

Textbook

Law and Gospel

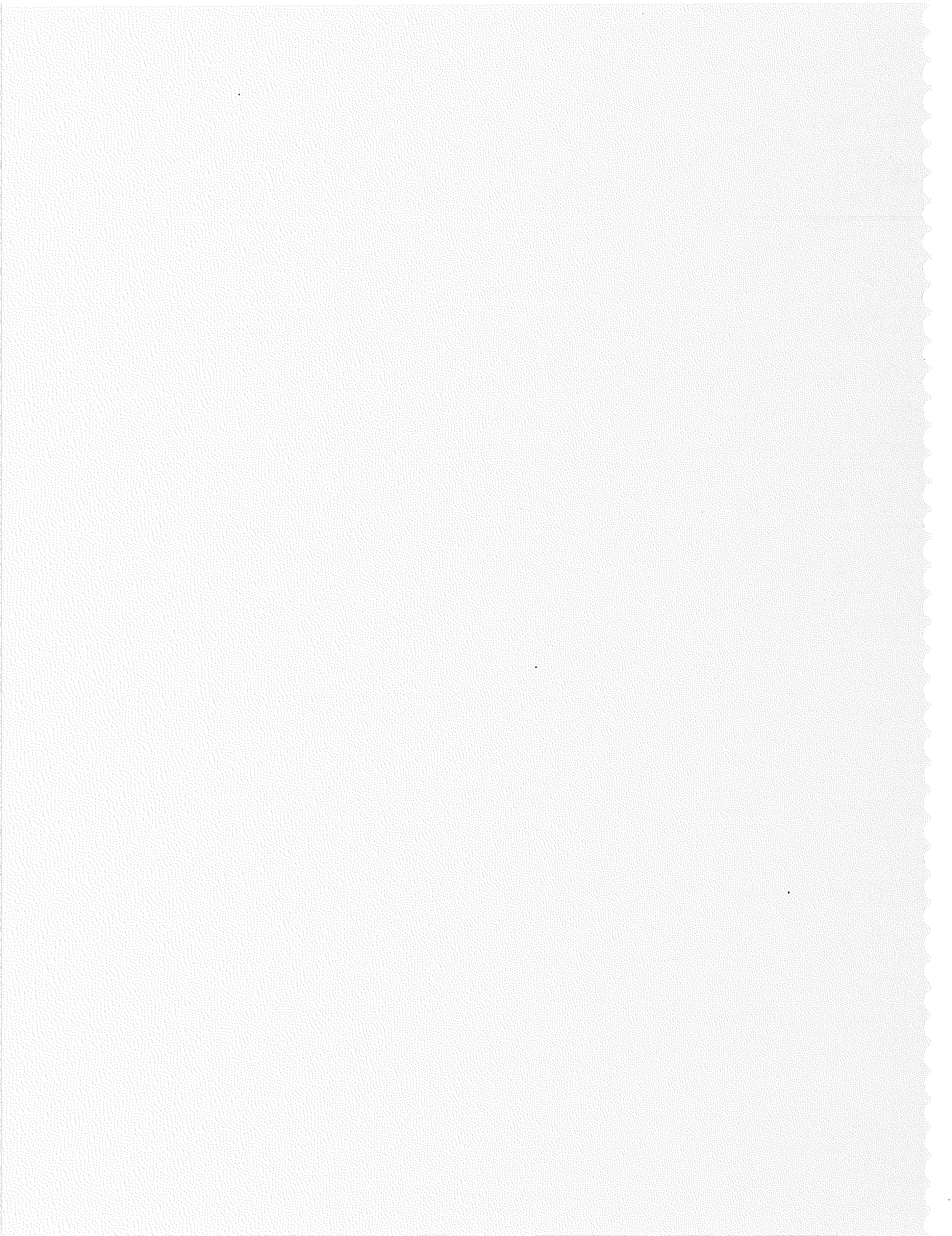
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abridged by

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Congregational
Assistant Program



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Law and Gospel

Introduction - What is the law? What is the gospel?

A. Doctor Martin Luther said, "Put the man who is able to separate the law from the gospel at the top of the list and call him a Doctor of Holy Scripture" (sermon, January 1, 1532, based on Galatians 3:23, 24).

B. In the same sermon, Luther defined the law as "God's Word and command in which he commands us what we are to do and not to do and demands our obedience or service." He defined the gospel as "a doctrine or word of God that does not demand our works or command us to do anything, but asks us simply to receive the offered grace of the forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation and be satisfied that it is a present for us."

C. Do not say that the gospel is a divine doctrine and the law a human doctrine. Each doctrine is the Word of the living God himself.

D. Do not say that only the gospel is necessary, and that the law is unnecessary. The law is not an addition that can be thrown out. Both are equally necessary. Without the law, the gospel is not understood. Without the gospel, the law does not benefit us.

E. Do not say that the law is the teaching of the Old Testament and the gospel is the teaching of the New Testament. There is gospel in the Old Testament and law in the New Testament.

F. Do not say that the law and the gospel have different final goals, as if the gospel aimed at people's salvation, and the law aimed at people's condemnation. Both have people's salvation as their goal. But the law, ever since the fall, cannot lead us to salvation. It can only prepare us for the gospel. Through the gospel we get the ability

to fulfill the law somewhat.

G. Do not say that law and gospel contradict each other. There are no contradictions in Scripture. Law and gospel are distinct from each other, but are in perfect harmony with each another.

H. Do not say that only one of these doctrines is meant for Christians. Even for the Christian the law still keeps its significance. In fact, when a person stops using either of these two doctrines, he is no longer a true Christian.

I. The true points of difference between the law and the gospel are the following:

- 1) How they were *revealed* to human beings;
- 2) Their *contents*;
- 3) The *promises* offered;
- 4) Their *threats*;
- 5) The *function* and the *effect* of either doctrine; and
- 6) The *persons* to whom either the one or the other doctrine must be spoken.

J. Law and gospel are different in how they were *revealed* to human beings. People were created with the law written in the heart. Because of the fall into sin, this writing in the heart has dimmed but is not gone. If you speak the law to the worst unbeliever, his conscience will still tell him, "That is true." But when the gospel is spoken to him, his conscience does not tell him the same thing. Instead, the speaking of the gospel makes him angry. The worst sinner admits that he should do what is written in the law. Why? Because the law is written in his heart. The situation is different when the gospel is spoken. The gospel reveals and proclaims

free acts of divine grace, and these are not obvious. God did not have to do what he has done according to the gospel.

K. The *contents* of law and gospel are different. The law tells us what to do. The gospel shows us only what God is doing. In the law we hear the Ten Commandments. The gospel makes no demands at all. The law has nothing to say about forgiveness or grace. It only commands and demands. The gospel only makes offers. It is grace and truth!

L. Law and gospel have different *promises*. The law promises everlasting life and salvation, just like the gospel. But there is a big difference: all promises of the law are made if we fulfill the law perfectly. The law offers us food, but does not give it to us where we can reach it. The law says, "I will satisfy your hungry and thirsty soul." But it is not able to do this because it always adds: "...if you do what I command."

Now look at the gospel. It promises us God's grace and salvation without any strings attached. It is a promise of free grace. It says, "Take what I give, and you have it." That is not a condition. It is a kind invitation.

M. The law and the gospel have different *threats*. The gospel does not threaten at all. It just consoles. If something in the Bible is a threat, you can be sure that it is law, because the law is only threats.

N. The law and the gospel have different *effects*. There are three effects of the law:

First, the law tells us what to do, but does not make us able to do it. Instead, it makes us more unwilling to keep the law.

Second, the law uncovers our sins, but offers no help to get out of them. As a result, it makes us despair.

Third, the law produces sorry feelings. It shows the terrors of hell, of death, and of the wrath of God. But it does not offer any comfort to a sinner.

The effects of the gospel are entirely different:

First, when the gospel demands faith, it offers and gives us faith in that demand. When we say to people, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ," God gives them faith through our words.

Second, the gospel never scolds the sinner. Instead, it takes away all terror, all fear, and all anguish, and fills the sinner with peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Third, the gospel does not require anything good that a person must give: not a good heart, not a good attitude, no improvement of his life, no godliness, no love either of God or men. It issues no orders. Instead, it changes human beings. It plants love in their hearts and makes them able to do all good works. It demands nothing, but it gives all.

O. We speak the law and the gospel to different *persons*. We speak the law to secure sinners and the gospel to alarmed sinners. We speak both doctrines, but we have to ask, "Which people need law rather than gospel?"

Read 1 Timothy 1:8-11.

As long as a person is happy while sinning or unwilling to quit a particular sin, we speak only the law, which curses and condemns. But as soon as he is scared, we speak the gospel to him. As soon as he is scared, he is not a secure sinner anymore. While the devil holds you in a single sin, you are not yet a proper person to speak the gospel to; only the law must be spoken to you. To poor, sad sinners, we do not speak a word of the law.

But it is bad for a teacher to speak the law to a hungry sinner! A Christian teacher must say to a hungry sinner: "Come! No matter how great a sinner you are, there is still room for you. Even if you were a Judas or Cain, there is still room. Come to Jesus!"

Law and Gospel

Thesis One

Thesis One

A Christian teacher tries to apply law and gospel correctly. The Holy Spirit teaches him how to do that by teaching him to understand the Bible correctly.

A. The Bible requires us to teach the pure Word of God. After every presentation, we should be able to say, "I swear that I have taught the Word of God correctly. Even to an angel coming down from heaven I can say, 'My teaching has been correct.'"

B. Sometimes a person can truthfully say, "There was no false teaching in my presentation," even when the entire presentation is wrong. To be an orthodox teacher, you must distinguish law and gospel correctly. That is the final test of a proper presentation.

You can understand this from understanding colors. When you combine blue and yellow, you get green. The color is neither blue nor yellow any more. When you combine law and gospel rather than distinguishing them, you get a third teaching that is really neither law nor gospel at all that teaching is really just poison.

C. It is wrong to speak the gospel to people who are not afraid of sinning. It is even worse to refuse to speak the gospel to people because you are afraid that they will misuse it. That is not a good reason to deprive poor sinners of the gospel. Let bad people die. The children of God need to know how near their help is and how easily they get it. If you keep the gospel away from anyone who needs to be consoled, you fail to divide law and gospel properly.

D. The doctrine of the law and the gospel is easy – easy enough for children to learn. But we are studying the *application* and the *use* of this doctrine. The practical application of this doctrine is so difficult because it is not always logical. The Holy Spirit teaches people that in the school of experience. It is difficult for Christians and especially for Christian ministers.

E. Read Psalm 51: 10-11. David prays to God for a steadfast spirit. After his horrible sins, the shedding of innocent blood and adultery, David did not feel confident of God's grace. After he repented, he was told that he was forgiven, but we do not hear that he became happy right away. Actually many of his psalms plainly show that he was miserable. When the messenger of God told him, "The Lord also has put away your sin," David's heart answered, "No! That is not possible." David knew the doctrine of the law and gospel well. All of his psalms are full of references to the distinction between them. But when he fell into sin himself, he could not apply his knowledge. He cried, "Put a new and steadfast spirit into me."

F. In Luke 5:8 the Lord comes to the disciple whom He had named Petros, rock man, and tells him and the other fishermen to drop their nets into deep water after an unsuccessful night on the lake. Peter did, probably expecting that he would catch nothing. But they caught so many fish that their nets broke. Then Peter was afraid. He thought, "God

himself must have spoken to me. That man must be my Maker. He will one day be my Judge!" He fell down at Jesus' knees and said, "Leave me, because I am a sinful man, O Lord." He expected the Lord to say, "Look at how many sins you have committed. You deserve eternal death and hell." Peter was afraid because he saw all of his sins. It was impossible for him to be cheerful and grateful. He had to drop trembling to his knees and cry to his Lord and Savior those awful words: "Depart from me, O Lord." The devil had robbed him of all comfort and whispered to him that he had to talk to Jesus like that. He expected to be killed by the Lord. He could not distinguish law and gospel. If he had been able to do that, he could have approached Jesus cheerfully, remembering that Jesus had forgiven all his sins.

G. Read 1 John 3:19-20. When our heart does not condemn us, it is easy to distinguish law and gospel. That is the state of a Christian. But he may get into a condition where his heart condemns him. In that condition, he cannot silence the accusing voice inside him. If a person can divide law and gospel correctly then, he will fall at Jesus' feet and take comfort in Jesus' merit. But that is not easy to do.

H. After Christians have learned to make the proper practical use of the distinction between the law and the gospel, they join St. John in saying: "God is greater than my heart; He has rendered a different verdict on people's sinning, and that applies also to me." You are blessed if you have learned this difficult art. If you have learned it, do not imagine that you are perfect. You will always be no more than beginners in this art. Remember that when the law condemns you, then immediately seize the gospel.

I. Like two hostile armies, law and gospel sometimes clash in a person's conscience. The gospel says, "You have been received into God's grace." The law says, "Do not believe

it; look at your past life. You have sinned too much and too badly! Examine the thoughts and desires that you have kept in your mind." Then it is difficult to divide law and gospel. When this happens to a person, he must say to the law: "Away with you! Your demands have all been fully met, and you have nothing to demand of me. There is One who has paid my debt." This difficulty does not occur to a person dead in his trespasses and sins; he hardly listens to the law. But the difficulty is quite real to a person who has been converted.

Read 2 Timothy 2:15. Paul tells Timothy to *do his best*. That shows that dividing law and gospel properly is a difficult art.

J. Read Luke 12:42-44. What the Lord calls a great achievement is not just to speak the Word of God (giving some food to every member of the household) but to give everyone his due portion at the proper time, which is to treat each one as his spiritual condition requires. This must be done at the proper time. It is a poor steward that gives the servants something and then waits for a long time before he gives them something again. He must be concerned about how much food to serve and when to serve it. The lesson of the parable is that a teacher must be good at speaking to each student at the right time exactly what is needed, either the law or the gospel.

K. Read 2 Corinthians 2:16; 3:4-6. Paul expects his qualification for this high and difficult art to come from God alone.

L. Teach the law so that every student feels: "He means me. He has pointed out that I am a hypocrite." Teach the gospel so that the penitent person feels: "That comfort is for me."

M. A teacher should understand how to describe the thoughts and feelings of every one of his students. Just presenting certain doctrines does not do that. A person may be

orthodox and may understand pure doctrine, but still not be in personal communion with God, or not yet settled in his account with God, or not yet confident of the forgiveness of sins.

N. It is also difficult to divide law and gospel properly in private counseling. In the classroom you may say various things, hoping they will strike home. But when you counsel people, you will soon figure out which are Christians and which are not. You may be deceived by a hypocrite. But if you divide law and gospel correctly, it is the hypocrite's fault if he applies the wrong one to himself, not your fault.

O. Not all unbelievers are alike. Some obviously scorn the Bible. Some only know what the Bible says and do not believe it. Some are addicted to alcohol and other drugs. Some think they have no problems. If an unbeliever becomes truly scared of God but cannot say why, you must say to yourself, "I still have to crush this person with the law." It is difficult sometimes to figure out what the problem is and to speak the law that deals the problem. Only the Holy Spirit can give you this skill.

P. It is even more difficult when dealing with believers. Some are weak, and some are strong. Some are cheerful. Some are sad. Some are sluggish. Some are zealous. Some know only a few spiritual things. Some know the deep truths of the Bible. The Holy Spirit will help you learn what to say to each of these believers.

Q. If you do not know the distinction between the law and the gospel, you will get the impression that the Bible has a lot of contradictions in it. On the one hand, we read in Habakkuk 2:4, "The righteous will live by his faith." On the other hand, we note that 1 John 3:7 says, "He who does right is righteous." Paul also writes, "All have sinned

and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by His grace, through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:23, 24). Another remarkable passage is 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, where the apostle first makes this statement: "Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God," and then adds, "And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." If you do not know the distinction between law and gospel, won't you say, "What? That is to be God's Word? A book full of such contradictions?"

It is not that the Old Testament reveals a wrathful God, and the New Testament a gracious God. It is not that the Old Testament teaches salvation by a person's own works, the New Testament, by faith. We find both teachings in the Old as well as in the New Testament. But the moment we learn to know the distinction between the law and the gospel, it is as if the sun was rising upon the Scriptures, and we see all of the Scriptures in the most beautiful harmony. We see that the law was not revealed to us to put the notion into our heads that we can become righteous by it, but to teach us that we are utterly unable to fulfill the law. When we have learned this, we will know what a sweet message, what a glorious doctrine, the gospel is and we will be happy.

R. But do not say that the law has been abolished. That is not true. The law remains in force. But we have another message besides the law. God does not say, "Through the law comes righteousness." He says, "Through the law comes knowledge of sin." Romans 4:5 says, "To one who . . . trusts Him who justifies *the wicked*, his faith is credited as

righteousness.” We are on the way to
salvation the moment we are convinced that
we are ungodly.

Law and Gospel

Thesis Two

Thesis Two

A Christian teacher applies the Word of God correctly when he speaks the law to people who are secure in their sins.

A. It causes a great deal of damage to offer the gospel to secure sinners. The gospel is not intended for secure sinners.

B. In Matthew 7:6, what is meant by “what is holy?” The Word of Christ. What is meant by “pearls?” The consolation of the gospel, with the grace, righteousness, and salvation it proclaims. We do not tell these things to dogs, that is, to enemies of the gospel. We do not tell these things to pigs, that is, to people who want to remain in their sins and are seeking their heaven and their bliss in the filth of their sins.

C. Isaiah 26:10 says that it is useless to offer mercy to godless people. They imagine either that they do not need it or that they already have all of it. They say that the little sins they are guilty of have long been forgiven. To a person like that I am not to speak the gospel. I am not to offer him mercy, because he will not be benefited by it. A wicked person, who wants to remain in his sins, “does not see the majesty of the Lord.” He does not see what a great treasure is offered him. He does not understand the doctrine of salvation by grace. Either he spurns it, or he shamefully misapplies it. He thinks, “If faith alone is all that is necessary for my salvation, my sins, too, are forgiven. I can remain such as I am, and I will still go to heaven. I, too, believe in my Lord Jesus Christ.”

D. Whenever Christ met with secure sinners like the self-righteous Pharisees, he did not have a drop of comfort for them. Instead, he

called them snakes, pronounced woe against them ten times, revealed their hypocrisy, and told them they were going to hell.

E. True, our Lord says: “Come unto Me, *all*,” but He immediately adds “who labor and are heavy laden.” Thus He serves notice upon secure sinners that He is not inviting them.

F. When people begin to sin in all sorts of ways without repenting and imagine that everybody will have to regard them as good Christians because they go to a Christian church, the minister must say, “It is time that I lay down the law to my people so that I do not live in careless ease while my people go to hell.” Then the students will be brought to the point of death so that they can be restored to life by the gospel.

Law and Gospel

Thesis Three

Thesis Three

A Christian teacher applies the Word of God correctly when he speaks the gospel to people who are terrified because of their sins.

- A. First Timothy 1:8-11 and Isaiah 61:1-3 show us that we should not speak a single word of the gospel to people who are still living securely in their sins. On the other hand, we should speak only promises of consolation and grace, forgiveness of sin and righteousness, life and salvation to the brokenhearted, not any threat or rebuke.
- B. That was what Jesus did. He was approached by a woman “who was a sinner” (Luke 7:37). In front of self-righteous Pharisees she kneeled, washed Jesus’ feet with her hot tears, and dried them with her hair. She was crushed when she came to Jesus, and there was no one to comfort her. The Lord did not say a single word of law because of the sins she had committed. He simply said to her: “Your sins are forgiven.”
- C. The Lord treated Zacchaeus the same way. Zacchaeus was convinced that he could not go on sinning. He wanted to change his conduct. Zacchaeus surely expected that the Lord would go over the record of his sins with him and show him all the evil he had done. But Jesus did nothing like that. On the contrary, in the house of Zacchaeus He said, “Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham.”
- D. The parable of the prodigal son is another illustration. The Lord describes him returning

to his father with a repentant heart after he had wasted everything he had. The father receives him without a word of law and exclaims, “Let us eat and make merry, for my son was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found.”

E. The Lord even has this attitude on the cross. Next to him hangs a criminal. The patient suffering of Christ has given him a new understanding. He says, “We are receiving the condemnation we deserve, but this man has done nothing wrong. Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” He recognizes that Jesus is the Messiah. Notice that the Lord does not reply, “What? I’m supposed to remember you? You have done so many wicked things!” Instead Jesus simply says: “Today you will be with me in paradise.”

Law and Gospel

Thesis Four

Thesis Four

A Christian teacher does not apply the Word of God correctly when he says that repentance causes forgiveness of sins.

A. Repentance, sorrow over sin, is necessary if a person wants to be forgiven. In his first public sermon, Jesus said, "Repent and believe the gospel." He names repentance first. When Christ gathered his apostles around him for the last time, he said that "repentance and forgiveness of sins" should be preached in his name (Luke 24:47). Why is repentance required as well as faith? Our Lord gives the reason in these words, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick . . . For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Matt. 9:12, 13). With these words the Lord tells us that repentance is absolutely necessary, because without it no one is prepared to be made a believer. As long as a person has not been reduced to the state of a poor, lost, and condemned sinner, he has no serious interest in the Savior of sinners.

B. But repentance is not a cause of the forgiveness of sins. There are two reasons teaching that contrition is a cause of the forgiveness of sins is a mingling of law and gospel:

C. First, sorrow over sin is an effect solely of the law. To regard it as a cause of the forgiveness of sins is the same as turning the law into a message of grace and the gospel into law – a perversion which overthrows the entire Christian religion.

D. Second, sorrow over sin is not even a good work. Repentance which precedes faith is just a person suffering. God uses the hammer of the law to cause anguish, pain,

torment, and a feeling of being crushed. It is nothing a person does himself. In fact, people want to get rid of those feelings, but cannot, because God has produced them with the law. Genuine repentance is produced by God only when the law is preached in all sternness and people do not willfully resist its influence.

E. Because of a lack of experience many Christians are afraid they might lead people to despair by speaking the law. They do say that repentance must precede faith, but they fear that someone in the church might become depressed unless they add some saving clause to that statement. For that reason they qualify their statement by saying that the pain one feels in repentance does not have to be very great, and that a person will be received by God if he only desires to feel sorry for his sins. A comforting qualification of this kind really presents repentance as the cause of the forgiveness of sins, which is a false comfort.

F. Martin Luther says that when he had grasped the meaning of the term *repentance* for the first time, no word seemed sweeter to him. He knew that it did not mean that he had to do penance for his sins, but simply that he must be alarmed because of his sins and desire the mercy of God. The term *repentance* was gospel to him, because he knew that the moment he had been brought by God to the point where he acknowledged himself to be a poor and lost sinner, he was a proper subject for the attention of Jesus and could go to Him with the assurance that He would receive him as he was, with all his sins and anguish and misery.

G. A person must not inquire whether he is repentant enough to come to Jesus. His very question about his fitness shows that he may come to Jesus. If one has the desire to come to Jesus, he has true repentance even if he does not feel it. It is the same as when a person begins to believe.

H. Others say that repentance is necessary and that their own reason tells them that God cannot forgive their sins which they treat so lightly. Then they proceed to describe what their sorrow must be like from texts like Psalm 38:6-8. Legalistic pastors will ask a person whether he can say all these things concerning himself, whether he has ever been bowed down and mourning for a whole day, whether there has been a time when his loins were dried up, whether he can say that there was no sound part in his whole body, and so on. Unless a person can demonstrate these things, the legalistic pastor tells him not to imagine that he has been truly repentant.

This method is wrong. True, the text cited describes David's repentance. But where is there a text that prescribes the same *degree* of repentance for everyone? There is no such text.

I. Keep in mind that the term *gospel* is used like the term *repentance*. In the Holy Scriptures the term *repentance* is used in a wide and in a narrow sense. In the wide sense it means conversion viewed in its entirety, including knowledge of sin, contrition, and faith. This is the meaning in Acts 2:38, "Repent and be baptized every one of you." The apostle does not say, "Repent and believe." He simply refers to conversion in its entirety, including faith.

J. The term *repentance* is also used in a narrow sense to mean the knowledge of sin and heartfelt sorrow and contrition. In Mark 1:15 we read, "Repent, and believe in the

gospel." In this statement John the Baptist evidently did not include faith in repentance. In Acts 20:21 Paul says that he had been "testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance to God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ." Since faith is named *separately* in this text, the term *repentance* cannot embrace knowledge of sin, contrition, and faith.

K. There is a similar usage of the word *gospel*. The narrow meaning is its proper sense. In its wide meaning it just stands for anything that Jesus preached, whether law or gospel.

L. Read Romans 2:16. The apostle cannot refer to the gospel in the narrow sense, for that has nothing to do with the Judgment, since Scripture declares, "He who believes in Him is not condemned" – "does not come into judgment" (John 3:18; 5:24). By *gospel* in this text, Paul understands the doctrine which he had proclaimed and which was composed of both law and gospel.

M. The term *gospel* is unquestionably used in the narrow sense in Romans 1:16. It is called, first, a gospel of Jesus Christ and then, a gospel that saves *all that believe it*. No such demand is made upon us by the law, which requires that we *keep* it. So the apostle is speaking here about God's gift to the world and of faith, that is, the gospel in the narrow sense, to the exclusion of the law.

N. Let us look at the Bible passages which refer to the gospel in the strict sense, and learn how we can tell that the word is used in the strict sense.

1. Whenever the gospel is contrasted with the law, it is quite certain that the term *gospel* does not refer to the gospel in the wide, but in the narrow sense. Read Ephesians 2:14-17.

2. Whenever the gospel is presented as the particular teaching of Christ or as the doctrine that proclaims Christ, it cannot refer to the law at the same time. Read John 1:17, Luke 4:18, 19.

3. Whenever poor sinners are named as the subject to whom the gospel is addressed, the reference is to the gospel in the strict sense. Read Matthew 11:5, Luke 4:18.

4. Whenever forgiveness of sins, righteousness, and salvation by grace are named as effects of the gospel, the reference is to the gospel in the strict sense. Read Romans 1:16, Ephesians 1:13

Law and Gospel

Thesis Five

Thesis Five

A Christian teacher speaks the gospel promises, and God puts faith into the heart of the person who hears them. A Christian should not imply that a person can make himself believe or even help himself believe.

A. You are not doing the wrong thing if you say, "Believe the gospel." That demand has been made by all the prophets, all the apostles, and by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. When demanding faith, we do not lay down a demand of the law. Instead, we issue the sweetest invitation, practically saying to our hearers: "Come, for all is now ready" (Luke 14:17). When I invite a starving person to sit down to a well-furnished table and to help himself to anything he likes, I do not expect him to tell me that he will take no orders from me. In that way, the demand to believe is to be understood not as an order of the law, but as an invitation of the gospel.

B. The error is the idea that a person can produce faith in himself. That turns faith into a good work. That would be confusing law and gospel. A preacher must be able to preach a sermon on faith without ever using the term *faith*. It is not important that his hearers hear the word *faith*. It is important that he speaks in a way that will arouse every poor sinner to want to lay the burden of his sins at the feet of the Lord Jesus Christ and say to Him: "You are mine, and I am yours."

C. Here is where Luther revealed his true greatness. He rarely appealed to his hearers to believe, but he preached about the work of Christ, salvation by grace, and the riches of God's mercy in Jesus Christ in such a way that

his hearers got the impression that all they had to do was to take what was being offered them and find a resting place in the lap of divine grace.

D. If you spend a lot of time telling people that they must believe if they wish to be saved, your hearers may get the impression that they have to do something. They will begin to worry whether they will be able to do it, and when they have tried to do it, whether it is exactly right. Anyone who has come to understand that it is up to him to accept what is offered him and actually accepts it has faith. To be saved by faith means to give in to God's plan of salvation by simply accepting it.

E. To say that faith is required for salvation is not to say that a person can produce faith himself. Scripture requires everything of people. Every commandment is a demand that says, "Do this, and you will live." Scripture demands that we "purify our hearts" (James 4:8). We are told, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light" (Ephesians 5:14). The mere issuing of such demands does not prove that man can comply with them. When a creditor demands payment that does not prove that the debtor can pay. Sometimes the creditor just wants the debtor to acknowledge his lack of ability to pay. When God gets me to acknowledge my lack of ability to believe, he approaches me with the gospel.

Law and Gospel

Thesis Six

Thesis Six

A Christian does not have to belong to a particular visible church to be saved.

A. It seems strange that anyone would say that the visible Lutheran Church is the church outside of which there is no salvation. The mother of the awful error which we are studying is the doctrine that the church is a visible institution which Christ has established on earth like a religious state. This view is wrong. The Savior says, "On this rock I will build My church, and the powers of death will not overcome it" (Matt. 16:18). This rock is Christ. No one is a member of the church except the one built on Christ. Being built on Christ does not mean connecting mechanically with the church. It means putting confidence in Christ and hoping to obtain righteousness and salvation from Him alone. Whoever fails to do this is not built on this rock, and is not a member of the church of Jesus Christ.

B. Read Ephesians 2:19-22. The one who builds on the foundation of the apostles and prophets is the one who believes their words. No one is a member of the church without a living faith.

C. Christ calls the church His flock. To be a member of the flock is to belong to the flock of Christ, to be one of His sheep, pastured by Him and obeying His voice.

D. The objection is raised that Christ compares the church to a field in which wheat and weeds are growing. But the objection is a wrong interpretation of the parable. Christ has given us the key that unlocks its meaning. He

does not say, "The field is My kingdom." In that case the church would be a society composed of good and evil members. He says, "The field is the world" (Matt. 13:38). In its visible form the church can never purge itself of hypocrites and ungodly persons, who find their way into it. Not until life eternal will the church appear triumphant, entirely purified and without blemish, separated from those who were not honestly and sincerely joined to it. But not until all are gathered before the judgment seat of Christ will these people become known as hypocrites. *We may see people going to church, but we cannot see whether they belong to the church.* It is impossible to declare regarding individuals that they are true members of the church. No man knows whether they are. To the eyes of God alone the church is visible; to the eyes of men it is invisible.

E. Making a person's salvation depend on this membership in, and communion with, the visible Orthodox Church overthrows the doctrine of justification by faith. True faith has been obtained by people before they join the Lutheran Church. It is a fatal mistake to think that Luther before becoming a Lutheran did not have the true faith. The true church extends throughout the world and is found in all sects. Anyone who believes in Jesus Christ and is a member of His spiritual body is a member of the church. This church is never divided. Although its members are separated from one another by space and time, the church is ever one.

F. No one must be induced to join the Lutheran Church because he thinks that only in that way he can get into the church of God. Wherever the Word of God is proclaimed and confessed or even recited during the service, the Lord is gathering a people for Himself. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, still confesses that Christ is the Son of God and that He died on the cross to redeem the world. That is truth sufficient to bring a man to the knowledge of salvation.

G. The false doctrine concerning the church which we are studying involves a fatal confusion of law and gospel. While the gospel requires faith in Jesus Christ, the law makes all sorts of demands upon men. Setting up a demand of some kind as necessary to salvation in addition to faith, the acceptance of the gospel promises, means to mix law and gospel. I belong to the Lutheran Church for the sole reason that I want to side with the truth.

H. Just because people can be saved in any Christian church, it is not true that a person can have fellowship with another Christian church. If I perceive the error of a church and do not leave it, I will be lost, because refusing to abandon an error will work to destroy my faith.

I. The Lutheran Church is indeed the true visible church, but only in the sense that it has the pure, unadulterated truth. As soon as you add the idea that you can only be saved in the Lutheran Church, you detract from the doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, and confuse law and gospel.

Law and Gospel

Thesis Seven

Thesis Seven

A Christian teacher does not apply the Word of God correctly when he tries to get people to do good works by speaking the law.

A. Trying to make people godly with the law confuses law and gospel. Trying to make believers do good by telling them the law also confuses law and gospel.

B. Read Jeremiah 31:31-34. The only reason Adam had the law in his heart before the fall into sin was so that he could know what was pleasing to God. He simply wanted whatever pleased God. The fall into sin changed this condition. After the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, God repeated the law and reestablished a legal covenant with the Jews. But the legal covenant had not improved them; since God had to force them to comply with His will – and forced obedience is not obedience. Yet during the time of this covenant the prophets were continually preaching the gospel and pointing to the Messiah. God says that in his new covenant He is not going to issue any commandments. He is going to write the law directly into their mind and give them a new and pure heart. Then they will not need to be bothered by the law.

C. We cannot fulfill the law. The Spirit cannot be forced to control our sinful flesh by the law. God says: "I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." This is why the law is written into our hearts. This means that the gospel, the message of the forgiveness of sins, does what the law could not do.

D. Read Romans 3:20. The law reveals our sins and does not remove them. Instead of

removing them, it increases them, because when a person lusts in his heart, the law calls to him, "You shall not covet." That causes a person to think that God is cruel for demanding what cannot be accomplished. The law increases sin. It does not kill sin, but rather it makes sin alive. Read also Romans 7:7-13 and 2 Corinthians 3:6.

E. You are foolish if you think that conditions in your congregation will improve if you yell at people with the law and describe hell and damnation for them. That will not improve people at all. There is a time to speak the law that way, to alarm secure sinners, but the law does not produce either a change of heart or love for God and other people.

F. Sometimes this confusion of law and gospel happens when ministers think that all of their gospel preaching is useless because gross sins of the flesh still occur among their hearers. The preacher may come to the conclusion that he has preached too much gospel to them and must adopt a different policy. He might decide not to speak the gospel for a while and preach nothing but the law, and conditions will improve. But he is mistaken; the people do not change.

Preachers who have succeeded in getting rid of certain evils by the preaching of the law must not think that they have achieved something great. Even the most corrupt congregation can be improved, but by nothing other than the preaching of the gospel in all

its sweetness. The reason why a congregation is corrupt is always that its ministers have not preached enough gospel to the people. The law kills, but the Spirit, that is, the gospel, makes alive.

Law and Gospel

Thesis Eight

Thesis Eight

A Christian teacher applies the Word of God correctly when the gospel predominates in his teaching.

A. Law and gospel are confused and perverted for people when the law predominates in the teaching. They are also confused when law and gospel are equally balanced and the gospel does not predominate.

B. Read Luke 2:14. The heavenly preachers gave us an illustration of how we are to teach. True, we have to use the law, but only as a preparation for the gospel. The ultimate aim in our use of the law must be to speak the gospel. Whoever does not adopt this aim is not a true minister of the gospel.

C. Read Mark 16:15, 16. Christ tells his apostles to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. The mere term *gospel* emphasizes that their message must be a message of joy. So that they do not think that this word is so infinitely great that nobody will grasp its meaning, Jesus adds these words immediately: "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved," to let them know that this is what he understands by the word *gospel*. He continues: "Whoever does not believe will be condemned." This, too, is a sweet word, because he does not say: "He that has sinned much for a long time will be damned," but states no other reason for man's damnation than his unbelief. No matter what a person's character is and how grievously he has sinned, nothing in his past record will damn him. But, naturally, when a person refuses to believe the words of Jesus, he has to go to hell. The alarming reference to damnation is merely to prompt men to accept

His gracious message and not to ignore it. These last words of the Lord should not be emphasized thus: "He who does *not* believe will be condemned," but thus: "He who does not *believe* will be condemned." He means to say: "Your damnation has already been removed from you; your sin has been taken away; hell has already been overcome for you. I have rendered a sufficient atonement for everything. It is now for you to *believe* this, and you will be saved forever."

D. Read 1 Corinthians 15:3. Do not merely listen to this statement of the apostle, but think of the time when you will be teaching in a congregation. Make a vow to God that you will adopt the apostle's method, that you will not stand in your church sad-faced, as if you were bidding people to come to a funeral. Instead, act like someone wooing a spouse or announcing a wedding. If you do not mingle law with the gospel, you will always enter your task with joy. People will notice that you are filled with joy because you are bringing them the blessed message of joy. They will begin to notice that wonderful things are happening among them.

E. It's too bad that many ministers of the gospel do not meet with these wonderful experiences; their people remain sleepy. What is the reason? Not enough gospel has been spoken to them. Your people really want to hear the Word of God. They were not forced by the government to choose this church over any others. God wants your aim to be to proclaim the gospel to his hearers

until their hearts are melted, until they give up their resistance and confess that the Lord has been too strong for them, and now they wish to abide with Jesus. It is not enough for you to be conscious of your orthodoxy and your ability to present the pure doctrine correctly. These are important matters, but no one will be benefited by them if you confuse law and gospel. The worst confusion happens when the gospel is spoken *along with* the law but does not predominate. A teacher may think that he has spoken the gospel truth quite often. The people, however, remember only that on some occasions they have been told to believe in Jesus Christ. Your people will be spiritually starved to death if you do not allow the gospel to predominate in your teaching. They will be spiritually underfed because the bread of life is not the law. The bread of life is the gospel.

