Law and Gospel in Spiritual Care

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The conference brochure has suggested this title as the topic of my written presentation. My intention is to attempt to respond to this assignment in a manner that may also have relevance for our discussion of Dr. Kleinhans' presentation.

In the medical community 'spiritual care' is frequently distinguished from physical medicine or care of the body, psychiatric medicine or care of the mind, as well as pastoral care. The latter is still permitted in hospitals between pastors and chaplains serving a patient that requests their service or in a religiously-affiliated hospital in which the patient at least does not refuse it. Spiritual care is often provided with the assurance that the provider will not proselytize.

This understanding of 'spiritual care' presupposes that it may be provided by Christians and non- Christians to both Christians and non-Christians. The question then is whether the Lutheran distinction between law and gospel is relevant to the practice

of spiritual care in which the practitioner has agreed not to introduce the gospel. Do the theological perspectives underlying Lutheran pastoral care raise questions that are relevant within the limitations of the practice of spiritual care? Are the questions raised by spiritual care relevant to our use of the distinction between law and gospel in pastoral care?

These are important questions to pastors because members of our congregations will often receive spiritual care independent of our pastoral care and even without our awareness. In such situations, we will probably be most helpful to our members if we are able to think of this spiritual care as a positive resource in our pastoral work.

I think that the distinction between law and gospel is a primal distinction in Lutheran theology. I follow the practice of Lutheran theologians who understood the Scripture as the norm but neither the sole source nor judge of doctrine. I follow their usual practice of beginning a systematic discussion of Lutheran theology and/or its usefulness in pastoral work by clarifying their understanding of the distinction between law and gospel. There are other forms of Lutheran theology which are validly Lutheran even though I think they are less useful. Specifically, as a would-be systematic theologian, I distinguish law and gospel in every locus of theology.

For example, I do not, on principle, participate in the current ELCA discussion of the 'authority of Scripture.' From my perspective, were I to think the topic of 'authority' a useful concept in the discussion of Scripture, I would frame it in terms of the distinction between the authority of the law and the authority of the gospel. I am a member of the ELCA which in its confessional statement in the governing documents refers to Scripture as an "authoritative source." I think that should be analyzed first in terms of the distinction between law and

gospel.

For the comfort of those who are also members of the ELCA, let me diverge for a moment by noting that the governing documents also make some four references to "pastoral care" without ever defining its meaning. Since one usage could be read to imply that we are responsible for the pastoral of the dead, we may hope that the Lutheran Confessions will remain historical documents rather than being interpreted on the basis of some later document.

I use the distinction between law and gospel to identify useful information, to organize this information, and to evaluate my work. In this, I acknowledge my use of approaches to systematic theology developed by Werner Elert.

Werner Elert's analysis of 19th century theology (*Der Kampf um das Christentum*) describes an oscillation in the relationship between theology and culture, sometimes more, sometimes less integration. The danger in diminishing integration is that theology separates itself from culture in issues related to the law and under-emphasizes those elements which provide meaningful analogies to the gospel. When we permit that to happen, we confuse the dialectical distinction between law and gospel with the differences between theology and culture, between the Lutheran Ethos and the wide variety of cultures in which Lutherans live. In the same way that Lutheran theologians have not hesitated to frame their theology in terms of the questions and concepts available in their time and place.

My understanding of the Lutheran distinction between law and gospel is that it is a dialectical distinction. Law and gospel can neither be described nor proclaimed at the same time. The task of describing them separately is the function of Lutheran systematic theology. The task of distinguishing law and gospel

in proclamation and pastoral care is the function of Lutheran pastoral care. The description of the individual and communal life that results when law and gospel are both distinguished in the church's ministry and teaching is the function of the Lutheran ethos.

Article V of the Formula of Concord distinguishes law and gospel in terms of their effects or of what the Holy Spirit uses them to do. These are operational definitions. The pastor can know the intention of the proclamation but can only evaluate whether law or gospel has been proclaimed by observing the results. In distinguishing law and gospel, process is more important than content. Distinguishing law and gospel in ministry is more important and more difficult than distinguishing it in systematics.

It would be beyond the scope of this presentation to even attempt a detailed description of how the style of theology represented by Article V of the Formula of Concord developed out of the Lutheran Reformation's response to the 15th century developments and how this Lutheran response compares to that of other 16th century reformations. The 16th century Lutheran focus on the distinction between law and gospel was displaced by the adoption of the doctrine of verbal inspiration. The doctrine of verbal inspiration seemed more relevant and useful in the polemical context of the 17th and 18th centuries. This has led, for example, to a focus on an apocalyptic style of theology with its a-historical utopian view of creation. It also appears to be the source of the current fascination in the ELCA with defining the "authority of the Bible."

By the end of the 19th century many Lutheran theologians recognized that the earlier assertion of verbal inspiration was not merely intellectually impossible to defend but was also theologically unproductive. In fact, it required theologians to

bracket out the intellectual and scientific thinking of the day in pursuing the task of systematic theology. Verbal inspiration could be defended only at the very high cost of isolating themselves from much of the world in which they lived. Many theologians chose such isolation and their history can be formulated retrospectively in terms of salvation history, rationalism, supranaturalism, and orthodoxy. Many found that they could only work in a meaningful way by choosing a new intellectual context through emigration.

Many other Lutheran theologians explored the possibility of systematic theology that began with the exploration of the Christian Faith (to use the style of theology that developed) which explored the way in which Christians could both participate in the intellectual and cultural developments of their time and remain Lutheran. The Lutheran Reawakening (*Erweckungsbewegung*) of the 19th century split along these lines.

Many representatives of this latter group focused on intellectual and cultural integration of Lutheran theology from the viewpoint of philosophy. Names such as Jacobi, Fries, Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Trendelenburg, and Feuerbach — more recently Husserl, Heidegger, and Jaspers come to mind. Increasingly however, the task of systematic integration was assumed by persons whom we think of primarily as theologians. Names such as Thomasius, Harless, Frank, Ritschl, Zahn, Harnack (Theodosius and Adolf), von Zezwitsch, Troeltsch, Gogarten, Bultmann, Tillich, Althaus, and Elert come to mind — to indicate the breadth but not define the boundaries of this movement. These theologians share an awareness of the importance for Lutheran thought of the distinction between law and gospel and the necessity of this distinction or its elements in constructing their theology. Of all those whom I have named, Elert has the distinction of being approved by many in the

United States for his Lutheranism but condemned for his theological method.

The theologian who is ordinarily identified as the first theologian in this group is Friedrich Schleiermacher. He was the first to identify his theology as a study of the Christian Faith. Coming out of a pietism that tried to merge Lutheran and Calvinist presuppositions and at first associated with the Herrnhuters, he pursued the eventually lonely path of constructing a systematic theology that would abstract from its Lutheran roots to such an extent that it could guarantee the validity of the Calvinist tradition in the Prussian Union. Disagreement with this intention that determines many of his results should not influence our appreciation of his method.

With the exception of some parts of the old Wisconsin Synod, almost all American Lutherans come out of groups that retreated to the past in various forms of pietism. I myself come out of that tradition and can not deny these roots. However, my personal experience has helped me understand that there are two Lutheran alternatives. Many of you will find it impossible for a Lutheran pastor to accept the limitations of the practice of spiritual care as I have defined. I suggest that you will still find it a useful resource for thinking about what it is that Lutheran pastors actually do.

Because Lutheran pastors are usually to some extent concerned to distinguish law and gospel, they may find interaction with practitioners of spiritual care very useful. As presently defined, spiritual caregivers do not introduce new content into the process but ideally work with the content that is already available. As pastors, we can learn a great deal about the relative importance of process and content from working within the strict limitations of 'spiritual care.' Lutheran pastors ordinarily have clear understandings of the content of their

proclamation. Conversation with spiritual caregivers may help achieve a similar clarity about process.

The discipline of 'spiritual care' can also equip us to interact more effectively with people who think of the human being in monistic rather than dualistic terms. For them, the concept of the 'soul' is no longer necessary or even always personally meaningful. To live and work effectively in the present world, we need to increasingly think of people monistically, that is, as bodies determined by human DNA that include more-or-less well-functioning brains. Increasingly, 'mind' is understood as the product of the brain in interaction with the environment. By analogy, we speak of 'spirit' as the dimension of the mind developed in interaction with the 'ultimate'—however it is defined. Lutherans have a confessional definition of 'god' in the Large Catechism that is very useful: Our 'god' is everything that we see as the ultimate source of good.

I also propose that we distinguish the present discipline of 'spiritual care' from those views of 'pastoral care' which focus on the pastor as the primary subject and on the shared religious assumptions of those involved in the process. Spiritual care is validated by its usefulness in assisting people to interpret and give meaning to their unique experiences on the basis of their own personal assumptions. The spiritual caregiver identifies the resources already present to the individual or family and assists in using those resources more effectively.

Those distinctions may also be helpful to us as pastors when we encounter and cooperate with both 'departments of spiritual care' in hospitals and with nurses, hospice caregivers, and social workers who understand themselves as having responsibility for spiritual care and even to specialize in its practice. Pastors need to understand what they intend to do and whether the results of their work can be a resource in pastoral

care. It is also possible that we may learn something from their method.

I assume that most of us have experienced the helpfulness of becoming more aware of the processes which shape the functioning of our mind and the way in which these processes have been more or less helpful in our own life. This process of becoming aware of the processes underlying our own thinking and the way in which we project our experience on to other people and to god or the ultimate may be described as a kind of 'mentalization.'

By analogy, the processes which shape our thinking about our relationship to the ultimates that we use as our 'gods' may be described as 'spirit.' Spiritual care can be described as a process of 'spiritualization' through which we become aware of the way in which we project our experiences on to the screens of our ultimates.

When I try to describe this process, I think of projection on to a screen. When I am dealing with other people I assume that there is really someone there and that the reality of the other person, the screen on to which I am projecting, corresponds as closely as possible to the reality of the screen. My life goes best when my projections are accurate. One might use the concept of a screen that already has a pattern on it and that my projection either reinforces and clarifies this pattern or obscures and confuses it.

From the moment of our birth we increasingly experience that we have needs and that many of these needs can be met only by agents outside ourselves. We need care that we are not able to provide for ourselves. We need and depend for our life on the work of caregivers. If minimal care is not provided, we can not survive. As we observe this, we see that mothers (caregivers) are engaged in an ongoing process of reading each other. The

infant can only treat the mother as though the mother is an omniscient omnipotent caregiver whose willingness to provide care varies. The infant quickly learns the usefulness of smiling and the mother tries to understand the variety of cries. In rare instances an infant is born before having developed the ability to smile. Mothering such a child is difficult. Those of us who are older and possibly eventually ourselves in need of care might also remind ourselves that it is easier to care for the older person who is appreciative rather than complaining.

Thus before we do anything, we experience that our life begins with needs and expectations. Both Luther and Schleiermacher use the example of the infant receiving care the example of 'faith.' Life begins with the experience of trust and the fulfillment of promise. Receiving care generates the expectation that care will be provided even when we have no capacity to conceptualize the care that is needed. Any definition of the care we need is shaped by the experience of being cared for. Over time, the child learns that mother is not perfect and responds more or less positively to various kinds of behavior.

This primal experience of being cared for is first spiritualized as the fulfillment of a promise which becomes meaningful only as its fulfillment is experienced. In the course of life, we also experience that we are able to influence a caregiver. The usefulness of the care received is not determined by our eventual conceptualization of the promise itself but rather by the way in which the caregiver fulfills the promise…

The experience of being cared for creates the expectation of continuing care. The nature of the world in which we live makes some frustration of these expectations inevitable. The paradigmatic frustration of the gift of life and care creates anticipation that death is inevitable without providing any information about death itself. This experience projected on to

the screen of ultimate in the process of spiritualization generates the ambiguity of simultaneously being cared for by an omnipotent omniscient gracious power that is contradicted by the frustration that very soon escalates into the awareness of death.

In Romans and Galatians Paul extensively analyzes a parallel coincidence of promise, law, sin, and the resolution of their inherent tension in the early Christian trust in Jesus of Nazareth. The more I study these documents the more I understand that I can only attempt to understand these discussions on an intellectual level limited by my perspective from my own time and place. I can not hope to ever read these documents as Paul and his opponents in the Christian community understood them. No matter how accurate my knowledge of the history and language of this controversy, I can never recapitulate the first century.

In similar ways, the life experience provides output that makes a discussion of sin, law, wrath, etc. meaningful. The experience of death is instructive about this since whether I think I really know something about death or have no concept at all, whether I think I will die or live forever, it comes.

Whether my thinking about it is accurate or completely in error, it will come.

This is the perspective from which I describe my own experience. Yours may be similar or quite different. However, I can only participate in your spiritual or pastoral care if you give me some insight into your experience. What can you expect of me as a Lutheran pastor? I will try to understand how your personal experience is projected on to the screens of wrath and grace and respond in terms of law and gospel. If you are my spiritual caregiver, I hope that you will pay attention to the distinction and observe it in your response to me. You may find some other

Christian or non-Christian response helpful but do not impose it on me. Even if I ask you for something better than I already have, offer me something that corresponds to my experience rather than automatically sharing what you find helpful.

The person receiving care is always the subject of the process. Suppose that, as the subject of care, I find it helpful to confuse law and gospel. I hope that you will patiently wait until it begins to dawn on me that this confusion work very well for me and give me the freedom to become aware of that at my own pace. Then respond to me in terms of where I am rather than where you are.

As a Lutheran pastor, I can be patient. I know that the process of spiritualization will, if we both live long enough, generate questions and doubts to which the most meaningful response will explicitly distinguish law and gospel. If the subject of ministry has not come to that point, I can wait for the need for focusing on the distinction. By observing this discipline, I permit the subject of ministry to personally and not merely intellectually become aware of the usefulness of the distinction.

The dialectical distinction between law and gospel experience can be only approximated, never fully resolved either systematically or experientially. The closer one comes responding to an individual situation, the more inevitably one will fail to make the distinction perfectly. It is far easier for the systematician to describe the dialectic of the distinction than for the pastor to realize it in the actual ethos of pastoral care and congregational life.

Each individual's experience differs as do the categories in which the individual reveals this basic conflict to the caregiver. One way of distinguishing is to look at experience

from both perspectives and in each perspective bracketing out either those factors which generate mistrust or those which generate trust in God. This is quite different from providing so many minutes of law and so many minutes of gospel.

The task of the caregiver is to sort out the current experience by bracketing out either those processes which have led to mistrust of God or those which lead to trust in God both in and respond to it. Two common modes are to find the explanation of the experiential conflict within one's self. One can bracket out the experience of death and any other existential contradiction of the promise by thinking of one self as being good enough to deserve the promise and bracket out the common inevitability of death as undeserved. Similarly, one can bracket out the good experience in life as incongruous accidents and focus on the negative experiences of life as being the reward of personal failure and bad behavior. Neither position is necessarily maintained consistently or in correlation to the current experience of life.

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