

MORALIZING AND THE PASTORAL MINISTRY:
THE PROPER USE OF LAW AND GOSPEL IN THE PASTORAL MINISTRY

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The Proper Use of Law and the Gospel in the Pastoral Ministry

Introduction: Nothing More Important or Difficult

What is the most difficult aspect of your ministry? Which situations in the day-to-day, down-in-the-trenches workings of your congregation do you find most troublesome?

If we were to take a poll of the brethren here, the answers to those questions would be as manifold and varied as the individuals consulted. For some it would be dealing with delinquents that ties their stomachs into knots and causes them to toss and turn on their cots at night. The prospect of confronting unresponsive delinquents is so disturbing to these men that they will do almost anything to get out of it. For others the dreaded specter may be trying to mend the rapidly disintegrating marriage of two members. The strongest of ministers have been known to suffer from sweaty palms and weak knees just thinking about serving as ecclesiastical referee at an insult exchanging match between two alienated spouses. Yet a third group may mention how they shrink back from having to rebuke an otherwise fine Christian because of some public offense. And so the list goes, with each person here being able to add to it--and not just once, but many times!

In the examples we cited there is really a common denominator, no matter how seemingly diverse those instances appeared to be at first hearing. When we are dealing with delinquency, disintegrating marriages, or deleterious conduct, it usually comes down to the same thing--spirituality, or lack thereof. In each of those cases what we, as ministers of Christ, are being called upon to do is to apply the Law and Gospel properly. Our goal--yes, our only reason for becoming involved in the dreaded and distasteful aspects of the ministry--is either to turn people from sins that have become almost daily habits or to motivate them in more God-pleasing conduct in their daily lives. It is no wonder, then, that our agenda committee has asked that we review once more the proper use of Law and Gospel in the ministry. Understanding Law and Gospel is the sine qua non of the ministry, and no minister dare ever become involved in any situation, distasteful or otherwise, or counsel any of God's saints without first being possessed of such an understanding.

There is, of course, the ever-present temptation to think that in this discussion we are dealing with a subject with which we are more than familiar. And it would not be difficult to make a case for such thinking either. "We're going to be talking about Law and Gospel you say? Who here does not know the difference between the two? Why almost from the moment we were first brought under the influence of God's Word we were made aware of the great gulf that exists between these two doctrines. What is more, the type of ministerial training that we have received has repeatedly stressed the difference between the two." It may well seem, then, that in this paper we are repeating an unnecessary lesson when we could be busying ourselves with other matters that prove to be far more profitable.

Let's keep in mind, though, that what we're discussing here is not just the difference between Law and Gospel, but distinguishing between the two. The first is easy--so easy that children can and do learn it, and that at a very early age! The second is difficult--so difficult, as a matter of fact, that only the enlightening of the Holy Spirit and a lifetime of study in the Word can make us so bold as to feel that we're beginning to understand it. And it is with the second, more difficult of the two that we are concerned with here, for we want to discuss the application or practical use of Law and Gospel in

the everyday workings of the ministry. That's a skill which is so difficult to acquire that Luther, in his oft-quoted but frequently misunderstood statement on the subject, stated that we should "call him 'a Doctor of Holy Writ' who is well versed in this art of dividing the Law from the Gospel."

One of the best ways to remind ourselves just how important, practical and difficult a subject we have before us is by listening to the man who wrote the classic on the subject, C.F.W. Walther. In the second of 25 theses on The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel Dr. Walther writes: "Only he is an orthodox teacher who not only presents all the articles of faith in accordance with Scripture, but also rightly distinguishes from each other the Law and the Gospel." And in Thesis 111 Walther goes on to assert: "Rightly distinguishing the Law and the Gospel is the most difficult and the highest art of Christian in general and of theologians in particular. It is taught only by the Holy Spirit in the school of experience."

It is, therefore, in a spirit of humility and trembling and with a prayer for enlightenment and understanding that we consider the subject:

"MORALIZING AND THE PASTORAL MINISTRY"

The Church's Commission: "Preach the Gospel"

Our work as ministers is just part of the larger work of the Christian church in general; it is just one of the many forms in which faithfulness to the commission of the Head of the church shows itself. Therefore any discussion about the pastoral ministry--even if it is to focus upon the more practical aspects of that ministry--quite naturally begins with at least a brief review of the church's primary task. Or, to put it another way, before we attempt to do anything for Christ as His ministers, we do well to remind ourselves exactly what it is that Christ has called us to do in the first place.

The task that we, both as members and ministers in Christ's church, have before us can in one sense be called very simple. Our Lord Himself expresses that task in very simple terms when He commands His first disciples to "preach the Gospel to every creature." (Mk. 16:15) That's all there is to it! We are to serve as heralds--for that's the basic meaning behind the term, "preach" (kerusso)--to Him whom we have come to know as our King. Like heralds of old who preceded a coming king, we go before our Lord to exhort all those we meet along the way of life to prepare for the King who comes. Christ asks us to announce or herald His coming; we are to serve as latter-day town criers or walking newspapers, as it were, in order to bring the news of the coming King to the people among whom we live.

Such a task is also simple when we view it from the perspective of the announcement we are to make to people. That announcement has been well-named, "Gospel," for there is no better news to proclaim to our sin-sick, hell-bound world than the announcement we can make concerning our King. After all, the King who comes has already come, and His first coming and all that accompanied it is what makes up the "good news." He has unselfishly sacrificed His own life for us in the deadly struggle with our foes. We had been shackled by sin and were being led by Satan on a death-march. We were moving inexorably toward that day when the unending death sentence of divine justice would be passed upon us. But now Christ, by entering the fray on our side and offering His life on our behalf, has, paradoxically enough, conquered the forces of

sin, death, and the devil. By becoming subject even to death on the cross He has set us free from the chains of our enemies. We, who were once held helpless in captivity by the forces of Satan, have been liberated by the love of our King. We now live in the kingdom of grace which our heavenly ruler has established for us. And we eagerly await the second coming of our King so that we can enjoy the great and all-glorious manifestation of His kingdom.

That is the simple announcement which we, as Christ's heralds, are to proclaim to nations: "The King is coming! The King is coming! He wants you to prepare your hearts in anticipation of His coming that you may live and reign with Him in His kingdom!" What could be more simple than to receive the commission to go before the coming King and make that announcement?

The Church's Purpose: "Make Disciples ..."

The responsibilities of the seemingly simple task of the church appear considerably more complex when we hear Jesus elaborate on them in the last chapter of Matthew. There He instructs His chosen one to "make disciples of all nations." (Mt. 28:19 NIV) A disciple, according to the root of the Greek word here (mathetes), is one who not only knows the ways and will of his God, but who also conforms his life to that will. He makes God's will his will, regardless or where that will may lead or what that will may require. And we, as the commissioned church, are to make all nations into such people--people whose minds have been directed to God's loving ways and whose wills are now directed by His gracious, good will.

The closeness of the master-disciple relationship that we are to establish between Christ and His followers emphasizes the truth that we have no light and easy task before us. Nor will any superficial or perfunctory performance of this task satisfy its demands. Jesus indicates as much when He says that we are to make disciples of all nations by "baptizing them... and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." (Mt. 28:19,20 NIV) Careful and thorough indoctrination into all the truths of God's Word is absolutely essential if we are to produce the kind of followers that God desires.

Another way of expressing all that is implied in the concept of discipleship that we are to cultivate is by saying that we have a two-fold objective: To proclaim and prepare for the coming of our King; to teach men to bend their wills to the will of Him whom they confess as King of kings. St. Paul put forth the dual responsibility in very clear terms when he wrote to his young coworker, Timothy, about the purpose for which God inspired the sacred Scriptures. He states: "From a child thou hast known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable.. for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. (11 Tim.3:15-17) Telling people of the way to salvation and training them in the life of santification constitute the primary and secondary aims of the church of Christ.

The Nature of Man: Totally Corrupt

The magnitude of the task involved in fulfilling these two objectives of the Christian church becomes clear as we consider the nature of those we are to teach and train. Paul characterizes the unregenerate or Old Man as "corrupt," plain and simple (Eph. 4:22) And the word he employs here while speaking by

inspiration does not allow room for thinking that man's nature has just been "flawed" or that it "merely has a slight taint" in it. Man is ruined even in his innermost life, and his every thought and inclination have been corrupted. Thus the apostle can state in another place: "In me, (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing." (Rm. 7:18)

What Paul is expressing in the above passage is, quite obviously, a reflection of the estimate of man that God Himself had made millenia before. As God considered the bold, unbridled belligerence of man that had necessitated the judgment of the flood He stated: "The imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth." (Gen.8:21) This is not a sudden discovery that God has stumbled upon to His surprise, but a sad commentary on what had been all too obvious since the time of the fall into sin. Sin totally corrupted man. Each of his offspring bears the indelible imprint of that corruption. (Ps 51:5) And just as a corrupt tree cannot bring forth good fruit, we cannot expect man, corrupted as he is by the disease of sin, to produce works of righteousness on his own. (Mt. 7:17, 18)

The practical implication for us, who are to make faithful followers of Christ out of reprobate rebels, is immediately apparent: We can do so only with considerable difficulty, for the natural man "does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned." (1 Cor. 2:14 NIV) We can even state the matter more strongly: It is not just a case of man having a little trouble understanding all the details about the coming of the King. Rather, it's a case of his not being able to understand and not being interested in understanding. He has been alienated from God by the fall into sin, and because of his corrupt nature he militates against every effort to restore him to peace with God. "The carnal mind is enmity against God," is the way Paul puts it. (Rm. 8:7) Or to use Beck's more graphic translation of the same passage: "The fleshly mind hates God!"

Regenerate Man: "Simul Justus et Peccator"

It is true that the majority of our time as Christ's ministers is spent ministering to those who have already been reclaimed by grace. There are exceptions to this, or course, for we frequently encounter man in his "natural state." Sometimes, when we make what we may consider to be a casual prospect call, we may well be offering people their first substantive instruction in the wonders of God's love as we witness to them. But the majority of those with whom we brush shoulders spiritually already know Christ with their hearts as well as with their heads.

This does not invalidate all that we have said about the nature of man however. The person who listens as we preach from the pulpit or who seeks counsel in our study has been redeemed and regenerated, but is still rebellious and recalcitrant at the same time. He has been called out of the darkness of sin into the glorious light of the Gospel, but he still is inclined to evil and is thus continually in need of Christ. Paul expresses this tension that exists even within the children of God when he writes: "I delight in the Law of God after the inward man, but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members." (Rm. 7:21,22) Even a Christian of Paul's caliber is, according to Luther's well-known dictum, "simul justus et peccator," at the SAME TIME JUSTIFIED AND A SINNER, BOTH A CHILD OF GOD AND A SON OF ADAM.

Our Basic Tools: Law and Gospel

The responsibility of making consecrated saints out of corrupt sinners would be impossible if God had not equipped us for that task. But He who has called us to fulfill that awesome responsibility has also given us the very means to bring about the desired change, the means of grace. And in particular as we seek to promote sanctification in the lives of our members we shall especially rely on God's unchanging Word with its basic doctrines of Law and Gospel. It's true that those terms, Law and Gospel, are not always very enchanting to this generation which has had its ears tickled time and again by the fancier terminology of those twin consorts of humanism, modern psychology and sociology. But Law and Gospel are still the most basic tools for converting and consecrating people to God--yes, they are the most essential tools! If we are not employing Law and Gospel to teach and train our members, those members are not being instructed in discipleship.

We can appreciate more fully just how important both Law and Gospel are in leading our members in discipleship if we consider briefly a passage that we usually think of in connection with Christian education, Ephesians 6:4. While this passage does impress upon parents their responsibilities as people accountable to God for the rearing of the children entrusted to them, it can be most instructive in other areas also. It can, by way of example, help us to understand from a new perspective what God expects of us regarding the over all care of the church. What applies to the training of the tender plants in the Lord's vineyard also pertains to the more mature stock, for we want all be brought up "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord."

In this Ephesians passage Paul speaks about "bringing up" those under our supervision, but he has in mind much more than we usually associate with that phrase. We see Paul's meaning more clearly when we keep in mind the one other instance in which he uses the same word, Ephesians 5:29. There he states that "no man ever yet hated his own flesh, but nourisheth and cherisheth it" The word, "nourisheth," (which the NIV renders, "feed,") is exactly the same word that in Ephesians 6:4 is translated as "bring up." In other words, the basic idea behind "bring up" as Paul employs that word is that we are to "care for" those in our charge in a way that not only helps them grow, but also makes them strong and healthy. Keeping in mind that we are to do this in a spiritual sense above all else, we can say very simply that we are to provide for their every spiritual need.

Paul says that this providing for is to be done "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." The Greek word that is translated as "nurture" (*paideia*) can also be rendered, "training," as the NIV does, but it signifies training in the old Greek sense. We get more of a feeling for such training if we think of it in the sense of training that an Olympic athlete, say, a marathon runner, goes through in preparing for a race. Such an athlete first receives the basic instruction about running, and then he is expected to put that instruction into practice. And it's in the practical application that the meaning of "training" really comes through, for the athlete is constantly subjected to discipline, correction, chastisement, and even punishment. All of those aspects of "training" are behind Paul's use of the word, *paideia*. This becomes more evident when we compare 1 Corinthians 11:32 where the apostle uses another form of this same word. There he affirms: "When we are judged, we are chastened (*paideuein*) of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world."

We do not want to get the impression, however, that Paul is giving us license to deal with our members in a rigid or legalistic manner. That would be a misreading of this text and a misrepresentation of Paul's intent. We need only recall the apostle's words to Titus in which he reminds his colaborer that "the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world." (Tit. 2:11,12) Training most definitely has its evangelical side, at least in the church if not on the athletic field. Those who have been chastened by the judgment of the Lord are also to be constrained by the grace of God. If we expect to develop spiritual athletes capable of running well the race that is set before them, we will train them with Law and then Gospel.

The necessity of using both Law and Gospel also comes through in the second world in the phrase we've been considering from Ephesians 6:4, the word that is translated as "admonition" (AV) or "instruction" (NIV). The Greek word (nouthesia) here carries the basic meaning of "setting right" or "having a corrective influence on someone." There is implied in this word the idea that this corrective process begins when a person is confronted with what is wrong in his life and is made to see just how wrong he really is. There is also the additional idea of confronting the person in the wrong with the express purpose of correcting his wrong. In other words, after a person has been shown his error by the Law, he is to be strengthened in righteousness through the Gospel. We could convey this two-fold idea by rendering Paul's one word to read, "correction and encouragement."

We have at our fingertips, then, the effective tools with which to accomplish the very calling God sets before us, that of leading others to know and follow Him. The Law and the Gospel are precisely the means necessary to train adults and children alike in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. We are well-advised, therefore, to be clear in our own minds about the all-important function that these doctrines serve in our ministry. Both are to be used in the ministry, but each has a different content, serves a different purpose, is intended for a different person, and will produce a different effect.

The Purpose of the Law: To Strike Terror Over Sin

In our catechism we speak about "the three-fold purpose of the Law," and this is correct and proper in that context where we want to give an overview of the doctrine of the Law. Let us be clear in our minds, however, about the main purpose of the Law. Paul speaks of that primary purpose when he writes: "By the Law is the knowledge of sin." (Rm. 3:20) There is the chief purpose of the Law for fallen man--to show him just how fallen, how filthy; how devoid of righteousness he truly is. This purpose stands so far above the other two that Walther, when commenting on this passage from Romans, can actually assert: "At the present time the Law has no other purpose than to reveal man's sin....." (p.383)

How does the Law achieve this purpose? By comparison and contrast. On the one hand there is God's all-encompassing demand, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." (Mt. 5:48) This is not an easy demand which the Law sets before us. The Law exhibits no willingness to "bend the rules" for an unruly society or to wink at the peccadilloes of "boys who will be boys." There is only that rigid demand, Be perfect--as

the sinless, sin-loathing God who is in heaven." And nothing less than that satisfies the Law, for we are constantly asked to compare ourselves with our righteous God. What a contrast there is between us and God! In sharp opposition to our righteous Lord is the sordid, shameful record of our sin-stained lives which the Law will not allow us to ignore. The Law almost seems to delight in pointing out that we are nothing at all like that perfect man whom God demands us to be. In commandment after commandment, from the first through the tenth, the Law makes us personally and painfully aware that "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." (Rm. 3:23)

The Law will allow no one to escape its verdict, not even the most upright, for it lays bare even the secret and unknown sins of everyone in the most embarrassing detail. Consider the case of proud Saul before he became soul-winner Paul. If ever there was a man who had a chance of being acquitted by the Law, it was Saul. As he testified to Agrippa: "After the most straitest sect of our religion I lived a Pharisee." (Acts 26:5) The word, "Pharisee," today hold the connotation of hypocrisy, perhaps above everything else. In Paul's day it signified the strictest, most serious and self-denying practitioners of religion. The Pharisees were not satisfied with keeping the hundreds of different directives that God had revealed in the Levitical law. They added about 700 new ones of their own, and then they kept them down to the last detail. Such a zealot was the young Saul, a man who could rightly boast that he had to take second place to no one when it came to righteousness of the law.

But how did that same man feel when confronted with the unrelenting requirement of the Law? He too was humbled, yes, terror-stricken, for he who thought that he was able to justify himself was condemned along with everyone else by the Law he thought would acquit him. This comes through in the seventh chapter of Romans where the apostle reflects on his youth "without the law" and on his present inclination towards "the law of sin" even though he is a follower of Christ. Looking too long into the mirror of the Law can only fill him with stark terror as he sees what is reflected there. It is not surprising, therefore, to hear Paul give out with a most pitiful wail: "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Rm. 7:24)

If the Law strikes such terror in one who is the epitome of trust in the Savior how much more so in those who are without Christ and without hope in the world. (Eph. 2:12) Nor is it at all unexpected to hear Christians caught up by sin bemoaning their condition as the Law mirrors their sins for them to contemplate. "Groanings," "making one's bed to swim," "watering one's couch with tears," "Feeling one's moisture turn into the drought of summer"---- these are all most apt descriptions of the man who has viewed himself in the mirror of the Law. No wonder Luther says: "The doctrine of the Law, then, was given for this purpose, that a person be given a sweat-bath of anguish and sorrow under the teaching of the Law."

The Purpose of the Gospel: To Sound the Sweet Note of Salvation

What an almost unbelievable, but most blessed contrast the Gospel sets to the Law! As we crouch down, hunched over under the hammer-blows of the Law, the Gospel gently reaches down to us and raises us up. "Your sins have been forgiven," the Gospel reassures us in the quiet, comforting tones. "It's all right now. It really is, for Christ has come, and He is the end of the Law for righteousness to everyone that believeth." (Rm. 10:4) You no longer have to strive after the unattainable, seeking to gain righteousness through

the demands which the Law incessantly makes, but which you can never keep. Christ, your King, has fulfilled the Law and freed you from it. The sins which the Law once held before you and which it used to make you cower in terror have all been removed--every last one of them. There is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. (Rm. 8:1) Instead, you are now covered with Christ's own righteousness by faith in Him. It truly is all right, for God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them. (11 Cor. 5:19) "It is all right now!"

The heart of the Gospel message is, of course, the heart of God from which flows an unending, inexhaustible supply of grace. And this undeserved love and pity that God bestows upon us in Jesus Christ is just that--undeserved. "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast." Paul informs us in terms that cannot be mistaken. (Eph. 2:8,9) What is more, such love from God is always offered fully and freely. The Gospel never sets a condition. It does not unfold the riches of God's love in inviting detail and then offer those riches only half-heartedly by saying, "If you only do such-and-such." Malefactors and ministers alike receive the same word of comfort, "Thou shalt be with me in paradise." (Lk. 23:43) Nor is there the slightest hint of coercion accompanying the Gospel message. It does not offer the consolations of forgiveness and reconciliation in one sentence and then withdraw them part way in the next by saying, "Those who have received God's love must do this, that, or the other thing." Regardless of our spiritual level, whether our diet calls for milk or meat, we are reassured, "Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus." (Gal. 3:26)

One of the best ways to increase our understanding of the Gospel is to observe it in action. Here we are not merely referring to the importance of reading the Gospels again and again, although that is a practice of which we will never tire. Nor do we have in mind just those sections of the four evangelists' records that describe the actual day in which Christ atoned for the sins of the world. We are thinking here of those little vignettes which pervade the sacred record and punctuate God's redeeming, restoring love with their special exclamation points.

One such obvious example of grace in action is that in 11 Samuel 12:13, the glorious conclusion to the ignoble incident between David and Bathsheba. Nathan had preached the Law to David in all its sternness, a preachment that took the form of the parable of the rich man who stole the poor man's one little sheep. When David expressed indignation over the possibility of such a deed taking place in his kingdom, Nathan then showed the king that he was mirrored in that incident. "Thou art the man," he told David in what have to be four of the most cutting words in all of Scripture. David was terror-stricken by that preachment of the Law and he confessed, "I have sinned against the Lord." The very next words of Scripture tell us: "And Nathan said unto David, 'The Lord also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die.'" Nothing could be clearer presentation of undeserved and unconditional grace than that: I have sinned. The Lord hath put away thy sin. Those two statements, involving as they do confession and absolution, come with machine gun-like rapidity. The Gospel is to sound the pure, sweet note of salvation to the contrite sinner, and that is exactly what it does through the mouth of Nathan.

Another reassuring insight into the essence of the Gospel comes from the mouth of the Pharisees, of all people! Luke records that the Pharisees

were observing Jesus closely as publicans and other such known sinners approached Him to hear what He had to say. The Pharisees probably wouldn't have been too critical if the situation had advanced no farther, for sometimes it's hard to keep the riffraff away! What disturbed the Pharisees, though, was that "this man receiveth sinners-- and eateth with them" (Lk. 15:2). Jesus actually "received" such people, and the word the Pharisees use here is the same one Paul employs in Romans 16:2 when he asks the believers in Rome to "receive" Phoebe. Its obvious meaning is to "receive" in the sense of "welcome," to "open ones heart and arms" to another. This is what disgusted the Pharisees. Jesus welcomed all those publicans and sinners!

What was a source of shame and embarrassment to the Pharisees in our glory and boasting. Christ receives sinners! He loves even one lost sinner so much that He'll leave 99 others that are safe and will search until He can bring that lost one back into the fold. (Lk. 15:3-7) He loves even the most wayward and unworthy of His children with such a steadfast love that He stands at the door and looks hopefully for their return. And the moment that one of them does return, he is welcomed back with open arms and is restored to full sonship. (Lk. 15:11-32) Jesus does receive sinners. Without realizing it, the Pharisees had captured the very essence of the Gospel. That's what the glorious Gospel message proclaims to all who will listen: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief!" (1 Tim. 1:15)

Our Ongoing Obligation: "Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth"

As we reflect on the Law and the Gospel, those two doctrines God has placed into our hands to make disciples of others, there is no doubt about which one we most enjoy using. The Gospel is our great delight and joy. We know that the psalmist had the same Gospel in mind when he wrote: "How sweet are Thy words unto my taste! Yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" (Ps 119:103) We, who have tasted frequently and with such soul-satisfying enjoyment the sweetness of the Gospel want to share that sweetness with others. That is our highest delight and the main purpose in our ministry.

We are ever mindful, however, of what Paul wrote to Timothy: "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of truth." (1 Tim. 2:15) Paul here sets us a most important standard. The word that is translated "rightly dividing" is a compound word whose component parts mean "cut" and "rightly" or "correctly." There are a number of possible interpretations we can give to this word's basic meaning. But the one that seems to apply best in this passage is the idea of a steward correctly cutting up the various portions of food that the different members of a household will receive. This is most instructive for us who are to be stewards over the spiritual food which is to be set before the household of God. We are to apportion to each member exactly that doctrine, either Law or Gospel, that the person needs at a particular moment.

The responsibility attendant to such a task is staggering. For one thing, not all our members are at the same level of understanding or sanctification, not even those who are on the same chronological level. There are some of our members including at times even those who are very new to the faith, who delight us daily as they rush forward in sanctification, exhibiting insights and expressing zeal that can only cause us to marvel at the effectual grace of God in action. There may be others, though, who tax our won sanctification to the utmost, for repeated correction and encouragement do not seem to have the slightest impact on them. And, as if that is not exasperating enough, the

very same members are not always the same. Those who thrilled us with their obvious love for the Lord yesterday may appal us with their seeming hardness of heart today. And the very ones whom we though incapable of grasping the basics last week may flash forth with the wisdom of a theologian in a discussion tomorrow.

How important, therefore, that we know our members-- and know them well! This means, quite obviously, that we will avail ourselves of every opportunity to gain more insight into their nature and needs, ever changing though they may be. And here we do not just have in mind the importance of getting into our members' homes and meeting them on their own "turf," so to speak. Equally important is bearing in mind the special perspective we may have been able to gain in a moment of stress, say, when illness touched them or one of their family or when they were drawn into an important decision or a touchy situation that confronted the church. All these viewpoints, coupled with the all-important vision our Lord has granted us in response to our prayers on behalf of our members, will help us understand just what portion of God's Word each member requires at a particular time.

Knowing the needs of our individual members becomes even more urgent when we consider the nature of the Word that we are to apply to their lives. The writer to the Hebrews describes that Word in very memorable imagery when he says: "The Word of God is quick and powerful and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." (Heb. 4:12) Knowing how powerful the Word is reminds us all the more of how careful we are to be in using it. For example, before we use the Word to expose and lay bare a sinful heart, we want to be certain that sin is indeed present. How terrible an abuse of God's sacred trust if we use His word to humble those who have already been terrified by the Law. "'Is not My Word like a fire? saith the Lord,' and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?" (Jer. 23:39) By the same token, it would be equally reprehensible to offer the security of the Gospel to someone who is still secure in his sins. "From the propheteven unto the priest everyone dealeth falsely, for they have healed the hurt of the daughter of My people slightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' where there is no peace." (Jer. 8:10,11)

Rightly dividing the Word of truth requires a close and careful check on the spiritual condition of our members at all times. If we see sin present in someone's life, we are to preach the Law in all its sternness. And we are to preach that Law so sternly that the person involved will be struck with terror over God's wrath. What is more, we are to preach the Law as long as that person is at ease in his sin or as long as he is unwilling to turn away from one particular sin. If Satan retains his hold on a person through just one sin, that person can hear only the Law from us, and not a syllable of Gospel. If, on the other hand, that person has been terrorized by the Law and stand contrite because of the hatred and wrath of God, the Gospel is to be applied immediately. Then the Gospel is to shine forth in all its glory, showing the sinner grace for grace and reassuring him that where sin abounded grace much more abound. And the Law will not be referred to again in the case at hand, neither to mirror once more an already acknowledged sin nor to motivate by coercion the response we want to see. The contrite sinner is to receive every last bit of comfort and consolation that the Gospel offers, and that alone!

Moralizing: "The action of making moral"

To this point we have focused our attention rather exclusively on the subtitle of this essay, the proper use of Law and Gospel in the pastoral ministry, and have ignored the first word of the title itself, moralizing. What about that matter, moralizing? What does moralizing have to do with all that we have been discussing so far?

We can best answer in two words: Absolutely nothing! Moralizing has absolutely nothing to do with the pastoral ministry and the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. As a matter of fact, it is the exact antithesis of the two. The definition of the word, moralizing, reveals as much to us. The Oxford English Dictionary defines moralizing simply enough as, "the action of making moral" or "improving the morals of someone." That is the sum total and the avowed end of moralizing--making someone moral, or at least improving his moral to some degree! And such an end has nothing in common with our goals in the Christian church, whether we are talking about our primary or secondary aims. Let us etch this thought deeply into our minds: There is no point of contact between moralizing and the Christian ministry!

There may be some, though, who take exception with that assertion--at least with putting it so strongly. "Don't we affirm," they may wonder, "that one of the aims of our ministry, (perhaps a secondary aim, it is true, but one of our aims nevertheless,) is to promote sanctification? And isn't it also true that instructing people in righteousness so that they may be 'perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works,' is the same as making someone moral?"

There is just one answer we can give to those questions: Absolutely not! What has patching old clothes to do with giving a heart transplant to the man who will wear those clothes? Nothing, you say? Well, that's what moralizing has to do with ministering in the scriptural sense of the word. Moralizing is nothing more than an "ethical patch job." It is merely a matter of trying to change the outward actions of a person. In our ministry, by sharp contrast, we are concerned with effecting a real "change of heart" (metonymy); we want to replace a sinful heart with Christ's own heart. Manners, outward appearance hands and feet--these are the only concerns of moralizing. Mode of thinking, inner attitudes, hearts and minds-- these are the essential concerns of those who want to minister to others according to Christ's own directives.

An Ever-Present Danger: Confusing Law and Gospel

While the difference between moralizing and ministering is as great as the difference between hands and hearts, the application or observance of that difference is not always evident. In spite of good intentions and admonitions to the contrary, the most consecrated among us can confuse Law with Gospel and thus produce nothing more than moralizing through such mingling. As an example, we may unwittingly give to someone new to the faith the impression that he is not truly converted until he eschews certain sins and shows certain virtues. Or, to look at the obverse, we may leave him with the unscriptural notion that he has been converted just because he avoids certain sins and practices certain virtues. In either case we are confusing Law and Gospel and we end up with moralizing. And this is truly damnable in these instances because it may well give a spiritual novice a false sense of security and an improper hope of salvation.

Such confusing may also occur when we, in describing the man of faith to our

members, do so in a way that does not really fit all believers in all times. How this takes place is perfectly understandable. There are many times in our ministry when we are looking for a specific response of faith from our members. At such times our preaching may direct itself consciously or unconsciously toward producing just that we response which we want. As a result, we may, without our realizing it, blur the distinction between Law and Gospel and confuse the kind of conduct we expect from our members with what really constitutes saving faith in the Son of God. While that may arise in a very understandable way, the result is still an abomination! It robs the people of God the sure and unshakable hope of salvation which is rightly theirs in Christ Jesus and which we as the ministers of Christ are to establish.

Perhaps the most prevalent way of confusing Law and Gospel comes when we use the Law to do the Gospel's work. All of us are interested in seeing our members "bring forth fruits meet for repentance." (Mt. 3:8) That is most certainly a proper objective for our ministry, for it's one that Christ Himself held forth. (Mt. 7:17) As commendable a goal as it is, however, it dare never become our chief goal; nor are we to achieve that goal through the wrong means.

Guarding against such a danger is not as easy as we may think. Just as an illustration, consider how often these people are attracted to our Christian day schools because we practice stricter discipline and provide a more moral atmosphere than do the public schools. It frequently happens that these "by-products" or attendant blessings of the day school are elevated to first place by those who lack spiritual understanding. Thus we find ourselves under an implicit, if unexpressed, pressure to "produce," but to produce in the area of morals and manners. We may then resort to bringing about such immediate or outwardly apparent results by a stricter application of the Law, and forget all about the more important Gospel motivation. (Tight school discipline isn't confusing Law and Gospel in itself). Or our confusing of Law and Gospel may show itself in such things as a legalistic dress code for the students, a dress code that does not flow from the Gospel and is not based on the principles of modesty or appropriateness.

How foolish indeed, and how futile all such efforts. God shows the proper way when He says through Jeremiah: "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah...After those days, saith the Lord, I will put My Law in their inward parts and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be My people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbor and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord. For they shall all know Me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them saith the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sin no more." (Jer. 31:31,33,34)

For centuries the Jews had the laws of God, but these laws did nothing to improve them spiritually. Nor was the Law expected to, "for the letter killeth" (11 Cor. 3:6) All the Law can do is pronounce condemnation on those who sin against it. God therefore gave a "new law," the Gospel, which He wrote into the hearts of His people by faith. This Gospel centers around the blessed assurance that iniquity is forgiven and sins are covered. And what the old Law could never accomplish the Gospel will effectively produce, namely, moving men to serve God from the heart. As Paul says, "The spirit giveth life." (11 Cor. 3:6)

If we, then, seek to achieve by means of the Law what only the Gospel can do, we are striving for the impossible. "The Gospel of Christ... is the power of

God unto salvation to everyone that believeth" (Rm. 1:16), not the Law-- not under any circumstances! To seek to produce works of righteousness by using the Law will not only be impossible, it will actually bring about the opposite effect (Rm. 7:7-13) As a result, we "turn Christians into Jews, and that, Jews of the worst kind, who regard only the letter of the Law and not the promise of the Redeemer." (Walther, p. 383) God forbid that we ever confuse the commands of the Law with the promises of the Gospel and thus pervert both to the harm of our people!

Back Where We Started: "Preach the Gospel!"

There is one final exhortation we might offer as a way of checking whether or not we are on the right path in our use of Law and Gospel. That check is the simple question, which predominates in our dealings with our members, whether it be in public proclamations of the Word or in the private counselling with people on a one-to-one basis-- the Law or the Gospel? It is not enough that we try to maintain a proper balance between the two, balancing five minutes of the Gospel against five minutes of the Law or offering a Word of encouragement for every word of admonition. Our chief concern is the preaching of the Gospel, that indescribably precious news that "God loves me truly, loves even me!" It's for the preaching of the Gospel that He turns others to follow Him also; and it's in the preaching of the Gospel that He strengthens and sustains all believers in their walk of faith. The preaching of the Gospel, therefore, will predominate in our ministry.

It is surprising---and somewhat embarrassing, we might add---to note in our own ministry how often the Gospel receives far less time and attention than does the Law. It's almost as if we have never read, or perhaps have completely misread, Paul's inspired statement: "God hath made us able ministers of the new testament, not of the letter, but of the spirit, for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life." (11 Cor. 3:6)

Why does the Law surface more consistently than the Gospel as we approach those under our care? The answer is difficult to determine, for we can only speak from personal experience. It may simply be that we do not understand the distinction between Law and Gospel as we need to. We may not grasp the essential difference between a step along the way toward our goal and the attaining of that goal itself. Thus we may confuse preaching the Law and seeing temporary, but immediate results, with proclaiming the Gospel and trusting that the Holy Ghost will bring forth His fruits in His season. Or it may be that we just do not have the confidence in the Gospel that we need to have. We may not trust that such a simple message of grace--a message that has been presumed upon and trifled with so often in the past, including in our own lives--can actually effect a miraculous change in the lives of men. So we may again resort to the sternness of the Law and thus hope to produce with it what only the sweetness of the Gospel can achieve.

Regardless of which of the two explanations above you choose--even if you offer an entirely different one--it is important that we ever keep in mind the nature of the ministry to which we have been called. We in the Lutheran tradition generally in our Wisconsin Synod particularly have been aware of the concept of orthodoxy and all that such an awareness demands of us. This consciousness is understandable especially when we reflect on the peculiar position as "contenders for the faith once delivered unto the saints" into which our Lord Himself has thrust us in recent years. And yet, it is not enough to proclaim the Word of God purely. It is equally imperative that we divide

that Word of truth rightly. The finest form of orthodoxy--in fact, the only form of orthodoxy that does not soon wither and die--is that which is truly evangelical or Christ-centered. Only as we preach Jesus again and again are we being faithful to our calling.

Conclusion: "We Would See Jesus!"

The story is told of a young minister who was sent to a congregation that was known for its lack of life. It wasn't so much that the people did anything really wrong, it was just that they didn't do much of anything, either good or bad. The young minister--why is it that they're always young?--decided to meet the problem head-on, and during the first three weeks in that congregation he was as bold and fearless a minister as you could imagine. Every sin that the congregation had been guilty of or could be guilty of was laid bare and denounced in the most fear-inducing terms.

At the end of the third Sunday service, when the minister went back to the pulpit to pick up his Bible, he noticed a small slip of paper lying on the Bible. On the paper was written just this reference: John 12:21. The minister was to proud to check the reference at church where someone might see him, so he waited until he got home to the privacy of his study. The next Sunday it was a chastened and far more charitaritable minister who ascended the pulpit. There was a far more convincing ring to his greeting as he addressed the congregation with the words, "Dear friends in Christ." You see, John 12:21 conveys the earnest pleas of souls that have been struck with terror by the Law, "We would see Jesus!"

There is still the demand that our members can rightly make of us. They have the right to see Jesus, and all that we do as the ministers of Christ should be directed toward leading them to Him. May God ever instruct and enlighten us as we carry out the ministry of reconciliation. Then we shall not only distinguish properly between Law and Gospel, but we shall also see Jesus in the lives of our members.

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