

"THE CHRISTIAN TEACHER USES LAW AND GOSPEL"

Gerald F. Kastens

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Changing Times, An Unchanging Challenge

Lutheran classrooms are far different today than they were even as late as the sixties. From the suburbs to the countryside, today's classrooms have become a heterogeneous mix of children from various denominational backgrounds; children of unchurched families; children from many cultural and racial backgrounds; children from single-parent homes; children of dual-working parents; latchkey children; children from homes with "live-ins"; children from homes where physical, verbal, and sexual abuse is rampant; and the list goes on and on.

The changes reflected in the make-up of WELS classrooms are but a microcosm of the tremendous upheaval which American society is experiencing. We live in a world which is rapidly becoming a cesspool polluted by sin, threatening to corrupt some of our most basic values. Society has replaced "sin", with "alternate life-style"; "love", with "sexual freedom"; and "God", with "new world order." We may very well be witnessing within the span of a single generation a deterioration of the values and respect for authority which undergird our entire culture. It's as if everything nailed down is coming loose!

Like no other time in the history of the world, children are at great physical, emotional, and spiritual risk. They may very well be growing in what Christian apologist C.S. Lewis termed a "post-Christian society." Simply defined, a pre-Christian society longs for God; a Christian society serves God; but a post-Christian society has rejected God and taken his place on the throne. Like angry voters in an election year, post-Christians have decided God is a "bum" who should be "thrown out of office."

Christians living in the 90's, especially Christian teachers, are anything but naive about

the Lord has placed in our care so that when world's last night has passed we may be found faithful and worthy of the grace which the Lord God has given to us.

On the one hand, we need to be careful lest we break the "bruised reed" (Is.42:3) by being heavy-handed or indifferent. We also need the courage to apply the hammer of the law (Jer. 23:29) to the hardest sinner who persists in manifest unbelief and sin. Gifted and respected theologians such as Martin Luther, C.F.W. Walther, and Siegbert Becker saw this as the most difficult and highest art. In this ministry we need to focus on God...but not at the expense of ignoring people. God is to be glorified, and people to be saved.

Though the times in which we live are challenging, and the futurists may speak of even greater societal upheaval and changes within the family structure yet to come, the mission of the church and the means to carry out that mission remains unchanged. Not only is God's Word the source of strength for the teaching minister, but it is also the means which God has given to carry out Christian ministry. In setting forth its teachings, Christian teachers must rightly divide between law and gospel in teaching the Scriptures, in counseling, and to discipline.

"Understanding Law and Gospel is a Life-Long Process"

Every Christian teacher knows that teaching takes preparation. The Savior used thirty years to prepare himself for his three years of public ministry. Every undertaking demands planning and preparation. If our preparation for teaching is to be anything like that of Jesus, it will involve a lifetime. To properly handle law and gospel in our ministry requires preparation and continual guidance in the workshop of the Holy Spirit. Where does our lifetime preparation begin?

Word. Knowing that I am a wretched sinner who needs Christ's forgiveness just like the children and parents whom I have been called to serve, gives me greater empathy and prevents me from becoming overly pious. Understanding the joy of eternal life and the future victory which will be claimed by all who believe in Christ gives meaning and joy to all that I do. Every day provides an opportunity to serve the Lord. Blessings, troubles, and challenges are all a part of the plan which God has in mind for me each day.

Personal preparation for the teaching ministry is an on-going process. It is a matter of an on-going relationship with the Father. Jesus often spoke of his acquaintance with the Father (John 7:29; 8:55; 10:15; 17:25). How did he maintain that relationship? He modeled it for us through his prayer life. Some sixteen or seventeen times the gospels mention that he prayed, sometimes briefly, sometimes for entire nights. Matthew 17:21 implies that he had the habit of spending much time in prayer.

How can we keep our teaching ministry close to the Father? The same way -- by spending time with him. Both the Scripture and experience tell us that we should spend time each day with God. Our meeting with the Father should be unhurried, a time in which we give him our undivided attention in worship, confession of sins, Bible study, and supplication. We are destined to experience difficulties in keeping the appointment, "*For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit*" (Gal. 5:17). Let us, however, strive to be faithful that we might meet him daily through prayer and the Scriptures. We owe it to our students and our ministry to spend time with him every day.

A final step in lifetime preparation in handling God's Word is knowing the Scriptures. Jesus' knowledge of Scripture was total and intuitive (John 3:11; 7:15). He freely and

We hear and read God's Word for our own edification. We strive by the grace God gives to keep it pure. Now what must be done? The command of the Lord is clear *"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit"* (Mt.28:19). Our response to this injunction parallels that of the first believers: *"We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard"* (Acts 4:20).

But there is yet another obligation which a Christian has over the inspired message of the Scriptures. And it is something which he must not ignore in apprehending the truth of the Bible for himself, in setting forth its teachings correctly, or in bringing its message to the unbelieving world. God's Word must be rightly divided. St. Paul told Timothy, *"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the Word of Truth"* (2 Tim 2:15).

The Scriptures are to be divided only according to their own pattern: law and gospel. The following passages leave no doubt as to how many divisions there are to be and what is included in each division: *"Whoever believes and is baptized shall be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned"*(Mark 16:16); *"The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ"* (1 Cor. 15:56-57); *"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord"*(Rom. 6:23).

The Scriptures also clearly indicate God's purpose in proclaiming each. *"Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin"* (Rom. 3:20). *"Because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints - the faith and the love that spring from the hope that is*

"The Christian Teacher Uses Law and Gospel to Teach."

The first and most important way in which a Christian teacher correctly uses law and gospel is to teach both in every lesson that he or she presents to their children. At first sound, that may not sound like a distinction at all. But in my years of working with teachers, I find that perhaps the failure to teach both law and gospel clearly in every lesson is the one way in which the two are most confused. This, of course is not to suggest any particular deficiency on the part of our teachers. It is just that I see in their preparation and presentation the same struggles that I personally experience on a daily basis in "correctly handling the truth." The teacher will be explaining stories which are connected more closely historically or topically, and catechism instruction tends to center around doctrinal outlines with short proof passages. In either case, there may be a stronger inclination to present only the law or only the gospel in a single lesson.

If you are teaching topically, giving a running commentary, or historically-connected stories be careful not to make individual lessons only law or only gospel presentations. Include both doctrines in every lesson and in every lesson let the gospel be dominant.

Every teacher will at some time think that he has come across a Bible story which preaches only law or only gospel. This first impression is dispelled in a number of ways. First, pray the Holy Spirit to help you rightly divide his Word of truth. Then reread the story and study its context. Rarely, will you have to go outside of the Bible story itself to present both law and gospel. Often the context will help to reveal the presence of the "missing doctrine" in the story.

Take for instance, the Easter story in which the women return to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body, find the tomb empty, and hear an angel announce that the Savior had risen. The

assist in bringing out the full truth of both law and gospel. It is difficult, if not impossible, to read any supplemental material about a lesson without getting a "slant" on the story. Read what God said before reading what man says about what God said. This is an elementary rule for every Bible student to consider.

Poor planning and use of the teaching hour is an impediment to teaching both the law and gospel. There must be time to teach the gospel. For a period of time, keep track of the amount of time consumed by late starts, devotions, lengthy reviews, memory work, art projects, learning songs, worksheets, and discipline. There must be adequate time for each child to consider in depth and with clear distinction both the law and gospel.

One of the critical elements of the story which often receives inadequate time and attention is the application. The application of the truths of the story is not more important than the telling of the story or reviewing the facts. But it is not less important, either. The application can provide an excellent feedback to the teacher on how clearly she has presented sin and grace in the telling of the story. Teachers should not gauge their success at teaching alone on how well students are able to recite back the fact of the Bible story. It is not the intellectual knowledge of facts which saves. Has the child been made aware of his or her sins and sinfulness? Does the student fear the wrath of God against sinners? Has the child grasped by faith God's promise of forgiveness? Will the child be more firmly grafted to the Vine when it leaves the classroom?

The second way in which teachers properly use law and gospel in the classroom is to teach the law first. This does not mean that you will change the order in which a story is told in the Bible to place all of the law parts first. Most Bible stories have elements of law and gospel throughout. Always tell the story faithfully. Using God's order will never thwart your

God's will, not forced by fear to avoid going against it. A prerequisite for this kind of gospel-oriented teaching is a teacher convinced that he/she is God's child, comforted, saved, and free. Then God will bless your teaching. For God's spiritual blessings come the gospel, not the law. The gospel is the power of God for salvation. Faith comes from hearing it.

The Teacher Uses Law and Gospel to Discipline.

Which is easier to use law or Gospel? When I ask a group of parents which they feel more competent to do - teach their children law or the gospel - how do you think they respond? Right! "Go to bed! Be in on time! Finish your dinner! Don't fight! Don't be selfish! You'll do it because I say so and I am your mother!" We are all quite good at teaching children right from wrong. It is easy to teach our children that something is wrong because it offends us, rather than it offends God. How is the teacher to properly handle the law and gospel in discipline?

If a child commits a sin, first of all, call it what it is - not just a foolish mistake or a human boo-boo, but a sin that is offensive to God. Help students to realize that we deserve to be damned for our sins. Never justify the sin or say "it wasn't so bad." Never excuse it as normal. It is normal to sin. And a child needs to learn that it's normal for sinners to sin (Rom. 3:23) - normal, yes, but not right, not acceptable to God.

How remorse is shown differs from child to child. Some children cry, but you can't tell for sure if they are crying because they've offended God, because they got caught, because Dad's going to kill them, or because they are worried about what their friends are going to think about them. For some children getting a remorseful reaction out of them can seem as difficult as getting a natural suntan in Wisconsin in February. True contrition is sorrow a Christian feels

receive his forgiveness when I am not sorry for my sins and I don't believe that I am forgiven. But God's forgiveness and love don't depend on the condition of my heart. I have heard too many "God is satisfied if you do your best, God is pleased if you try hard" statements that I fear the problem even among WELS Lutherans is worse than we think. I would be pleased if each of you did your best. But God isn't pleased with our best. All of our righteous acts are like filthy rags. To suggest otherwise is to lower God's standard of good to a human level. The worst one, of course, is "God will love you, if you obey his commandments," implying that we actually can obey God's commands on our own and that God's love for us depends upon our behavior. It is easy for each of us to fall into this kind of moralizing and work-righteous talk, especially when we work with children.

Another remark which is commonly heard in our circles and which is correct as far as it goes, but which tends to confuse the issue of distinction between law and gospel is the statement that "God loves the sinner and hates the sin". Yet sin is never something that exists by itself. It is always an attribute that belongs to people. God does not send sin to hell. He sends sinners. The statement reduces the force and vigor of the law and confuses law and gospel.

I also encourage each of us not to teach children that, since we are Christians, God is pleased with the deeds we do. The Bible does say "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Heb. 11:6). But it is not my deed that is pleasing to God, but the fact that as I look to God through faith in Christ, God looks back at me through the blood and righteousness of Jesus. It is Christ's goodness which pleases God. I could never do anything that is pleasing to God - perfect, pure, holy, sinless - I am not made of stuff that produces righteousness and neither are the children whom we teach. We were made in the image of Adam and daily we do a good job

But what a victory is won when the Holy Spirit convinces a person through the gospel that in the reality of Jesus Christ we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code! We live for God, not because we have to, but because we want to - because we have been overwhelmed with how magnificent our Lord Jesus is!

If we want to produce in our classrooms, as tools of the Holy Spirit, a truly God-pleasing atmosphere, we must surround these boys and girls with the warmth of the marvelous love of God, and we can only do that as we bring them the assurance of the full and final forgiveness of all of their sins. God loves these boys and girls, with all of their sins and all of their faults. He has already long ago forgiven all of their sins. You are to be the messenger of God to bring them this good news. You are to tell them without conditions and without reservations, "God loves you. God has forgiven you all of your sins. No matter what you do or have done or will do, God has already washed away all your sins with the precious blood of his own Son." You must tell them this because it is true.

When we know and understand that the gospel moves the hearts and affects the behavior of children, then our counsel will rightly discern between law and gospel. It is the Spirit who produces fruit in our lives. Let's make not be guilty of making our students feel that, if fruits of faith are going to be produced in their lives, then they are the ones who have to initiate, form and produce them. Paul says, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control." The fruit is produced by the Spirit working through the gospel. Any Christian should expect to see this fruit being produced in his life. If a person belongs to Christ, then he has the Spirit of Christ. And the Spirit will produce fruit.

the One who holds the future. *"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not harm you, plans to give you a future.'*" (Jer. 29:11). We have God's Word to guide us and call us to repentance. Through the gospel we have been born anew to a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are celebrating people. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are given hope. In spite of rapid change, deterioration of moral fiber, and gloomy prediction and forecast, the kingdom ours remaineth. **Thank God!**