

# The Third Use Of The Law

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What prompted your program committee to choose this topic for this conference I do not know, but it appears to me that this is a subject about which we ought to be doing some very serious thinking in our time, and the choice of this topic would indicate to me that your committee is aware of a doctrinal trend which is becoming more and more recognizable in the Lutheran Church of our time. While it is always a little difficult to analyze and appraise the situation, yet I am convinced that we are on the brink of a full-blown antinomian reaction in the Lutheran Church and our Wisconsin Synod is not automatically immune to this disease for the stench of antinomianism permeates the theological atmosphere that our people have to breathe in these days.

I have in my library a book that is intended to serve as a textbook for Lutheran confirmands. The book begins with a lesson on baptism and a second lesson on the Lord's Supper, and then continues with a consideration of the life of Christ. There is scarcely any mention of sin. Even in the treatment of the resurrection, there is no indication that this has anything to do with our sin. Let me just read to you the section headed, "The Meaning of the Resurrection" Here it is:

1. "Jesus was truly dead.
2. He was laid in the grave.
3. He rose from the dead and appeared to many.
4. This showed that He was truly the Son of God and the Redeemer.
5. Because Jesus rose I will also rise from the dead. 1 Co 15:20-23.
6. Christ lives in me. He is my life.
7. The living Christ is present in the Holy Communion."

In the whole book there are few, if any, references to the wrath of God. While I have not double-checked this, it seems to me that hell is mentioned only once in the book, in the treatment of Christ's descent into hell, and there the whole context implies that hell is the place where the Old Testament saints went and remained until Christ came to take them to heaven. There is not a single chapter of the book that is devoted to the study of the Law and of sin, but there are at least six chapters which deal with the liturgy, and the Ten Commandments are treated very briefly in the thirtieth chapter of the book, which is headed, "Confession and Absolution."

Now this book, since it is privately printed, and, so far as I am aware, is used in very few congregations, would not be sufficient evidence to establish a trend in the Lutheran church. But when I hear, for example, that men in high places in the Lutheran Synods of our country, men who are directly associated with some of the new catechisms and books of instruction in Christian doctrine which are being projected by Lutheran publishing houses and boards of education, are suggesting that these new catechisms ought to begin with the doctrine of baptism, that the Ten Commandments should be treated at the end of the book, that less space should be given to the Law, and that more emphasis should be laid on the liturgy and on the worship of the church, it certainly seems to me that the spirit which breathes in the aforementioned book is beginning to exert a significant influence on the thinking of many Lutherans.

When, moreover, we hear more and more often that we ought to remember that we are preachers and teachers of the Gospel and not of the Law, that we should avoid the negative approach and the motivation of fear, that we should be careful not to nourish feelings of guilt, that we should teach the Law in an "evangelical manner," and similar arguments, it would certainly seem that antinomianism is a very present danger confronting all of us in the schools and congregations of the Lutheran church.

Antinomianism, opposition of one sort or another against the Law of God, is not a new movement in the church. It is an old heresy, also in the Lutheran Church. It springs from failure to understand the proper distinction between Law and Gospel, and it is, basically, a rationalistic attempt to eliminate the apparent

contradiction between Law and Gospel by banning the preaching and teaching of the Law from the church and the Christian classroom.

An example may serve to clarify how this can easily be done. The Gospel comes to us again and again with the glorious promise of deliverance from all fear. "Fear not," "Be not afraid," this is the constantly repeated admonition of the Gospel. As forgiven children of God, who have, in confident faith, known the gracious love of our heavenly Father as it has been demonstrated to us in the gift of His own Son for our salvation, we are indeed delivered from all fear. But, on the other hand, the same Bible, of which we believe that it is, in all its parts and words, the inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word of God, also contains many a passage which calls upon us to spend the time of our sojourning here in fear, and to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. It is evident that we are here dealing with what appears to human reason to be a contradiction. There are those who insist that since the Bible encourages us to put aside all fear, therefore, it can no longer admonish us to be afraid, and therefore, they say, the Law ought not to be taught in the Church.

Just as Gospel passages are quoted in support of antinomianism, so the strong Gospel affirmations in the writings of the teachers of the Church can be employed in similar fashion. Luther, in his writings against the antinomians of his day, complained that they cited passages from his books in support of their heresy. He wrote, "If I had died at Smalcald, I would forever have been known as the patron saint of such spirits, for they appealed to my books, but all this behind my back without my knowledge and against my will. They did not do me the courtesy of showing me a single word or letter of their work or of consulting with me on the matter." (S.L., XX, 1611).

The leader of the antinomians in Luther's day was John Agricola, who had been a close friend of Luther from the earliest days of the Reformation. Luther himself called him "one of my best and closest friends." (S.L., XX, 1-612). He always professed the greatest friendship for Luther and repeatedly expressed his willingness to be guided by Luther in all doctrinal matters. In 1536 or 1537 he became a member of the faculty at Wittenberg, where his antinomianism soon became evident. He had been accused of false teaching on the subject prior to this time, but Luther refused to believe the stories that were circulating about him. However, when Luther discovered that the reports which he had up to this time treated as mere rumors, were factually correct, he immediately insisted that Agricola would have to issue a public retraction in print. This Agricola did without hesitation, but continued to teach the same doctrine, continuing to cite Luther's own words in support of the antinomian position.

Luther, in answer to this slander, wrote, "I am surprised how anyone can possibly say that I reject the Law or the Ten Commandments when there are extant so many of my expositions of the Ten Commandments, and these not all of one sort. These are daily preached and used in our churches (I say nothing of the Augsburg Confession and the Apology and our other books). Besides this, they are sung in two versions. Moreover, they are portrayed artistically, they are printed and engraved, spoken by the children morning, noon, and night, so that I do not know of any way in which they are not used, except that we (sad to say) do not practice and portray them in our deeds and life. And I myself, as old and learned as I am, daily as a child repeat them word for word. If anyone would have gained any other idea out of my writings, and yet would see and notice that I lay so much stress on the catechism, he should at least have spoken to me, and said, 'Dear Dr. Luther, How does it come that you lay so much stress on the Ten Commandments, since you teach that they are to be rejected?' This they should have done, instead of secretly undermining my work behind my back and waiting for my death, and then make out of me what they please. Allright, I forgive those who desist from it." (S.L. XX, 1613).

To undo the harm done by Agricola and his supporters, Luther drew up a series of six disputations, consisting of 258 theses in all, directed against the antinomians. These six debates were held at the university between December, 1537, and September, 1540, but the controversy continued after Luther's death and was not settled until the adoption of the sixth article of the Formula of Concord in 1580. But even this did not lay the antinomian issue to rest even for the Lutheran Church, and to this day we must keep on recovering for ourselves

again and again the grand old truths for which our fathers labored so earnestly, and so successfully under the blessing of God.

One word should be said about terminology. Strictly speaking, the term, “the third use of the Law,” has often been understood to refer to the use of the Law as a rule for Christian living. While it may be very useful for pedagogical purposes to distinguish very carefully between the use of the law as a curb, a mirror, and a rule, they are not so sharply divided in life. When the Lutheran Confessions, in the Sixth Article of the Formula of Concord, deal with the third use of the Law, they do not limit themselves to the consideration of the Law as a rule. Rather under this heading they deal with the use of the Law among converted children of God. It is in this same sense in which we shall deal with it in this paper.

### **THE LAW MUST BE TAUGHT IN SUCH A WAY THAT IT AROUSES FEAR**

Surely there ought to be no doubt in the mind of any one of us, who claim to be Bible Christians and moreover have taken an oath on the Lutheran Confessions, that the Law should be taught in church and school, to both believers and unbelievers. As teachers of the church we have committed ourselves to the position which holds, “We reject and condemn as an error pernicious and detrimental to Christian discipline, as also to true godliness, the teaching that the Law. . . should not be urged upon Christians and the true believers, but only upon the unbelieving, unchristians, and impenitent.” (F.C. VI).

The Law, then, is certainly to be used in church and school, but if we are to use it properly, we must know what we intend to accomplish by the Law. Luther says in the Smalcald Articles (III, ii), “The chief office or force of the Law is that it reveals original sin with all its fruits, and shows man how very low his nature has fallen, and has become utterly corrupted; as the Law must tell man that he has no God nor regards God, and worships other gods, a matter which before and without the Law he would not have believed. In this way he becomes terrified, is humbled, desponds, despairs, and anxiously desires aid, but sees no escape. In this Luther is simply repeating what he learned from St. Paul, who says that “by the Law is the knowledge of sin (Ro 3:20)”, that “the Law entered that sin might abound (Ro 5:20),” and “that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful (Ro 7:13).”

This means much more than teaching people to say by rote, “Almighty God, merciful Father, I, a poor miserable sinner, confess unto Thee all my sins and iniquities.” One of the strangest phenomena in the church today is the man who agrees that the Law must be taught, that men must be brought to a knowledge of sin, but who says that we should never teach the Law in such a way that men are made afraid. The Law is there to terrify, to damn, and to slay the sinner. Luther says that the Law which does not condemn is a fabricated and a painted Law (XX, 1648). “God has given His Law,” he says, “just for this purpose that it should bite, cut, beat, kill, and sacrifice the old man. For it should frighten the proud, unwise, and secure old Adam, punish him, and show him his sin and death, that he may be humbled and despair, so that he may become desirous of grace (XX, 1657).” Agricola, too, spoke highly of the Law, but Luther said that the nasty little devil who rode Agricola did not want a law that mortifies, or angers, or accuses, or terrifies, or kills (XX, 1658).

The Lutheran Confessions, too, have much to say about the terror and fear that should be created and aroused by the Law. We have it in Luther’s *Small Catechism* again and again, “We should fear and love God.” And if anyone says, as we hear it said so often, that this does not mean that we should be afraid of God, we need only to point to Luther’s explanation of the conclusion of the Commandments, where he says, “Therefore we should fear His wrath.” It is true that there is a difference between the fear of the Christian and the fear of the unbeliever, but the difference is not this that the fear of the Christian is not real terror and anxiety while that of the unbeliever is real fear. The Lutheran Confessions call the one a filial fear and the other a servile fear, and they define these terms in this way: “Filial fear can be clearly defined as such anxiety as has been connected with faith, i.e., where faith consoles and sustains the anxious heart. It is servile fear when faith does not sustain the anxious heart. (Trig. p. 261).” We have become so used to defining fear as reverence and have become so adept at removing from the word reverence every connotation of being afraid that we would do well to remind ourselves that Luther and the Confessions not only use the word “fear” or “*Furcht*,” but they also use the words “terror,” “*Schrecken*,” and “anxiety,” “*Angst*.” “The Law should terrify us,” is a thought that the Confessions

repeat again and again. Commenting on the words of our Lord, "Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden," the Apology says, "The Labor and the burden signify contrition, anxiety, and terrors of sin and of death (*Trig.* p. 263)." The German may be more helpful to some of you. "*Die Last, oder die Buerde, da Christus von redet, das ist, der Jammer, das grosze Erschrecken vor Gottes Zorn im Herzen.*" The Augsburg Confession (XII) defines contrition as "terrors smiting the conscience through the knowledge of sin (*Trig.* p. 49)." The Apology (XII) repeats and expands on this definition and says, "We say that contrition is the true terror of conscience, which feels that God is angry with sin, and grieves that it has sinned. (*Trig.* p. 259)." In the *Large Catechism* (1, 322), Luther says that the close of the Commandments contains "an angry word of threatening ... to terrify and warn us," "*ein zornig Drauwort . . . uns zu schrecken und warnen* (*Trig.* p. 673). Countless other examples could be cited in which the Confessions speak in a similar vein.

That the Scriptures use the word "fear" in this same way is also not difficult to establish. When the Bible speaks of trembling before the Lord, when David in the Psalms speaks of the terrors of death, when Hebrews speaks of men who are all their lifetime subject to bondage through the fear of death, when we are admonished by St. Paul to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling, when Jesus tells us not to fear those who kill the body, but rather to fear him which is able to destroy both body and soul in hell, when sinful Adam hides in the garden because he is afraid, when fear fell on blameless Zacharias, and the believing shepherds on the hills of Judea were sore afraid, it becomes evident that the Biblical picture of fear is one of anxiety and terror, anxiety and terror which is removed and overcome indeed by the "Fear not" of the Gospel, but anxiety and terror nevertheless.

This does not mean that we should indulge in all sorts of lurid presentations of the horrors of hell. It does not mean that we use all sorts of emotional tricks deliberately to frighten the children in our care. It is enough to say what the Bible says, to say it without softening the stern warnings of the Law, without explaining away any of its strict demands, and above all, without giving the impression by our own attitude that while God says some rather hard things in his Word, he does not really mean what he says.

What we ought to aim for is to get people really to believe that God is in dead earnest when he says that the soul that sinneth, it shall die; that he means every word of what he says when he tells us, "Cursed, damned is everyone that continueth not in all the things that are written in the book of the Law to do them." These things which the Scripture says about the wages of sin are frightening enough and terrifying enough without any lurid embellishments which may arouse a mere temporary emotional upset, which may be worse than useless. What we need is a simple, earnest, straightforward, and honest teaching of what the Bible says about the sinfulness of men and the wrath of God. What we need is sin-conscious teaching and preaching.

This means that we must know not only what sin is and what its fruits are and what is meant by the wrath of God, but those whom we teach must learn, not only to say, but also to believe with all their hearts that they are sinners, that God means it not only when he says that the wages of sin is death, but also when he declares that there is not a just man upon earth that doeth good and sinneth not, and that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. If we could just get a child truly to understand what it means when God says, "Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer, and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him," or "Whoso shall say to his brother, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire," and if we could then get him truly to believe this and apply it to himself, so that he stands before the bar of his own conscience and confesses, "I have hated my brother. I have often spoken to him in anger. I am a murderer. How can I ever have everlasting life? I deserve the punishment of hell fire," then the Law will have done for him what it ought to do. No one can honestly and sincerely entertain thoughts like these without being troubled, anxious, terrified, and afraid. I am convinced that much of our teaching of the Law is so ineffective because we are afraid of making people afraid, because we do not understand that this is what the Law is really supposed to do.

A word of caution may be in place. There is a type of teaching of the Law that borders on sadism, which feels none of the terror of sin itself, and shows no sympathy for the sinner. There is one kind of preaching of the Law that reminds me of the depraved delinquent who pulls out a switch-blade knife and finds joy in the pain which he inflicts and laughs at the fear of his adversary as he runs down the street, screaming in terror. There is

another kind of teaching that reminds me of one of the members of my congregation who took his knife out of his pocket and cut off his uncle's arm which was caught in a corn picker, because they both knew that if it was not done he would bleed to death. If ever we need to come down from the teacher's rostrum and stand with our children in sympathetic love, it is while we are teaching them to know the wrath of God, and we will do it as it ought to be done if we have ourselves recognized our own sin for what it is and what it has done to us, if we have ourselves learned what it really means to stand before God and smite upon our breast and say, "God be merciful to me, a sinner." Our teaching of the Law must never become a playing with words. It must be a wrestling for souls. And if it is this, it will never become a matter of depraved delight in the torments of a terrified soul, nor a timid toning down of the severity of God's Word out of sentimental sympathy.

### **SHOULD THE LAW BE TAUGHT THUS TO CHILDREN OF GOD?**

At this point there are always those who object and say, "I will agree that this is the way mission work should be done among self-righteous Pharisees. But we must remember that we are dealing with Christians. These are children of God who know that they are sinners, and to them we ought to teach the Gospel." But tell me, if this argument is to stand, do they not also know that their sins are forgiven? And if they already know that their sins are forgiven, why should we keep on saying this? How long will they continue believing that their sins are forgiven, if they forget that they have sins that need to be forgiven? How long will they desire and yearn for the salvation offered in the Gospel, if they are not reminded again and again that they are lost. Luther says, "If Christ is to be preached, the Law must be preached (XX, 1617)." How can one preach about forgiveness, if there are not first some sins to forgive? And how can one know that there is sin, if the Law does not show us our sin (XX, 1659)? The Savior says, "I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick."

That the Law is to be preached also to Christians is surely manifest even from a cursory examination of Holy Scripture. Those who say that the Law should not be preached must reject much, if not most, of the preaching of our Lord himself (XX, 1638). The sermon on the mount (Mt 5-7; Lk 6:20-49) was preached to Jesus' disciples (Mt 5:1; Lk 6:20), and it is Law from beginning to end, and it speaks of judgment and hell fire (Mt 5:22), of eternal punishment in prison (Mt 5:25,26), of being cast into hell (Mt 5:29,30 cp. Mk 9:42-48; John 15:6), and of great ruin and woe (Mt 7:24-29; Lk 6:24-26,46-49). He tells them that they call him Lord but do not do what he says, and then reminds them that those who hear his sayings and do them not, will go down to ruin as a house built on sand. He told his disciples that those who deny him before men, he would also deny before his Father in heaven (Mt 10:33; Mk 8:38, Lk 12:9). He upbraided them for their lack of faith (Mt 14:31; 16:8; 17:17,20; Mk 4:40, 16:14; Lk 8:25; 24:25; John 20:29), and for their lack of understanding (Mt 16:9,11; Mark 8:18, John 14:9), going so far as to call Peter a devil (Mt 16:23; Mk 8:33). He told them that if they would not watch and be ready when he came, he would cut them asunder and assign to them the log of a hypocrite, weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt 24:42-51), and when Peter asked him whether this really applied also to them, the Savior reminded him that the servant who knew his master's will shall be beaten with many stripes (Lk 12:36-48). We might mention here also the parable of the pounds (Lk 19:12-27) and of the talents (Mt 25:14-20), both of which end on a threatening note and speak of the punishment of those who call Him Lord and do not do what he says. When he spoke of his betrayal, they were all pricked in their conscience (Mt 26:21-25 Mk 14:18,19; Lk 22:21-23; Jn 13:21-25). This list is by no means complete.

That the Law is to be preached to Christians can be demonstrated also by the epistles of Paul. The epistle to the Romans is written to the saints in Rome (Ro 1:7) and it begins with a stern assertion of the sinfulness of all men and a declaration of the judgment of God (1:18 - 3:20), and this same theme is repeated sporadically throughout the book (6:23; 7:24; 8:13; 11:20; 13:2; 14:23). The letters to the Corinthians are written to the saints in Corinth (1 Co 1:2, 2 Co 1:1), and you know that both letters are full of denunciations, and toward the end of the second letter he admonishes them to examine themselves to see whether they are still in the faith (13:5). We will say nothing of the letter to the Galatians and the two epistles to Thessalonica, for

surely a word to the wise is sufficient, and there is not one of us who believes that he is able to distinguish Law and Gospel better than our Lord or even that he can improve on the method of the inspired apostle Paul.

The Law is necessary for the Christian, to terrify and arouse anxiety in him, because he is not only a saint, justified and forgiven by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, but he is also a sinner, with all the infirmities common to human nature. He is not only spirit, born of the Spirit, but also flesh, born of flesh; and his sinful flesh, in which nothing good dwells, he will carry with him to the grave. And though, after the spirit, he delights in the Law of God, yet, like the apostle Paul, he sees another law in his members, warring against the law of his mind, so that he cannot do the things he wants to do and often does what he hates (Ro 7:14-25, Gal 5:17). The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.

The Law is indeed not made for the righteous man, but for sinners (1 Ti 1:9), but the best Christian is still a sinner, and Luther says, "Also we, who by grace are made holy and yet live in this sinful body, must on account of the remaining sins permit ourselves to be admonished, frightened, killed, and sacrificed by the Law until we die (XX, 1659)." The Formula of Concord tells us, "Because of these lusts of the flesh, the truly believing, elect, and regenerate children of God need in this life not only the daily instruction and admonition, warning and threatening of the Law, but also frequently punishments. (Trig. p. 965)."

Because the Christian remains a sinner all his life, he is in need of life-long repentance, as Luther says in the first of the Ninety-five Theses, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent ye,' He intended that the whole life of the believer should be one of repentance." Repentance is a state of mind, an attitude of the heart, and consequently it is not an act that can be performed at stated intervals. It either continues as an ongoing process, or it ceases, and, in ceasing, becomes impenitence. It is the sense of sin, the conviction of sinfulness, the experience of the need of salvation. If this is to remain alive in the heart, the Law must be preached. We can so easily become unconcerned about our souls and so quickly fall into a false sense of security, that the Scripture itself warns us repeatedly against falling away and encourages us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. "When the Law is preached," says Luther, "we learn that we are all debtors to the Law and children of wrath, the godless completely, in body and soul, through and through the godly insofar as they still are and live in the flesh. Therefore, the teaching of the Law is necessary and by all means must be kept in the church, for without it Christ cannot be kept (XX, 1646)." When the Church is no longer filled with sinners who are troubled and anxious and fearful because of their sins, the Gospel will become "the same old stuff," as so many speak of it today, and men will say, "Our soul loathes this light bread." Luther held that while we must avoid the papist doctrine of penance as the devil and hell itself, yet those who permit no repentance at all to remain in the Church by removing the Law from the Christian pulpit are far more dangerous (XX, 1639-1640).

Occasionally we hear men say that while it is true that there must be repentance in the Church, yet real Christian repentance must be worked by the Gospel and not by the Law. This is what Agricola said also. This argument often stems from a failure to understand clearly what is meant by Gospel. It is true that the story of the suffering and death of Christ serves to show us the true nature of sin. It demonstrates the awful anger of God against human transgression. If God did not spare his own Son when the sins of the world were laid on him, then what will happen to us? If God forsook his only-begotten and beloved Son for our sin, then what is to become of us? On this subject the Formula of Concord quotes Luther who said, "Yea, what more forcible, more terrible declaration and preaching of God's wrath against sin is there than just the suffering and death of Christ, his Son? But as long as all this preaches God's wrath and terrifies men, it is not yet the preaching of the Gospel nor Christ's own preaching, but that of Moses and the Law against the impenitent. (Trig. p. 955)." Luther says further, "Everything that reproves sin is and belongs to the Law, whose peculiar office it is to reprove sin and to lead to the knowledge of sins (Trig. p. 957)."

Closely allied to the view that true repentance is to be worked by the Gospel rather than the Law is the view that real repentance, true contrition, is sorrow over sin that flows out of love. This is the Roman definition of contrition and it is specifically rejected by the Lutheran Confessions. The Apology asks, "When, however, will a terrified conscience, especially in those serious, true and great terrors which are described in the Psalms

and the prophets, and which those certainly taste who are truly converted, be able to decide whether it fears God for his own sake (out of love), or is fleeing from eternal punishments?" Even in the case of Christians, it is often true that much of our anxiety over sin is occasioned by the threats of punishment spoken by God in the Law. Sorrow out of fear and sorrow out of love are not separated in our hearts, just because we are both spirit and flesh, and the old man still lives in our hearts as well as the new man.

The important thing is that we should be troubled by our sins. For this is the condition of our heart in which the glorious message of the Gospel can bring us hope and comfort and joy. "The closest step to faith is despair," Luther says. And when the Holy Spirit through the Law has done what the confessions call his "strange work," then he can through the glorious Gospel of the grace of God do his own work and bring consolation and comfort to the troubled heart. "He terrifies," says the Apology, "that there may be a place for consolation and quickening, because hearts that are secure and do not feel the wrath of God loath consolation (Trig. p. 265)." And this must always be the goal that we also have in mind when we teach the Law. When we have by our teaching convinced men that they are lost and condemned sinners, then we must also bring them God's own promise that through Christ they shall have forgiveness of sins and everlasting life. Of this a great many things can and should be said, but this is not in the province of this paper that is to deal with the place of the Law in our teaching.

### **THE LAW AS A RULE FOR THE CHRISTIAN**

While the revelation of sin and all its fruits remains one of the purposes of the Law also for the Christian as long as he lives, it serves also as a guide for the Christian life. While the Law does not give the power to do good works, it does show us what works we should do if we wish to please God. Only the Gospel can create love for God in our hearts. Only the forgiveness of sins makes it possible for us to have the right attitude toward God. But once our hearts have been warmed by the warmth of God's love in Christ, once they are filled with gratitude to God for his great kindness to us, we will want to serve him and do those things which please Him.

But what shall we do to please Him? Perhaps all of us have had the experience of wondering what we might do to please someone we love. We ask them what we can give them for Christmas, or we ask someone close to them what they would like. The same question rises in the heart of the child of God. "What shall I render unto the Lord for all His benefits to me?" asked the psalmist. On the road to Damascus, Paul put a similar question and said, "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?" The prophet Micah asked the same question in these words, "Wherewith shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the high God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

Not only the Christian, but all men who follow the natural dictates of their hearts ask this question. But instead of waiting for an answer from God, some men have burned their sons as sacrifices and others have given their daughters to be temple harlots. Some have lain on beds of nails and others have mutilated their bodies. They have beaten themselves with whips, starved themselves, taken vows of chastity and poverty, and lived all their lives as hermits in the desert—all in an effort to please their god. And over their most strenuous efforts and their most prodigious sacrifices, God has spoken the verdict, "In vain do they worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men."

If men are to know what they should do to please the Lord, they must ask him, "What wilt Thou have me to do?" And the Lord has not left us without an answer to this question. The prophet writes: "He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God." "He hath showed thee what is good" in his holy, verbally inspired and inerrant Word, in which he has told us what he wants us to do. It is important for us to remember this. The denial of the verbal inspiration of Scripture and the commonly accepted view that the Bible is only the product of human wisdom, has left modern man without a sure and certain guide for life. For most people today there are no absolute moral values, and the rightness or wrongness of an action, so it is generally held, is to be

determined by the individual conscience, by pragmatic considerations, by the will of the majority, by human reason, or by social custom. This is the so-called “new morality.” In this area, too, the evolutionary philosophy that has dominated western thought for over a hundred years has done its damnable work. In the evolutionary view of man and the world there is no such thing as absolute truth or fixed principles of right and wrong. Ethical principles are only relative, subject to change.

It is therefore important that our children should be firmly grounded in the truth that God has revealed his will to us, that he has done it in the words of the Bible which are God’s own words, and that we therefore have a sure and certain guide for our life in his holy Law as it is summed up in the Ten Commandments and as it is set forth in detail in countless passages of Holy Scripture. They will live in a world to which this conception of right and wrong is completely foreign. But if they know and believe that it is God who lays down the rules, they will not be so easily misled to follow their own intuition of what is correct nor will the majority opinion determine the course of action which they will follow. In their weakness and sinfulness they will still use the argument that “everybody does it,” and they will still seek to justify their acts by saying that they do not see anything wrong with it. They will still be swayed by sentimental notions of what ought to be done, but basically they will know that the judge of their actions is God and that His Word must be studied as the norm of Christian life and action. The Lutheran Confessions state this truth in these words, “This doctrine of the Law is needful for believers, in order that they may not hit upon a holiness and devotion of their own, and under the pretext of the Spirit of God set up a self-chosen worship, without God’s Word and command (*Trig.* p. 969).” They quote as their Biblical proof for this principle Dt.12:8,28,32, where we read, “Ye shall not do. . . every man whatsoever is right in his own eyes. . . observe and hear all these words which I command thee, that it may go well with thee. . . when thou doest that which is good and right in the sight of the Lord thy God. . . . What thing soever I command you, observe to do it; thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it.”

It is our responsibility, therefore, as Christian educators to train men to decide all questions of right and wrong on the basis of the Holy Scripture, because, first, God is the judge of the world and he alone sets the standard; and, secondly, because he has revealed his will to us in the words of the Bible. The first of these principles is granted by all except theoretical atheists, but the second is almost universally denied in our time.

The acceptance of these basic propositions means, of course, that we must learn also in these matters to take our reason captive in obedience to Christ. Because the reason of man is morally depraved by nature, therefore the demands of God often appear to be foolish to human reason. Because we all tend to be pragmatic in our approach to the problem, we often are tempted to decide upon a course of action on the basis of the anticipated consequences. It may seem to us that a certain action commanded by God will do more harm than good, and therefore we choose that method of dealing with the matter at hand which seems to us to be productive of greater good, and thus we exalt our own wisdom above the omniscience of God. What we must keep in mind always and train our children to keep in mind, is that a work is not good unless God wants it done, and a work is not evil unless God has forbidden it. When Saul was sent by God to wipe out the Amalekites, he spared Agag, the king of the Amalekites, and the best of the cattle and sheep, in order, as he said, to sacrifice them to the Lord. For this apparent act of mercy and piety, he was rejected by God, who told him that to obey is better than sacrifice. We might do well to keep this example and the principle which it illustrates in mind as we see the exaggerated piety and the increased devotion of our time, the so-called revival of religion, coupled with a fearful breakdown in moral standards also in the church.

Not everything that appears to us to be good and pious is pleasing to the Lord. When we read the Old Testament prophets, we notice that the strongest denunciations of these men of God are not directed at murderers and adulterers, but against the prophets who taught falsely because they sought the praise of men, the priests who did their work for money, and the people who worshipped their manufactured gods in self-chosen devotion. One of the worst kings of Judah is denounced because he was so religious that he built altars in every corner of Jerusalem (2 Ch 28:24). And in the New Testament, the harshest words of our Savior are not directed against the dishonest publicans and the immoral harlots, but against the pious Pharisees who loved to pray standing on the corner of the streets to be seen of men (Mt 6:5). And it seems tragic in our time when the pure



doctrine of God's holy Word needs defending as seldom as before the Reformation, when there are so many who have not yet heard of their salvation in Christ, and when God's people need the guidance of His directions for their lives, to hear men arguing and disputing about the proper vestments to be worn at Holy Communion, or the color of the cloths to be placed on the altar, as though these things in themselves were a part of the worship of God. I am sure that the Lord does not care very much about the percentage of beeswax in the candles burned on the altar, but I do know that an eternal light burning in the chancel is of no value when the light of his pure Word no longer shines from the pulpit. And the burning of many candles will never please him when the fires have gone out in the heart. His Word must always remain a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path.

This does not mean that he has directed our lives in detail. He does not tell us exactly what we should do in every given situation. We need to remember also that not every command of God applies to all men. There are certain duties that are given to parents and others that are enjoined upon children. The responsibilities that rest upon teachers and preachers are different from those that ought to weigh heavily upon the conscience of farmers, or businessmen, or politicians. Some commandments of the Lord are given to all men, others are given to classes of men, and still others are given to individuals.

And even the commands of the Lord that are universal must not be applied in mechanical fashion. There are times when two commandments of the Lord would appear to be in conflict with each other. There is the commandment of the Lord that tells us that we should not kill, but there is another commandment that says that we are to obey the government and at the same time assigns to the government the right to kill. So that when a man acts as an agent of the government, he acts as a servant of God and serves God by killing. The Law of God says that we should speak the truth. What shall a Christian do when he is required to act as a spy for the defense of his country in obedience to lawfully constituted authority, when in the very nature of the case lying and deception are required of him? To cut off a man's arm would appear to be, per se, contrary to the commandment of God, but if it is necessary to cut off his arm to save his life, it becomes clear to all of us what the choice must be.

To some people it would appear that this destroys the absoluteness of the Law of God, and the light by which our actions are to be guided, but really it serves only to remind us, first, that God is the one who gives the Law and that the Law must never, after the manner of the Greek philosophers, be looked upon as consisting of eternal, immutable principles to which even God must conform. Secondly, we are reminded that we must constantly study his Word if we wish to walk in his paths. It does not mean that the course of action that we are to follow is not definitely prescribed. It is one thing to kill when we can point to a definite commandment of God that requires this of us in this situation. It is quite another thing on our own, without any specific directive of God, to decide that in this particular case we are not bound by God's ordinance. There may be times when the choice between two commandments of God will be a difficult one to make, and in this difficulty we should learn to pray more fervently for guidance and be driven to a more earnest study of His Word, which is the only revelation of God's will for us. And if, in our ignorance, we make the wrong choice, we have the assurance of forgiveness through the precious blood of our Savior.

There are those who seek to solve this difficulty by saying that the law of love takes precedence over the specific commandments of God, and that in the New Testament we are to be guided in our actions by the law of love, which sets aside every other commandment. This argument is built on two false premises. The first of these is the misconception that the law of love and the Ten Commandments are two different laws, standing over against each other in opposition. The fact is, as Paul says, that the Commandments are comprehended or contained in the law of love. As our catechism puts it, the law of love is the summary of the Commandments, so that, when a man obeys the law of love, he will obey one of the Commandments of God. The second error is the mistaken notion that we, on the basis of our finite and fallible human reason, are able to determine what love is, and what love requires of us. Love, like religion, often becomes a cloak for wickedness. On the plea of Christian love, men have, on the one hand, been asked to tolerate false teachers and, on the other, to burn heretics. On the basis of human reason, a good case can be made for both. But the fact is that God has, on the one hand, forbidden us to tolerate false teachers in the church, and on the other, indicated clearly that the sword

by which the Church is to win its battles is the Word of God. We will fulfill the law of love to our neighbor when we treat him as God wants us to deal with him.

The law of love is to remind us that our obedience to the Commandments is not to consist of mere outward actions. God requires obedience not only in the letter, but also in the spirit. And right here may be the place to remind ourselves that to obey the Law in the spirit in Biblical terms does not mean to fulfill the purpose for which a specific law is given without actually doing what the Law demands. This is a violation of the Law. To keep the Law in the spirit means to keep it inwardly, to do what is right because we want to do it out of love for God. To keep the Law in the letter means to comply outwardly with the demands of the Law, without the proper attitude in the heart. As St. Paul says, "Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing." When we therefore hold the Law before the children in our schools and the people in our congregations, we will never be satisfied with mere outward obedience. We will be conscious always of the fact that the Law is truly obeyed if the obedience flows from a willing heart that loves the Lord. That kind of obedience the Law can never elicit from men. It can come only as a result of the preaching of the Gospel of God's love in Christ, so that here, too, we are driven in our teaching to the cross of our Lord as the only source of a truly obedient life.

### **DOES THE CHRISTIAN STILL NEED THE LAW AS A CURB?**

The last question we need to consider as we contemplate the use and application of the Law in church and school has to do with the Law as a curb. We need not discuss at any length what is meant when we speak of the Law in this way, which is also sometimes spoken of as the first use of the Law. Usually, we say that the Law acts as a curb when through the threats of punishment it deters the person who does not want to do what is right from doing wrong. But surely we may include here also that use of the Law which encourages men to do what is right by the promise of reward. For if punishment is considered the reward for evil doing, then freedom from punishment is also a reward for well doing. This use of the Law as a curb is also sometimes called the political use of the Law. For this is the principle followed by the government in maintaining order and discipline in the world.

We are, however, here interested in the use of the Law in church and school. Is it proper to use the Law as a curb when we are dealing with Christians? Some are willing to grant that the Law must be used as a mirror and a rule by Christians and therefore avoid the danger of antinomianism. In this respect, nevertheless, some hold that it is not right to drive Christians to obedience by threats of punishment, and they even object to the use of any kind of reward to encourage believing children of God to do what is right. They believe that any motivation that does not spring purely and completely from love of God is unworthy of a Christian, and the use of such auxiliary motivations is unworthy of a Christian educator.

Now we will all grant that it is right and proper that we should do that which is good and avoid that which is evil because we know that it is the will of our heavenly Father, who has done so much for us in body and soul. Yet, it does not follow that we must conclude from this that every other motivation is wrong. It is true that we should love God above all things, but this does not mean that we dare love no one else, and nothing besides God. By the same token, the principle that the love of God should be the chief motivation for a Christian mode of life does not necessarily make every other type of motivation wrong.

This question of the use of the Law as a curb also must not be decided on the basis of abstract, philosophical reasoning, no matter how Christian such reasoning may appear to be. It must be answered on the basis of the Holy Scriptures. If the inerrant Word of God makes use of this sort of motivation in dealing with Christians, then it would necessarily follow that it is perfectly proper to use it in this way.

It is obvious to anyone who knows the Scriptures that the Bible does use threats of punishment in seeking to elicit obedience to the will of God from believers. There are so many examples of this that one scarcely knows where to begin. In the garden of Gethsemane the Savior urged his disciples to watch and pray, and he did not say, "I want you to do this, and you ought to love me and please me, and therefore you ought also to do this willingly." No, instead He reminded them of the danger that threatened them and said, "Lest ye enter into temptation." When he spoke of the end of the world, he again encouraged them to be watchful, and

again he did not only say, “Look up and lift up your heads because your redemption draweth nigh,” but he also reminded them that those who were not watching when he came would be cut asunder and appointed a portion with the hypocrites. St. Paul also wrote to the “saints” in Rome and told them that they should be subject to the government and pay their taxes — not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. Note well that he does not say, “You must not obey because you are afraid of the wrath and punishment of the civil authorities, for that would be to deny that you are a Christian and such motives have no place in the life of a child of God, but you should obey the laws of the land only and alone because your conscience, your sense of responsibility to God, prompts you to act in this way.” He takes for granted that their fear of wrath will be part of the motivating forces that prompt them to do that, which is right.

And just as the Holy Scriptures use the threats of temporal and eternal punishments to deter the Christian from wrong doing, they also use the promises of temporal and eternal rewards to encourage him to do that which is right. Here we may think of such passages as, “Cast thy bread upon the waters and it shall return unto thee after many days,” or St. Paul’s admonition to the Corinthian Christians, “He that soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully,” or his promise to Timothy, “Godliness is profitable unto all things, having the promise of the life that now is and that which is to come.” Examples could be multiplied, but one more should suffice. Through the prophet Malachi God urged His people to bring the tithes to the temple, and he promised that if they will do this He will give them an abundant harvest. Through Haggai he told them that a drought and a harvest failure had come because they had not rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem. It is evident that God, in the Holy Scriptures uses both the threats of punishment and promises of reward to prompt also His people to do good works.

The Lutheran Confessions also repeat this teaching of Scripture. It always amazes me that people who have memorized Luther’s *Small Catechism* should say that threats of punishment and promises of reward have no place in pedagogy. Luther says that “God threatens to punish all those who transgress His commandments, therefore we should fear His wrath and not act contrary to them.” These words describe in simple terms exactly what we mean when we say that the Law should be used as a curb, also by the child of God. And in the succeeding words of his explanation of the close of the Commandments, he sets forth the positive corollary of this principle, “He promises grace and every blessing to all that keep these commandments. Therefore we should love and trust in Him and willingly do according to His commandments.”

The other confessions repeat this same thought. In the *Large Catechism* Luther writes, “Thus He demands that all our works proceed from a heart which fears and regards God alone, and from such fear avoids everything that is contrary to His will, lest it should move Him to wrath. (*Trig. P. 673*).” The Formula of Concord says, “The truly believing, elect, and regenerate children of God need in this life not only the daily instruction and admonition, warning, and threatening of the Law but also frequently punishments (*Trig. p. 965*).”

If we had the time, we might here very well discuss the question of whether God ever punishes believers, as the Lutheran Confessions here assert and as so many Lutherans, who have sworn to these confessions, deny. But we shall say nothing of that here, but take for granted that the confessions are correct. We will ask therefore why Christians need punishments and threats to move them to do what is right, when they ought to love the Lord and do everything with a free spirit. The answer is a simple one. ‘If we were perfect Christians and did not need to lug this lousy old Adam around with us till we die, we would no longer need the threatening of the Law. If we loved the Lord the way we ought to love Him, no one would need to drive us with threats of punishment to do His will, but because we still do have the old Adam, we need the Law as a curb. And so the Formula of Concord says, “As far as the old Adam is concerned, which still clings to them, he must be driven not only with the Law, but also with punishments, nevertheless he does everything against his will and under coercion, no less than the godless are driven and held in obedience by the threats of the Law. . . . For the old Adam, as an unmanageable, stubborn mule, is still a part of them, which must be coerced to the obedience of Christ, not only by the teaching, admonition, force, and threatening of the Law, but also oftentimes by the club of punishments and troubles, until the body of sin is entirely put off, and man is perfectly

renewed in the resurrection, when he will need neither the preaching of the Law nor its threatenings and punishments, as also the Gospel any longer. (*Trig.* pp. 969-971).”

While all this is true, we ought never to forget that the highest motivation for Christian living can never come from the Law, but only from the Gospel. For children of God who know what they owe to the Father who daily supplies us with all we need to support this body and life, who know what they owe to God the Son who shed His precious blood on the cross for their salvation, who know what they owe to the Holy Spirit without whose blessed work they would still be in the darkness of unbelief; for children of God who know all this, there will never be any better reason for doing what is right than that this will please him who is the source of every blessing that we enjoy, and who loved us unto death. May God grant this spirit to us and to our children, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.