to the second group he says: "The Lutheran Church regards the holy Sacraments as the most sacred, gracious, and precious treasure on earth. She knows well that God is not a mere master of ceremonies, who decrees what minimum rites we should observe for membership...The Christian Church is not a Masonic fraternity."

## THEESIS XXII

(Edward Schroeder)

*The Word of God is not properly divided: 18) when a false distinction is made between spiritual awakening and conversion; or when a person's not being able to believe is interpreted as though he were not permitted to believe.*

The distinctiveness of the Gospel is sacrificed when faith is psychologized. Both rationalism and papism have ways, which any Lutheran can easily spot, of keeping men away from Christ. But there is a more refined way of accomplishing the same end. Walther labels it Pietism.

It is not the "touch not, taste not" variety of Pietism that Walther has in mind here, but the Pietism that insists on

putting a man through the mill before it will let him come to Christ. It operates with the assumption that there are three kinds of people: converted believers, unconverted unbelievers, and a middle category of “awakened” but basically unconverted people. (This middle category consists of what many of us like to call “dead wood.”)

The New Testament will not allow this trichotomy. It knows of only two categories. “If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature”; “he that hath not the Son of God hath not life.” The New Testament knows nothing of any imaginary “middle category” of men who may be “awakened” by a preaching which requires some traumatic inner conflict before there may be a “surrender to Christ.” Such preaching is really just another preaching of works-righteousness. It makes “the struggle of coming to the faith” a prerequisite for receiving the Gospel. This is putting the cart before the horse. It is confusing Law and Gospel.

Faith does not bring me the Gospel. Rather, the Gospel summons me to faith. I do not break through to the peace of the Gospel after I have experienced some great inward conflict. Rather, after the Gospel has broken through to me, it touches off a conflict between flesh and the spirit within me. Conflict comes after conversion and faith, not before.

The pastor is up against this kind of confusion when a parishioner confesses that he doesn’t “feel like a Christian, doesn’t feel forgiven,” and therefore fears that he had never really been forgiven and that God doesn’t want him to believe. If he happens to know the word “predestination,” he may confess that he fears that he has not been predestined to salvation.

What about the man who suffers from this kind of fear? The Pietists call him a “middle man,” essentially an unbeliever. Walther insists that he is a believer, that he has faith, even

though it is a weak faith. He could comfort such a person with the reminder that the Gospel is not a matter of how I feel about God but a proclamation of how God feels about me. Faith in that Gospel, Walther maintains, is simply the receiving of this good verdict about me from God. There will always be reason for me to wonder why God should give me such a good verdict, but I can not refuse to accept it without calling Him a liar.

Merely to tell a troubled parishioner that his very concern about the problem is the best assurance that he has nothing to worry about is no proclamation of the Gospel; it is merely another subtle way of keeping him away from Christ. Concern about one's spiritual poverty is not a basis for assurance and confidence. The one basis for such assurance and confidence is Jesus Christ, given into death for his sins and raised again for his justification.

## THESIS XXIII

*The Word of God is not properly divided: 19) when one attempts to use the demands, threats, or promises of the Law to motivate the unregenerate to turn from their sins to good works and thereby become godly; or when one attempts to compel the regenerate to do good works by making legalistic demands rather than by exhorting them in an evangelical manner.*

The Law is not capable of producing good works, either in the regenerate or in the unregenerate. It can and does expose evil works for what they are and may thus, by pricking consciences or arousing fears of punishment, bring about improvements in personal and social morality, i.e., civic righteousness. Civic righteousness has its own reward, but it does not make the unregenerate man godly nor does it add anything to the godliness of the regenerate.

Thus the “fire-and-brimstone” preacher confuses Law and Gospel if he supposes that a vivid description of the terrors of Hell can frighten men into godliness, or that rhapsodizing about the glories of heaven can seduce men into godliness.

Godliness is nothing more or less than God’s approval. Behind every attempt to legislate godliness stands the ancient heresy that a man’s approval by God is determined, in whole or in part, by the verdict of the Law. This heresy is reinforced by the false notion that the success of the Church’s witness can be judged by the degree of moral improvement that it brings about in its own fellowship and in the community. Against both these heretical notions stands the harsh statement of the prophet: “All our righteousness are as filthy rags.”

The evangelical preacher “beseeches” men to good works “by the mercies of God.” God’s love in Jesus Christ is the sufficient – indeed the only – motivation to God-pleasing conduct. Good works performed out of any other motivation are offerings to an idol and come under the judgment of the First Commandment.

## THEESIS XXIV

*The Word of God is not properly divided: 20) when the unforgivable sin against the Holy Ghost is described in a manner as if it could not be forgiven because it is so great a sin.*

Are there any sins which are unforgivable? Many people think so. They feel some particular transgressions are so monstrous that God could not possibly overlook them. This is a warped idea about sin and grace, growing out of a failure to distinguish properly between Law and Gospel.

There is a sin against the Holy Ghost. Our Lord speaks of it. He says that “blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be

forgiven unto men.” That is, blasphemy against the office, not the person, of the Holy Spirit, cannot be pardoned, “neither in this world, neither in the world to come.”

What makes this kind of sin unpardonable? Walther is emphatic: it is not because of the magnitude of the sin. As the Apostle Paul says, “Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.” The reason why this sin is unpardonable lies elsewhere. The Holy Ghost works faith in men’s hearts. Those who reject the Holy Ghost are rejecting the only means by which they can be brought to faith. In this way the sin against the Holy Ghost cannot be forgiven. Whoever commits it is condemned not so much on account of the sin involved but on account of unbelief.

Calvinists, who teach that there is an eternal decree of damnation directed against some men, contend that such men cannot be saved because Christ did not suffer for their sins. They make the sin which cannot be forgiven a consequence of God’s decree. But this is not in keeping with the message of universal grace in Christ, the Gospel of the Scriptures. Those who would portray gross sinners as beyond the recognition of God diminish the full scope and effectiveness of the Gospel and exalt the Law over God’s grace.

It is the joy of the Gospel that there is no sin so great to be forgiven, as long as the sinner does not stubbornly thrust away the welcome of the Spirit. When he does that he has no means by which he can receive the blessing of the Lord.

## THEESIS XXV

*The Word of God is not properly divided: 21) if the Gospel does not generally predominate in one’s teaching.*

It is no longer death that speaks the last word, but

resurrection and life. The Law, as the proclamation of death, is assigned its place by the resurrection victory of Jesus Christ. The Law does not stand above the Gospel, nor even parallel to it. It is always subordinate, the servant. Hence, as Walther says, "The ultimate aim in our preaching of the Law must be to preach the Gospel."

This does not weaken the Law. The Law is the instrument of death and must fulfill its mission. Those who set their hope for blessings in the Law must discover that the Law turns and curses them. Those who seek justice in the Law must find that its justice is inexorable. Those who seek liberty here must find themselves the more enslaved. The Law asserts that man cannot escape God, that excuses will not deceive Him nor pious works bribe Him, that God will not be rationalized out of existence. This is the function of the Law, to confront man with the dead-end of his self-achieved ambition, dignity, and life.

In the midst of despair and death, the Gospel calls man to a new life. It proclaims to him the forgiveness of sin, confers on him the dignity of sonship of God, not as something he must win or achieve, but as the free gift of God in Jesus Christ. It summons him to let go the purposes of this world and flesh for the sake of the purposes of God; to set his hope not in the securities of this world, but in the promises of a heavenly Father; to let go his pride of self, so that Christ may be his glory. It invites him to relax his hold on this world and life, because he already possesses a new world and an eternal life which are sealed to him in Baptism, and which no force of earth or hell can take from him.

The Gospel offers him a new and unique joy. It is not the joy of being able to have one's sins and selfish pursuits now without the fear of consequences, but of being freed from the whole pursuit of the false and delusive. It is not the joy of being

able now to harness God to one's private ambitions, but of being released from one's "privacy" and of having full communication in the mind and purposes of God. It is the joy of being a son of God and living out that sonship. It is the joy of engaging in the Father's continuing battle, yet in the certainty of strength and victory already assured in the victory of Christ. It is the joy of living under grace, of experiencing the marvel that, as God has loved us freely in Christ even when we were dead under His judgment, so all the good things of this body and life with which He continually showers us are also the free gifts of His love. It is the joy of living not in complaint, but in overwhelmed thanksgiving for the abundance of His gifts.

Such a Gospel triumphs over Law. It condemns the Law, and will not yield an inch. Shall we then be ashamed of it? It seems strange to hear pastors argue at times that it is not necessary to include the Gospel in every sermon. It seems strange that the Gospel of life should ever be construed as a repetitious bore, that a preacher should feel it unnecessary to present it in all fullness and beauty because "my people already *know* this!" It seems strange that we can doubt the power of this Word to transform men's lives, and then seek to assert the church's role in society in other more dramatic terms of impact.

If there is any call in Walther's theses today, it is the call upon every minister and teacher of the Word to submit with renewed joy to all the necessary sweat and toil, the agony of prayer, the searching of the Word and wrestlings with the Spirit, to make Christ alive to the hearer, so that the Lord Jesus may meet him at his need, and summon him out of the world of illusions, despair, and death, to the new world of life, power, love, and victory.

To magnify Christ and His benefits, this is our call. This is also our privilege, our joy, and our glory.

[CFWalther \(PDF\)](#)