

Using Law-Gospel to Interpret Scripture Robert Kolb

The proper distinction of law and gospel is a popular mantra, a much-used tool, a commonplace so common that we hardly need to stop and reflect on it. And yet it is precisely such commonplaces that we tend to take for granted. Therefore, a little practice at doing it cannot hurt since the distinguishing is a skill that we learn only in the school of experience and from the Holy Spirit. Basic to our actually putting the distinction to use is our employing it in our own reading of Scripture, and that will form the focus of our time together.

“Law” means many things, some quite benign. It is a frequently used translation of “Torah,” the general term for all of God’s instruction of his people. There are, as Luther notes in discussing such things in the preface to his Galatians commentary, several kinds of righteousness, including those expressed in ceremonial laws, civil laws, and moral laws. Those can all bring benefits of various kinds to society, church, and individuals. Gospel, too, according to the Formula of Concord, can have more than one meaning, for instance, in its usage in Mark 1:1, as a term for all that Jesus said and did.

However, when taken together, in the manner of Luther and Melancthon and their students, and placed in contrast to one another, the terms “law” and “gospel” in distinction provide a hermeneutical principle, which, as the Formula of Concord comments, is “a particularly magnificent light, which serves to divide the Word of God properly and to explain and interpret the writings of the holy prophets and apostles in their true sense” (FCSD V, 1). As a hermeneutical rule, the proper distinction of law and gospel tells us how to parse the grammar of faith. When God is at work to save, it is gospel. When God is at work to condemn, it is law. When we are receiving Christ from the Word, it is gospel. When we are being evaluated as to our performance, it is law. When the burden falls on us, whether it falls on us trying to live our humanity in defiance of God or living out our humanity with the aid of the Holy Spirit, it is law. When the burden falls on Christ, it is gospel. That is the hermeneutic of the distinction of law and gospel. At the same time these two terms also denote two ways in which God communicates with his people, about two distinct subjects: how he behaves over against sinners as he comes to us as Jesus of Nazareth, and how expects us to behave as the people whom he has created as the ones to exercise responsibility for the care of his creation. As the voices of God, as descriptions of God at work, especially in the process of bringing sinners to repentance and forgiving their sins, law and gospel perform God’s most important tasks in a fallen world.

The proper distinction of law and gospel rests on several presuppositions. The first is that the Creator who brought all things into existence is a God who likes to talk. He proves himself in the first chapters of Genesis to be a God of conversation and community. He talks his way through the entire Scripture from Genesis 1 to Revelation.

Word is his instrument, and his words of law and gospel do things. Luther’s concept of God’s Word as his active and living tool for accomplishing things came from his Ockhamist instructors. His definition of God’s Word went beyond what modern linguistic scholars call “performative” speech. It was and remains “creative” speech.

The Wittenberg professor explained to his students in 1535, as he began his decade-long lectures on Genesis, “by speaking God created all things and worked

through his Word. All his works are words of God, created by the uncreated Word.”¹ “God speaks a mere word, and immediately the birds are brought forth from the water,” he commented on Genesis 1:20. “If the Word is spoken, all things are possible.” The creatures of God, Luther believes, are “nothing but nouns in the divine language.” God’s Word is the instrument of his power. That power expresses itself in promises to his people, the professor told his students: “We must take note of God’s power that we may be completely without doubt about the things which God promises in his Word. Here full assurance is given concerning all his promises; nothing is either so difficult or so impossible that he could not bring it about by his Word.”² Throughout these lectures, as he had often done earlier, he insisted that God’s re-creation of sinners into his own children parallels this creative activity in Genesis 1.

This identity-defining Word of God was often described by the term “doctrina” in Wittenberg parlance, and modern Melancthon scholar Peter Fraenkel has called that term a “verbal noun,” that is, a term that refers both to specific content and to the action that the content demands. Both law and gospel demand proclamation, and proclamation in the sense of Gerhard Forde: the direct address, the “I-thou” confrontation, of primary discourse. God wants his Word spoken face to face, lips to ears, piercing minds and hearts in order to kill sinners and bring his reborn children to life.

It is a daring venture to try to give summary definitions of law and gospel in the sense of the distinction to this kind of group. I would like to make one observation about the law of God, his design for human living, in two dimensions, loving him with heart, soul, strength, and mind, and loving neighbor as self. We are speaking, when we speak of law in the distinction, as a law that we have said will always turn its accusing finger against sinners. Some years ago, as I was thinking of the distinction as an evangelistic tool, I realized that few people in our society stop to listen to the accusation. Another insight of Luther in the Smalcald Articles takes us to a deeper level of the law’s theological use and at the same time helps us recognize a wider field for its application with our hearers, those outside the faith and those in the daily struggle of the dying and rising of repentance. Luther noted that the law is like “the thunderbolt of God, by means of which he destroys both the open sinner and the false saint and allows no one to be right but drives the whole lot of them into terror and despair. This is the hammer of which Jeremiah speaks: ‘My word is a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces’ . . .” (SA III:iii,2).

More than just accusing, the law always crushes [*lex semper conterens*]. If we take seriously Luther’s definition of what is really wrong with human beings in sin, as he sets it forth in the exposition of the Ten Commandments in the Small Catechism, then we see that beneath or behind our disobedience against each specific commandment from two through ten lies the fundamental rejection of God, the doubt that defies God, the failure to “fear, love, and trust in him above all things.” That means that any action of the law that deprives us of the pretense that we or any other created object, human or animal, mineral or vegetable, can serve as our God, can control our lives, does the theological work of the law. It crushes our pretension, it crushes our defiance of God, it smashes to smithereens our idols of every kind.

¹ Genesis lectures, 1535, LW 1:47, WA 42:35 or 36.

² “Genesis Lectures,” 1535-1545, LW 1:49; WA 42:37,5-24.

That means that we can use the commandments to show those who cannot yet admit their own guilt that the very fact that they are victims of other people's evil actions demonstrates the inadequacies of their false gods, their need for the true God. That seventh graders make a mockery of God's gift of sex with dirty jokes invites God's accusation. That seventh graders are the object of sexual harassment by other seventh graders or eighth graders also reminds them that their ways of keeping order in their world fall short, and that they need the love and protection of their Creator and Redeemer. Whether we encounter our own inability to function well as the source of our own identity, security, and meaning for life in our own disobedience or in someone else's – in our own defiance of God, or the defiance of our neighbor that brings havoc and fear to our lives –, we encounter the crushing power of the law. That crushing power brings with it fear: fear of our own inability to control the evil within us, and fear because of our inability to control the evil that threatens us from outside.

However we are crushed, we finally, under the law's sentence, realize that death is inevitable; it is necessary. Our false gods must die, and we must die as sinners. There is no other way to receive life than through death. For sin pays but one wage: death (Rom. 6:23a). And sin is an honest employer. It never cheats its servants. It always compensates those in its employ. The law does not offer bargain rates on liberation and life. It cannot liberate us nor give us life. It can only evaluate. It can only judge. Its sentencing procedure is not complicated. It is either guilty in even the tiniest degree or not guilty. Only to the dead does God give the gift of life (Rom. 6:23b).

The gospel of Jesus Christ – and there is gospel for sinners only in the one who has assumed our sinfulness, died our death, and reclaimed our life in his own resurrection – alone makes alive. Only the Word of God created what exists, and only his Word made flesh re-creates those dead in sin into those dead to sin. The law has several uses and functions. The gospel, I have long argued, has only one use. It makes sinners who have been buried with Christ alive in him. The gospel is a single word, "Arise." Or, "your sins are forgiven you, for the sake of Jesus Christ." This word of the Lord bestows a new identity at the same time it buries the old one of sinner, rebel, doubter. It creates anew children for the family of God. For the gospel that takes our sin away, takes our old life enslaved to idols away, does not bring the former sinner, recreated through the Word of the Lord (in the flesh, in the absolution), to some neutral ground between corrupted humanity and restored humanity. It takes us out of death, into life; out of idolatry, into trusting the Creator who has come as Jesus of Nazareth and who breaths new life into us as God's Holy Spirit. In fact, I have recently come to question whether I was right in insisting that there is only one use of the Gospel since I found a passage in Luther in which he talks about two uses. Luther then explained that Christ helps sinners in two ways. First, he takes our part against God and serves as "the cloak that is thrown over our shame – ours, I say, the cloak over our shame because he has taken our sin and shame upon himself – but in God's sight he is the mercy seat, without sin and shame, pure virtue and honor. Like a brooding hen he spreads his wings over us to protect us from the hawk, that is, the devil with the sin and death that he causes. God has forgiven this sin for Christ's sake."³ But the gospel does not only speak of the forgiveness of sins. It also provides the power and strength to live as the children of God. God has bestowed this

³ WA 45,153,33-154,14.

new identity as his children on sinners by means of that forgiveness. “He not only covers and protects us, but he also wants to nourish and feed us as the hen nourishes and feeds her chicks. That is, he wants to give us the Holy Spirit and the strength to begin to love God and keep his commandments. When Christ demanded that the man give up everything to follow him (Matt. 19:16-25), he was saying that keeping God’s commandments involves knowing and having Christ.⁴ Luther’s formulation of two dimensions of the gospel’s activities illustrates his efforts to hold justification and sanctification distinct but inseparable. God’s gracious bestowal of the new life that identifies sinners as his children brings with it expectations for Christian living. The Wittenberg reformer could also talk about the Gospel of Jesus Christ as forgiving, consoling, and empowering. Luther’s functional definition of the Word of God in Jesus Christ proclaimed what Christ had done for his people “lately.”

That word, “Your sins are forgiven you,” means “take up your bed and walk” (Matt. 9:6). The gift of new life means new living. Some distinguish the forgiving use of the gospel from the empowering use of the gospel, and the gospel does indeed function to comfort us with assurance of our new identity through Christ and to enable us to live as real human beings through our new-born ability to serve and please him. But essentially it is just one simple Word from God. You are my child! We understand that he follows that up with a gentle parental “So act like it!” But the one word that bestows our new identity brings with it the expectation of our heavenly Father that we will live out our identity in the performance of his will.

There are a thousand ways to say the gospel, but they all contain the name “Jesus Christ.” God has good news for us in his creation, but for upwardly fallen sinners Jesus Christ is the name of life and salvation. The heart of the gospel he is and brings lies in the forgiveness of our sins, which is the restoration of our humanity. Believers have recognized a variety of ways of expanding on “your sins are forgiven” to proclaim the liberating power that Jesus’ death and resurrection have fashioned. But one example of a good overview of the variety of ways to talk about the Lord’s saving work is J. A. O. Preus’s *Just Words*.⁵ The liberating power of forgiveness, or reconciliation, or adoption, or atonement, resting upon what Christ has done for us, has brought us back to being real human beings. That is the identity he has given us, and from that identity flow the works that make his love and his will real in our world. But the proper distinction of law and gospel reminds us that identity and the performance that it produces are two very distinct things. C. F. W. Walther reflected Luther’s and Melancthon’s conviction that this distinction was the key to the sacred Scripture. We can test that proposal by looking at some familiar and some not so familiar passages.

We discuss:

1. John 3:14-18
2. Romans 6:1-11
3. Matthew 5:1-12
4. Micah 7:8-20
5. John 15:1-17

⁴ WA 45:153,15-154,36.

⁵ J. A. O. Preus, *Just Words, Understanding the Fullness of the Gospel* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2000).