

# The Proper Distinction of Law and Gospel and its Application for Pure Teaching and Spiritual Life<sup>1</sup>

by August Pieper

[Translation by Dennis Rardin, on the basis of an effort by Leonard Bernthal. Waldemar Schuetze's translation of Part III in *Journal of Theology* was also consulted.]

Revelation 3:8 has the Lord writing to the congregation at Philadelphia, "I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth." The faithful Lutheran church has rightly applied this message to herself. The words, "you have kept my word," are true of no other church to the degree they are true of her. There is no other church of the word like her. She was formed and preserved through her keeping of the word, her keeping of Scripture as the infallible, saving word of God. Holding to the word is her unique characteristic, without which her other characteristic, the *sola gratia*, would be out of the question.

It is not necessary to elaborate any further on such a well-known fact of history. To the Lutheran church Scripture is truly the living speech of the great God; therefore she stands in such awe of it that it sends shivers up her spine. To her the word is the one and only power of God for salvation. "God does not wish to deal with us otherwise than through the spoken word and the Sacraments. It is the Devil himself, whatever is extolled as Spirit without the word and sacraments."<sup>2</sup> Therefore the word is more precious to her than gold, than much fine gold, sweeter to her than honey, than honey from the comb.<sup>3</sup> From this two-fold understanding flows her keeping of the word. On this two-fold basis we adore, promote, preach and teach the word so much, and insist on pure doctrine so much, that we deny church fellowship to everyone who will not let the word stand as it reads in every part. We have no right to sell out even the smallest point of doctrine, because it does not belong to us but to the great God, and because part of the way of salvation hangs on every point.

Woe to us should we tamper with the word of God! "Let the prophet who has a dream tell his dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully," Jeremiah 23:28. "Cursed is he who preaches a gospel other than the one we preached," Galatians 1:8. Whoever does not make the purity of his preaching his highest concern is a godless man, who has no fear of God before his eyes and has no regard for the salvation of souls.

But teaching pure doctrine is easier said than done. The Lutheran church has confessed the pure, unadulterated truth in her symbols. They have human failings in form, but the doctrine confessed in them is the pure and unadulterated gospel of God. There is not one false doctrine, not even a hint of false doctrine in them. So it is easy to give a *quia* subscription to the confessions and claim to have pure doctrine.

But not everyone who does so is really a pure teacher in every point of doctrine. To speak of doctrinal purity in the true Lutheran church, for instance in our synod, as if every single pastor, professor, and teacher were free of each and every false doctrine at all times, as if it were not possible for false doctrine to be preached or taught—this is an unrealistic delusion, an utopia which is never realized. There is probably not even one pastor or professor who has from his youth, without fail, taught only what is right in all points of doctrine and has never taught anything false. In this sense even the orthodox, pure church is not free of error. We claim to have pure doctrine only in this sense, that first of all we have set forth the doctrine of Scripture in its purity in our official confessions; second, that no false teaching will be tolerated; and third, that we seek to clean out

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<sup>1</sup> This article, entitled "*Die Rechte Scheidung von Gesetz and Evangehum in ihrer Bedeutung fur reine Lehre and geistliches Leben*," originally appeared in *Theologische Quartalschrift*, Vol. 7, Number 2 (April, 1910), pp. 103-128, Number 3 (July, 1910), pp. 188-203, and Number 4 (October, 1910), pp. 280-300.

<sup>2</sup> Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article VIII, *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 497.

<sup>3</sup> cf. Psalm 19:10.

false practice with all earnestness and patience wherever it shows itself. It is the same with pure doctrine as it is with a holy life. “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me,” Philippians 3:12.

And even if we could claim to be flawless in presenting each individual doctrine of Scripture, still the absolute purity of our teaching would not be guaranteed. Above all, this depends on the clear, pure distinction between law and gospel, on the right understanding of the essence, office, and application of both, on the practical relationship we set up between them. These are really the only two doctrines in the revealed word. They are the only things we have to preach for salvation and for sanctification. Everything else in Scripture is decoration, linguistic form, a means for understanding and proclaiming them. On the one hand, law and gospel are fundamentally different in nature, office, and purpose. On the other hand, they are perfectly united in the goal they strive for—saving and sanctifying sinners and building up the body of Christ.

Our church, following Luther, has always considered it the theologian’s highest art to put both law and gospel into action, to preach and apply them so that they reach their common goal for sinners. Everyone strives for it with all diligence, but no one ever brings it to absolute perfection. And where this distinction is not pure, where the essence, office and application of the two are mixed, we cannot speak of pure doctrine. On the contrary, there the very essence of Christian teaching is rendered null and void, and its effect is brought to nothing. There Christianity becomes merely a religion of reason, and differs from paganism only in its outward rites. Luther writes,

This distinction between law and gospel is the highest art in Christendom, and whoever claims or takes for himself the name Christian should understand and know it. For where something is lacking at this point of doctrine, there one cannot tell a Christian from a pagan or a Jew, so much depends on this distinction...there neither law nor gospel can be understood and consciences must be lost in blindness and error...Therefore no one can mix the two together or mistake one for the other without falsifying doctrine...Therefore whoever knows the art of distinguishing law from gospel well, set him on top and name him a Doctor of Holy Scripture. For without the Holy Spirit it is impossible to arrive at this distinction. I experience for myself, and see daily in others, how hard it is to distinguish the doctrines of law and gospel from each other. Here the Holy Spirit must be master and teacher, or there would be no one on earth who could learn or teach. Therefore no pope, no false Christian, no enthusiast can divide the two from each other, especially in *causa materiale et in objecto*<sup>4</sup>...Under the papacy things went on this way, that neither the pope nor all his scholars, cardinals, bishops and universities have ever known what law or gospel are; indeed, they still have not tasted it, or mentioned in any of their books how to separate one from the other. Therefore their faith, even at its best, is only a Turk’s faith, which is based only on the letter of the law and external conduct.<sup>5</sup>

And regarding Galatians 3:19 he says,

Concerning this distinction between law and gospel you find nothing written in the books of the monks, of the teaching of papal rights, or of the university theologians, yes, not even in the writings of ancient fathers. Augustine knew about and pointed out this distinction up to a point. But Jerome and the others knew nothing about it at all. In short, complete silence about this distinction was the rule in all schools and churches for centuries, which has to astonish a person. This situation put consciences in grave danger. For if the gospel is not clearly distinguished from the law, Christian doctrine cannot be kept free from error.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *In causa materiale*—concerning what in Scripture is law and what is gospel. *In objecto*—concerning which one is to be applied to a given person.

<sup>5</sup> Sermon on Galatians 3:23-24, W.A. IX, p. 412f.

<sup>6</sup> St. Louis Edition, IX, p. 415. Regarding Augustine, Luther quite likely is thinking of his *De Spiritu et Littera*.

This art is difficult and rarely found, and Luther confessed it was even hard for him. So we will not consider ourselves perfect at it either. Certainly we recognize a rich and deep knowledge of pure doctrine in our midst, and that the distinction between law and gospel predominates. Yet it is true that even among us, both in and out of the pulpit, in no other point of doctrine will greater failure and harm be done than in this one. God forbid that we consider any error in any part of revealed truth, even the smallest, as unimportant. But comparatively speaking, it is true that a whole flock of errors in this or that individual point of Christian doctrine would not be half as bad as confusing law and gospel or mixing them together. For from such mixing comes a third thing which is neither one nor the other, which empties God's word of its essential meaning and brings to nothing its power to save and sanctify. Yes, that third thing, in and of itself, can only lead people astray into sin and unbelief, strengthen their self-righteousness, and lead them to hell.

This article is intended to contribute something to understanding the distinction between law and gospel more deeply, and to dividing them more purely in practice.

### I. What is the Law?

As far as content is concerned, the law is none other than what is written in the Ten Commandments, "You shall not kill, commit adultery, bear false witness," etc., Matthew 19:17ff, or summarized spiritually, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself," Matthew 22:37ff, Luke 10:26, Deuteronomy 6:4-5. In Leviticus 19:2 and elsewhere this is all summarized in one concept "Be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy."

The law demands of us an absolute, free, natural, uncommanded ethical perfection, Matthew 5:48. It demands an entirely spontaneous and perfect agreement of our desires, wishes and will, of our aims and aspirations, of our speech and conduct, with its demands. It also demands an inner aversion to all ungodliness and sinfulness, which fills us with indignation within, which opposes every demand to turn aside from God's law and does so with the mind of Christ, "Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men," Mark 8, Matthew 16. Study the spiritual exposition of the law in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7. The law does not demand and forbid only external works and deeds, nor only internal acts of the heart. It wants a constant disposition of the heart, a solid mindset<sup>7</sup>—and not one obtained with great effort, but one which a person has by nature, that is present in his soul by virtue of his creation. The law demands a natural mindset which is man's own as a natural endowment. The law wants the character and nature of this mindset to be so complete and perfect that without any law outside him, out of his own inner, instinctive compulsion, a person wills and does what is good, and hates and avoids what is evil. Compare Philippians 2:5, Jeremiah 31:33. The law not only demands a holy will and action, but a holy being. Truly, that is much to ask for!

The form of the law is demand, order, command and prohibition. "You shall!" "You shall not!" The proper mood for its verbs is the imperative, though it is also expressed in other kinds of language. Therefore the Ten Commandments, Christ's summary of the law as love for God and neighbor, and his command to be holy, each begin with "You shall!" "You shall not!"

And this demand is meant in deadly earnest. It has the promise, "Do this and you will live," Leviticus 18:5, Luke 10:28, Romans 10:5, Galatians 3:12. But as reliable as the law's promise is in and of itself, in practice it has the opposite meaning for us sinners. This promise will never be fulfilled for a single person, for no one ever has, or ever will, fulfill the law.

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<sup>7</sup> The German for *Habitus*.

For sinners, the law has no promise at all in regard to attaining eternal life,<sup>8</sup> but without further ado turns itself into threat, curse, and punishment for them. The law has no thought of grace for the transgressor. “They who stray from your commands are cursed,” Psalm 119:21. “Cursed is the man who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out. Then all the people shall say, ‘Amen,’” Deuteronomy 27:26, Galatians 3:10. God is not a God who is pleased with godless conduct Whoever is evil does not stand before him; he is a consuming fire for all who do evil. The law has in it no thought, no breath of mercy, of relaxing its standards, pulling its punches, or leaving well enough alone. It is an absolutely stern either-or, an arm raised to strike, the arm of God swinging to destroy us.

That is why the law has only one meaning, one effect, one office and one goal for us sinners. The law is the office that proclaims damnation, 2 Corinthians 3:7, and the letter which kills, 2 Corinthians 3:6.

Luther often makes the observation that the mere existence of the law, whether as a witness in our conscience or as God’s revelation in the word, already makes the whole world sinners and proclaims us guilty before God. Had we remained in the law, and the law in us, as our way and nature, we would never have perceived or recognized it in our hearts as law,<sup>9</sup> and it would not have been necessary to give the law again on Mt. Sinai. But this is the reality—our fall from the law first taught us to perceive and recognize it as law. Its very existence as a demand and threat is God’s testimony that we are fallen, godless evildoers.

So on the one hand the law comes against us as a mirror which reveals our sinful nature, our fall from God, and our transgressions to us. When it demands something of us, the very fact that the law demands it shows that we fail to do it. When the law forbids and condemns something, by doing so it is charging it against us as something we have done. “Through the law we become conscious of sin,” Romans 3:20. “Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what it was to covet if the law had not said, ‘Do not covet,’” Romans 7:7. By the very fact that it forbids coveting, the law affirms that there is coveting and identifies it as sin. So it is with all sin, from the obvious outward deed to the hidden original corruption.

That is why Scripture has a revealed<sup>10</sup> and thorough doctrine of sin, the substance of which is taken from the law. “They are all sinners together, and fall short of the glory of God,” Romans 3:12 & 23, Psalm 14:3. The natural man lacks every spark of spiritual life, every salutary thought of God and spiritual things, I Corinthians 2:14. “There is no one who understands, no one who seeks God; there is no fear of God before their eyes,” Romans 3:11 & 18. So they also lack every spiritual inclination of the will. Truly, as the Augsburg Confession says,<sup>11</sup> by nature they can have no true fear of God, no true faith in God. They are utterly dead in transgressions and sins, Ephesians 2:1-5, Colossians 2:13, totally of the flesh and sold to sin, Romans 7:14, filled with every evil lust and inclination, full of enmity toward God, Romans 8:7, and totally servants and

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<sup>8</sup> [Pieper’s comment] This is not to deny the fact that the proclamation of the Law, the actual giving of the Law, had great promises given with it, Exodus 20, and that an evangelical tone goes through the entire presentation, for example, already at the beginning, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” This is the same as, for example, Romans 12:1: “Therefore, I urge you, in view of God’s mercy, etc.” This is the *usus tertius legis* [third use of the Law] of the Formula of Concord. It has in mind the believers in Israel, who were being urged with that promise (“I show love to thousands who love me and keep my commandments”) to keep the commandments diligently, and from the promises would also realize all their failures to keep them. So also the threat is added (“I am a jealous God...”) because the flesh still adheres to believers, in order to warn the believers, as well as all the godless, against transgression. But this does not change the fact that the Law as such, in and of itself, promises grace, blessing, and salvation only on the condition of absolutely perfect obedience, and without further ado curses every transgressor.

<sup>9</sup> I.e., if we had not fallen into sin, keeping the law would be perfectly natural for us; the written law would be superfluous, and its threats unnecessary. God does not have to say, “You shall not fall toward the sky,” and threaten us with eternal damnation, in his effort to get us to fall *down* instead.

<sup>10</sup> Pieper uses the term “special” here and frequently in this article (*besondere Lehre* here, more often *besondere Predigung* and similar expressions). This dogmatic term refers to preaching the written or revealed law, as opposed to the “general proclamation” of the natural law by conscience or society. We make a similar distinction in English simply by speaking of the “natural” and the “written or revealed” law. Whenever possible, these terms will be translated “written” or “revealed law,” or, occasionally, “specific preaching of the revealed law” if necessary to avoid redundancy in English.

<sup>11</sup> Article II, *Triglot* p. 43.

slaves of sin, Romans 6:17ff, 1 Kings 21:20.<sup>12</sup> As a result of all this, not only do they instinctively and necessarily give themselves over to all sin, but in and of themselves they are also incapable of changing their ways, Jeremiah 13:23, Psalm 55:19, Isaiah 1.

That is the boundless corruption of man's original sin. It is worth noting that our confessions, in almost every place they speak of original sin, point to it, in contrast to sinful deeds, as the essential or principal sin.. Because of original sin man lies under God's wrath and is subject to death and the power of the Devil. Cf. Apology II, Smalcald Articles III, I, Formula of Concord I. Only the Lutheran church has this understanding.

But the law is not only a mirror of sin. It is neither a cold, objective description of sin, nor a theoretical definition or abstract teaching of man's sinfulness. No, the law, in its essential nature, is the demand of the holy God on our person in regard to our personal relationship with him, and even more. Truly, the law is no abstraction; here the personal God himself comes against us ordering, commanding and forbidding, requiring, demanding, and threatening. Where the law encounters sin, it turns into wrath, curse and damnation because of sin. That is what Romans 4:15 means. "The law brings only wrath," that is, it brings God's wrath on us, because it did not find its demands satisfied, but rather came across sin. "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men," Romans 1:18. This wrath of God is not a picture of wrath, but is the actual *furor dei*,<sup>13</sup> leading to his curse and judgment of damnation.

The law is truly a most serious matter for sinners, not merely a story about wrath and curse. Just as its demand is no game, so its threat is no mere shadow boxing. No, it brings wrath, curse and damnation with it *in concreto*.<sup>14</sup> The law is God actually grabbing and getting a hold on sinners spiritually. The law puts sinners in real spiritual handcuffs and brings them to trial, *in concreto* it convicts, sentences and hands them over to punishment, that is, to death and to eternal agony, Hebrews 4:12, Galatians 3:10, Genesis 2:17, Romans 5:12, 2:8-9. In short, the law's office is to preach damnation, to judge the sinner and award him damnation as his rightful lot, 2 Corinthians 3:9.

That is the nature of the law. Considering it objectively, in relation to the sinner, it is demand, threat, mirror, wrath, curse, and damnation. And it is all of these in an absolute sense. As a demand, the law is not just advice, a well-meant fatherly admonition or merely a request; it is rather a preemptory command. As a threat, the law is not merely a mild warning; it is rather a burning indication of never-ending punishment. As a mirror it does not draw sentimental pictures for the imagination, but shows a frightful reality. As wrath, curse, and a handing over for punishment the law knows no condition and no moderation, sees no possibility of God changing his mind or commuting his sentence. Regarding its demand and curse the law is as unchangeable as God himself. Therefore Paul sums up the entire nature of the law in this single statement, "The letter kills," 2 Corinthians 3:6-7, Romans 7:10-13.

Together with the law's nature, its power and effect are indicated. In practice the law's power and effect are not separated from its nature. God himself pronounces the death sentence on the sinner and also, at the same time, carries it out. The execution follows close on the sentencing. The threat, "On the day you eat of it you will surely die," was a prophecy; it was fulfilled at the very time the sin was committed. At the moment of the sin, death took its seat in man's heart and on his neck. Like a killing frost in the summer devastates the growing crops, the breath<sup>15</sup> of the LORD, the anger, the curse of God blew on man's sin and on the whole creation; from that time on they have been withering in the face of utter ruin, Isaiah 40:7-8. Death entered the world and began its work of destruction.

Through one man and through one sin death entered the world and came to all men, because they all sinned, Romans 5:12. "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field," because God is already executing his death sentence on the fallen world in a very real way. Job says, "Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble. He springs up like a flower and withers away; like a fleeting shadow, he does not

<sup>12</sup> The second citation is, in the original, "1. Rom. 21,20." 1 Kings 21:20, "I have found you because you have sold yourself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord," must be the passage Pieper meant.

<sup>13</sup> God's fury.

<sup>14</sup> That is, the Law does not merely announce God's judgment; it brings God's judgment with it.

<sup>15</sup> *Geist*.

endure,” Job 14:1ff. He complains, “Does not man have hard service on earth? Are not his days like those of a hired man? Like a slave longing for the evening shadows, or a hired man waiting eagerly for his wages, so I have been allotted months of futility, and nights of misery have been assigned to me,” Job 7:1ff. All labor and toil, all the vanity of this life, all sorrow and all misfortune, all the grief, cares, anxieties, tears, and heartaches, all the death and destruction in this world result from this: “We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence. All our days pass away under your wrath; we finish our years with a moan...But who believes that you are so very angry?”<sup>16</sup>

And as far as the law is concerned the temporal death, the temporal ruin which plagues us, which is so frightfully real that the whole world cries and wails about it—this is nothing in itself. It is merely the beginning of eternal ruin, of eternal death, of the powers of hell. Already in this temporal distress eternal death has laid its hand on us and relentlessly drags us down to hell, unless God’s grace intervenes. What we experience here of the inescapable dominion of temporal death is the beginning of the dominion of eternal death, which through sin, by the power of the law, has come to all men. For we are already judged by the law and are already at the point of actually being thrown into the jaws of hell. Oh yes, the law is powerful and effective indeed. The letter kills, kills, kills.

And it kills just as completely inwardly as outwardly. The law devastates, ruins, destroys, and kills the soul. We understand that the law does not do this of itself, but through the sin which dwells in us. For in and of itself the law is holy, righteous and good, Romans 7:10ff. But sin is there once and for all, and the law cannot step aside, so the law’s effect is inevitable—the death of the soul. Romans 2:14ff says that the Gentiles do by nature things required by the law, that they are a law for themselves and thereby give notice that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, that at the same time their conscience bears witness that the law’s threats are right, and their thoughts are now accusing them, now acquitting them in regard to their keeping or transgressing the law. This passage is saying that people not only know God’s law by nature, they also perceive its witness, agree with it in their conscience, and judge right and wrong by it. They feel themselves driven to fulfill it, and when they fall into transgression they have an awareness of guilt.

And this is said of all mankind in general. There is not one person who does not perceive in his heart the law’s testimony about his sin. One can stifle it, or harden his heart against it so that eventually he is not aware of it, but the by nature the witness is still there.<sup>17</sup> When the act is performed, this witness is felt and detected through the conscience, and cannot but become an accuser of sin over against the day of judgment, Romans 2:16. The heathen know God’s righteous decree that those who do “such things” deserve death. They know it without the revelation of the written law, by nature. If this is already true of the natural law inscribed on the heart, how much more is it true of the revealed law which is specifically proclaimed by God’s command? Because of this it is true in full measure, “Through the law comes”—as a result is effectively present—“the knowledge of sin” in everyone who hears it, into whose spirit it enters.

However, original sin, sinful living, and self-hardening make the testimony of the natural law so indistinct that Paul can say, “I would not have known what it was to covet (would not have recognized it as sin) if the (revealed) law had not said, ‘Do not covet’ For apart from (revealed) law, sin is dead,” Romans 7:7ff. “Before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account where there is no law,” Romans 5:13. When he speaks of the heathen in Romans 1:18ff, Paul shows how little regard natural man has for his natural knowledge of the law and sin, for the law, and for God himself. So the natural knowledge of God is not sufficient to put man where the gospel must meet him in order to save him.

But in practice the revealed law has a much greater effect. In it the same God who wrote the law in man’s heart but found only utter contempt for it, comes to man once again from the outside through the word.

<sup>16</sup> Psalm 90:7-9,11. Verse 11 is translated from Pieper’s German, since his point is lost in the NIV translation.

<sup>17</sup> *Man kann es ersticken, das Herz dagegen verstocken, sodass man es schliesslich nicht mehr verspürt, aber ursprünglich ist das Zeugnis da and wird auch durch’s Gewissen actu empfunden und wahrgenommen, und zwar als Anklage über die Sünde gegen den Tag des Gerichts, v. 16.* Two problems here: 1. By “*ursprünglich*,” does Pieper mean that the witness is “primordial, original,” i.e. in his heart from creation? Or does he mean that in the case of a hardened person, the “original” witness is still there? 2. What is *actu*?

The word sheds light on the innermost corners of man's heart, looks at him, forces him to look God right in the eye, and then thunders in his conscience, "You transgressor! Cursed are you because of your wickedness and sin!" "The word of God, the law, is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart," Hebrews 4:12. There can be disagreement in this passage over the meaning of *merismos*<sup>18</sup> and its connection with the following words. But the passage still clearly ascribes to the law the power that penetrates the soul of the sinner right down to its marrow, that judges and condemns the thoughts and attitudes of his heart.

And it is always the same with other pictures. A picture of the power of the law's effect is painted when God says through Jeremiah (23:29), "Is not my word like fire, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" It is the Holy Spirit who punishes the world because of sin in the law; this punishment is a guilty verdict, a conviction for sinfulness and damnation.<sup>19</sup> The sinner then has a godly and powerful conviction of his guilt and the punishment he deserves. He recognizes God's voice in the law just as Adam recognized it in the garden, and is terrified just as Adam was.

Indeed, where God through his Spirit impresses the law on a person, and reveals sin, wrath, curse and punishment to him, there it is out with the usual deathly quiet, the cemetery silence in his soul. There terror of God enters, a heart-stopping horror at the mouth of the abyss. He has the same experience as Felix, Acts 24:25, the people of Israel at the giving of the law on Sinai, Exodus 19:16, Peter, Luke 5:8, the jailer at Philippi, Acts 17:29, the same experience David had after he had come to know his sin. David felt the arrows of the Almighty in his heart; the double-edged sword which pierces his soul and spirit, joints and marrow, "divides," that is demoralizes,<sup>20</sup> breaks his heart and courage, and leaves no soundness in his bones. He groans in anguish of heart. His sins have become a great burden too heavy for him, Psalm 38. Indeed, the end result of the law's effect on the sinner is despondency and despair, as happened to Cain and Judas, Matthew 27:3ff. Every Christian has some experience of this and joins Luther when he sings:

My fears increased till sheer despair  
Left naught but death to be my share  
And hell to be my sentence.<sup>21</sup>

We see the law work itself out completely in the case of Judas—the death of the soul in the midst of this life. From this preserve us, dear Father in heaven!

The worst part of the law's effect is that it still does not restrain sin, the purpose for which it was originally given, except in a completely outward way.<sup>22</sup> Even less does it work true repentance or make someone spiritually alive. The law is truly God's word, through which the Holy Spirit works, John 16:8ff; it is in and of itself holy, righteous and good, Romans 7:12; it is spiritual, Romans 7:14. In spite of all this, it cannot rouse anyone to spiritual life. "I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law?" Galatians 3:2-5. "For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law," 3:21, but there is no such law. The letter kills. Those who busy themselves with doing the works of the law, as well as those who are terrified, lose hope, and despair under the law—all who are under the law are under its curse. For the Spirit of God which rules in the law is no Spirit of grace and life, but—because of sin—is the Spirit of demanding, wrath and curse. It is impossible for the law to make anyone righteous and alive, since it was made powerless to do this through sin, Romans 8:3. It demands righteousness and a spiritual life, but cannot bring it about; it threatens, curses and condemns, but knows of no

<sup>18</sup> "...dividing soul and spirit..."

<sup>19</sup> John 16:8 (see NIV text note).

<sup>20</sup> *zeresst*, which literally means "decompose, disintegrate," and figuratively means "demoralize."

<sup>21</sup> "Dear Christians One and All Rejoice," *Christian Worship*, 377, v.3.

<sup>22</sup> Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article II.

grace and therefore also gives no comfort. Because it binds all things over to sin and curse,<sup>23</sup> it gives everyone over to eternal punishment and kills everyone through despair. The letter kills.

The law also kills because it increases sin; it drives the sinner ever deeper into sin. The law drives and urges one into self-righteousness and pride, another into sin and vice. It makes one into a miserable hypocrite, another into a miserable slave of vice, both into furious enemies of God and the law. The apostle says in Romans 7:5 that the sinful passions were aroused through the law to bear fruit for death; and 7:8-9, “Sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead. Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died.” “The law was added so that the trespass might become greater,” i.e., increase itself, Romans 5:20.

Now in regard to its wording, the law wants to have good works (“You shall!”) and restrain sin (“You shall not!”). It even goes to the point of attaching the promise to the commandment, and the threat to the prohibition.<sup>24</sup> But, by virtue of the fact that man is in bondage under sin, the law has exactly the opposite effect. It goads the Old Adam into putting his wicked nature into action by committing every kind of sinful deed. Already in Genesis 4:7 sin is compared to a wild animal crouching at the door. It sleeps as long as no enemy is there. But let the hunter’s sword strike its breast, and it wakes up terrified. It does not peacefully submit to capture. Rather, because it is wild, it springs into action, and a life and death struggle ensues. Filled with the pangs of death, it struggles on to the last gasp, and dies fighting.

So it is with slumbering sin. Natural man is quite terrified when the killing law enters into his heart. Indeed, the pangs of death and hell enclose his heart, but with him there is no thought of surrender. He cannot convert himself; just as little can he willingly submit to death. So in dread, fear, and anxiety he begins his war against God. Experience teaches even the natural man something of this function of the law. “Stolen bread tastes sweet,” Proverbs 20:17. The forbidden excites; that is why Ovid says, “*Nitimur in vetitum, semper cupimusque negata.*”<sup>25</sup> Over against the haughty, fleshly-minded enemy of God, the law sets itself up as a higher authority which demands things from him and threatens him. As soon as it does, man rises up in rebellion and really starts breaking it. He cannot submit to the law, Romans 8:7. Now sin really takes control of him, 6:14.

There is no way to escape the demands and threats of the law. To surrender willingly to slavery, curse and damnation, man cannot do, so he sets himself up in defiant opposition to the law, his own authority against God’s authority. “Who is the Lord that I should obey him?” Exodus 5:2. He is convinced of the law’s majesty in his conscience; it strikes home. Inwardly he shakes and trembles; he even loses hope and despairs. Nevertheless he takes up his utterly hopeless war against God, and races headlong into the hardening from which there is no return, unless God shows him mercy.

Some very enthusiastically throw themselves into observing the law, and make themselves believe they have kept the law well enough. They don the hypocritical armor of self-righteousness, their hearts filled all the while with hidden, deadly hostility against God and his law. These are the haughty Pharisees; the tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of heaven ahead of them. Others *are* those very tax collectors and prostitutes, thieves and murderers, mockers and blasphemers, who harden their hearts in *this* way unless God intervenes with his grace. Like the Pharisees, they store up against themselves wrath for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed, which—according to the law—will give to each person according to what he has done, Romans 2:5-6. That is the frightful function of the law.

“Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful,” Romans 7:13. Indeed the letter kills and cannot do otherwise—because of sin.

Because of the sin that was already present, the law’s effect is also its office. This thing it actually accomplishes is what it is intended to accomplish. God revealed it and has it proclaimed so that it will kill the sinner, in order that grace may make him alive again. It is intended to make demands, curse, and hand the sinner

<sup>23</sup> cf. Romans 11:32.

<sup>24</sup> Smalcald Articles, III, 2, *Triglot* p. 479.

<sup>25</sup> “We strive for the forbidden, and always lust for things denied us.”



over to temporal misery, death and hell. It is intended to produce knowledge of sin, terror, anxiety,<sup>26</sup> and despair. The law is intended to awaken slumbering sin and force it into action, to compel it to produce its fruit with all its might. The law creates no new sin. But it is intended to elicit the sin which is already there as a condition, the ruin of original sin—the self-righteousness, conceit, pride, defiance, hostility against God, the lying, deceit, hypocrisy, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander—in short all the ungodliness and wickedness that lie deep in the heart, hidden under all kinds of pretty masks. The law is intended to turn the original sin in the heart into actual sinful desires and deeds, into transgressions, and in this way bring it to light. The very commandment that forbids sin with threats and curses is intended to get the sin in the heart to act, to stir it up. The law is intended to have the sinner make himself guilty of actual transgression, the curse, and temporal and eternal death. In this way it makes room for grace to save him.

To summarize: with a view toward his ultimate pardon, the law is to kill the sinner, who otherwise is irretrievably lost in the ruin of his original sin. The law is to kill 1) by turning all kinds of wicked desires into deeds, 2) by bringing curse and damnation on a person, and 3) by driving him into anguish and despair through knowledge of his sin.

While we willingly grant points two and three, we are inclined to dispute point one. For, on the one hand, it seems to make God the author of sin, and on the other hand, it seems to work directly against the conversion of the sinner. But, first of all, it is clear once and for all, in Romans 7, that the law actually stirs up covetous desires, in fact, that it produces each and every kind of covetous desire, 7:8. The law forbids and damns every sinful desire; by doing so it also arouses sinful desire, sets it in motion, advances it. And the more vehemently it demands, forbids, and curses, the more powerfully and energetically it brings forth the sinful desire. How completely wicked is the heart of man!

Scripture also says quite emphatically that this is the divinely intended purpose of the law. In Romans 5:20 Paul says, “The law was added so that the trespass might increase,” which means, in its context, “so that from the one trespass of Adam a mountain of sin might arise.” In Galatians 3:19 it says, “What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions.” “Because of transgressions” certainly means, “For the purpose of revealing the transgressions,” but it also means, “For the purpose of increasing the transgressions” and “For the purpose of condemning the transgressions,” indeed, it means even more, as we shall see at the conclusion.

At the same time, we certainly remind ourselves again and again, as Paul reiterates so often in Romans 7, that in reality man’s original sin, not the law, is the *causa efficiens*,<sup>27</sup> the guilty party for this increase of sin. It is sin that seizes the opportunity afforded by the law to carry out all its wickedness. But it is the purpose of the law to afford sin this opportunity, and in this way to drive man into all kinds of evil desires, sins, shame and blasphemy, hostility and furious fighting against God, until God considers it the right time to intervene with his grace.

In no way does this make God the author of sin. We recall here Luther’s illustration in *De Servo Arbitrio*<sup>28</sup> of the rider riding a lame horse, by which he seeks to make God’s working in the hardened more understandable. The rider does nothing different with the lame horse than with the sound one—he urges it on. That the lame horse limps is not the rider’s fault, rather, the actual cause of the limping is the lame condition of the horse. So it is here. God works in the sinner with the law. He cannot, for the sake of the sinner, annul it or take away its power without denying his holiness. He presses it on the sinner’s heart like the rider presses spurs into the side of the lame horse. In the horse the result is a limp; in the sinner the result is all kinds of sinful actions.

For another thing, God does not will the sinful action as sin, or insofar as it is sin. Sin is already there in the ruin of original sin, just as awful, just as damnable, just as deadly as the sinful action. Rather, God wants the

<sup>26</sup> *Angst*.

<sup>27</sup> In the Aristotelian language of the orthodox dogmatists, the *causa efficiens* or “moving cause” was the cause which most directly caused something to happen. In the case of a car moving down the street, for example, the *causa efficiens* might be the engine.

<sup>28</sup> *Bondage of the Will*.

form of the sin which already exists changed. He wants man's sinful condition turned into the corresponding deed for a definite purpose. God does this with a view toward man's salvation, as we shall see later.

This purpose of the law to incite, provoke and urge the sinner on to all kinds of transgressions, blatant hostility and open warfare against God in no way contradicts its other goal—to crush him and bring him to despair through the knowledge of sin and the curse. Certainly despair and arrogant struggling against God seem to be opposite, mutually exclusive spiritual conditions. And indeed, struggling against God involves arrogance, a malicious disposition, and hardening oneself. It must, unless broken, lead to total obduracy.

But not only is it possible for these opposite spiritual conditions to exist at the same time; it is reality. The depths of the human soul cannot be measured with yardstick, mathematics, or psychology. "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" Jeremiah 17:9. Indeed the soul is both defiant and despondent not only from one moment to the next, but even at the same time. Despair, death's deepest agony, can be bound up with the most stubborn opposition to God in man's fight to the death. In fact, the one is the end result of the other. There is such a thing as fighting with the "courage of despair."

Yes, not only is it possible, but it is actually the case, that man wallows in sin and depravity with the dread of hell in his soul. With despair in his heart he dreadfully mocks, curses, and blasphemes, he consciously rages and storms against God. Yes, it is as a result of his despair that he resolutely sets himself, with all the strength at his disposal, against the all-powerful God who manifests no grace. So despair in the heart does not make opposition to God impossible, and vice versa. They can be, and in fact are, both present at the same time.

Indeed, they are intended to be together. One is to serve the other. The three effects of the law are to assist each other. The law's curse makes the despair worse, and the despair (which is the greatest sin) makes the curse worse. Despair makes the opposition to God worse, and the opposition to God makes the despair and the curse worse. So the law is to lock an iron ring around the sinner from which there is no way out—except by grace.

Grace is the goal toward which everything the law works is striving. But we must be very careful not to misunderstand the spiritual and moral nature of the law's effects. The law is our—the natural man's—taskmaster unto Christ, Galatians 3:24.<sup>29</sup> But that does not mean that the law prepares us spiritually or morally for the gospel,<sup>30</sup> that it converts our unspiritual and immoral nature into a spiritual and moral one, or breaks or diminishes our unspiritual nature in the least. Nor does it mean that the law makes us less hostile, obstinate, or arrogant toward God, or that it leads us to hunger and thirst for the righteousness of God, makes us spiritually poor, humble, or sorrowful over our sins, or that the law makes us willing or "merely" willing to receive the gospel. No, passages like Matthew 5 about spiritual poverty, about those who mourn, are meek, and hunger and thirst for righteousness, Isaiah 57 and 66 about those who are humble and contrite in spirit, as well as Psalm 113:5ff, Luke 1:51, 1 Peter 5:5, Luke 14:11, all deal with the crushed spirit of the repentant sinner brought about through the gospel. About this God has a heartfelt pleasure, since it is a spiritual virtue, a fruit of faith.

But the "spirituality" of the person whose spirit is crushed only by the law is unspiritual; his "morality" is the greatest immorality. For it is entirely the kind of "spirituality" which sets natural man's inborn wickedness and godlessness in motion through the law. This "spirituality" is sin—sin awakened, raging against God, terrified and in anguish. Indeed, even the attitude of a sinner struck down by the law, by which he knows his sins and is terrified and despairs, even this is pure sin. His knowledge is sin, his anguish is sin, his despair is the greatest sin—not to mention the fact that man does not do or achieve these things, but rather only has them done to him. He does not willingly agree with any of this in his heart; rather, he sets himself against it. And

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<sup>29</sup> The Greek says "So the law became our *παιδαγωγός* to lead us *εἰς Χριστόν*, so that we might be justified by faith." The translation in the footnote of the NIV, "to lead us until Christ came," is the correct one. However, one cannot translate with the temporal sense of *εἰς Χριστόν* here because it is rather clear from what follows that when he wrote this article (1910), Pieper did not yet understand *εἰς Χριστόν* primarily in its temporal sense. So the German "*Zuchtmeister auf Christum*" is translated as literally as possible, "taskmaster unto Christ," throughout the article.

<sup>30</sup> That is, the law does not prepare us for the Gospel by making us act better (a moral preparation), or by creating in us an emptiness or sense of need which the gospel fills (a spiritual preparation).

man's rising up in rebellion is inseparably bound up with the knowledge of sin that is thrust upon him. Man's will is still that unbroken, unconverted, fleshly, hostile, evil will, which cannot submit to the law, Romans 8:7. Yet it is precisely through the knowledge of the law and God's wrath which is imposed on it<sup>31</sup> that this will is set in motion.

No, the law cannot impart life, Galatians 3:21. It cannot create a flicker of spiritual life, not even a spark of salvation. It can only kill, and do nothing else but kill. Even the knowledge of sin, anguish, and despair which it creates is pure sin, an utterly cursed thing, pure death. Only eternal death and damnation can result from it, as in the case of Judas, if grace does not intervene. It is, in fact, the beginning of the eternal agony, "the *passiva contritio*, true sorrow of the heart, suffering and the sensation of death,"<sup>32</sup> of the wrath of God which burns down into the depths of hell. Indeed, what the law works, and is intended to work, in the unconverted sinner is nothing less than hell, hell's agony and raging, the condition of the condemned in eternal torment. Hell consists of nothing else than the wrath of God rankling the condemned, so that they continue on in sin, like the rich man, and rant and rave against God. The only difference is that to be under the law in this world is the first beginning of hell, there is the fulfillment; here there is the possibility of salvation through grace, there not.

So there can be no talk of any moral or spiritual effect and purpose of the law which prepares a person for grace. From a spiritual and ethical point of view, man's condition under the working of the law, under the contrition worked by the law, is worse than it was before. Then sin was dead; it slept. Now it is awake, alive; it storms and rages.

But this condition does not hinder or defeat conversion by the gospel. Rather, the gospel must find a person in precisely this condition in order to work faith in him.<sup>33</sup> It is specifically the *passiva contritio*, the anguish of sin, the agony and feeling of death, upon which grace can work. The gospel is by its very nature the forgiveness of sins. It bounces off of the person who has no knowledge of any kind of sin and has no effect on him. Therefore natural man can never be converted as long as sin sleeps undisturbed, locked away in his heart, mind, spirit and thoughts without his knowledge, where undetected it rules all his thoughts, desires, words, and actions, and even passes itself off as right and virtuous.

The presence of the *contritio* worked by the law is the *sine qua non* of conversion through the gospel. But the question is, in what way? Why? The answer has nothing to do with whether this contrition is sin or virtue, spiritual or unspiritual. The spiritual or ethical character of the despair over sin does not come into consideration here at all. Rather, contrition is necessary here only as a condition of the soul, or to put it in more learned language, the disposition of the psyche. The contrition worked by the law, as consciousness of sin, anguish over sin, and the dread of eternal damnation, is an unbearable torment of the soul, a taste of hell's agony, which the sinner naturally wants to escape (he "anxiously desires aid").<sup>34</sup> As unspiritual and hostile to God as this desire to escape is, it is on this spiritual condition that the gospel can work, because it offers him salvation.

By no means does this mark conversion as a natural occurrence. To the sinner who has been brought to despair and torment by the law, because he is a natural, unspiritual person, the kind of salvation the gospel offers is offense and foolishness. He is completely unable to recognize it as genuine salvation. In fact, he only experiences the salvation which the gospel offers as mockery in his distress. A miracle, the spiritual opening of his understanding, is required so that he can lay hold of trust in the gospel. But the gospel also takes care of this, for it is God's power for salvation; it is spirit and life.<sup>35</sup> That Scripture makes this connection between the working of the law and gospel, we will see later from Galatians 3.

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<sup>31</sup> Literally "the passive knowledge of the law and God's wrath."

<sup>32</sup> *Contritio passiva* is the anguish and terror of heart which are inflicted on the sinner through the proclamation of the law. Unlike the repentance worked by the Gospel, the *contritio passiva* leads only to rage against God and despair unless God intervenes through the Gospel. (*Contritio activa* was a term used in a work-righteous sense by Roman scholastics to describe a contrition natural man was able to manufacture in himself.) Cf. Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article III, *Concordia Triglotta* p. 479-481.

<sup>33</sup> cf. Romans 11:32, Galatians 3:22.

<sup>34</sup> Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article II, *Triglot* p. 479.

<sup>35</sup> cf. Romans 1:16, John 6:63.

But first let us look at the other side of the law's operation. God wills the despair over sin worked through the law. He does not will it in regard to whether it is sin or holiness, but strictly as a disposition of the soul. In the same way he even wills the increase of sin worked through the law—turning original sin into actual lusts, desires and passions, into all kinds of sinful deeds, defiance, hostility, grumbling, etc. (cf. Smalcald Articles et al.)

But in what way does he will this increase of sins? Certainly not as a disposition of the soul, for as such they would hinder conversion. Indeed, were God to leave them room to work themselves out, they would end with absolute hardening and obduracy as their legitimate consequence. Or does he will them insofar as they are sins, i.e. sinful, in their nature? No—never, at no time and in no sense does God will the sinful quality of an action or thought. He is not a God who is pleased with godless ways. No, God wills sins, he wills individual transgressions—fleshly desires, passions, words and works—only in that they are actions, *acta et facta*, and are therefore concrete, graspable, palpable ways for the original sin which lives within to present, reveal and manifest itself—so that sin might be recognized.

“Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law.” “Apart from law, sin is dead.” Sin can exist as a dead, quiet, inactive, passive condition, as merely being sinful; it is unrecognizable for the sinner as natural man. No one recognizes original sin in and of itself. When it is excited and incited, when it comes alive and breaks out into action, into actual, concrete desires and deeds—this first makes it perceptible, recognizable. For this reason God wills that the dead sin become alive, that the sleeping sin wake up, that original sin give itself over to all kinds of sinful deeds—so that in this way sin might be recognized.

So God's stirring up sin is strictly in service to the sinner's consciousness of sin. The sinful deed which is a concrete, obvious, visible transgression, the sinful will which again and again pushes ahead in obvious opposition to the law, the crude, vulgar lust, passion, and misdeed which grabs his attention and is clearly, evidently and undeniably a transgression—this should make the sinner aware that he is guilty and deserves punishment, and should make him fall into terror and despair. And from the knowledge of his sinful acts he should progress to the knowledge of the ruin of original sin, the chief sin. From his self-righteous, arrogant thoughts he should become aware of his self-righteous, arrogant heart. From his impure desires and actions, which rage within him, he should become aware of his unspeakably impure nature. He should become aware that satisfying the law from the heart is impossible, that he cannot become righteous before God, that he is bound and locked up under the law. In this way arousing sin brings about the knowledge of sin, and with it the possibility of salvation through the gospel.<sup>36</sup>

That this is the teaching of Scripture is evident from a look at Romans 7, especially v. 13. After the Apostle has shown that sin was brought to life through the law, and how sin, through transgression of the law, brought death to us, he concludes by saying that it happened for this purpose, “in order that (*ἵνα*) sin might be recognized as sin”—“in order that (again *ἵνα*) through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful,” v. 13. This means, “For this purpose the law is to incite the sin in the heart to actual transgressions, so that the sin in the heart might become known as the actual cause of death, recognized as utterly sinful.”

And there is one more expression with which Scripture joins the office and effects of the law for the sake of the sinner's salvation. To complete our thoughts, we need to take a closer look at this. In Galatians 3:19 Paul answers the question: What is the purpose of the law? “It was added for the sake of transgression.”<sup>37</sup> “For the sake of”<sup>38</sup> is quite indefinite. It can mean, “for the purpose of *revealing* the transgressions,” “for the purpose of *increasing* them,” or “for the purpose of *condemning* them.” It can mean just one of these things, or two or all three taken together. We see a few sentences later that Paul means all three, where he says, “But the Scripture”—and here that is the law, or God through the law—“declares the whole world a prisoner of sin so that the promise might be given through faith” (Galatians 3:22). And also the next sentence, “But before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. Therefore the law was

<sup>36</sup> cf. Apology XII, 51, *Triglott* p. 265.

<sup>37</sup> *Um der Ubertretungen willen.*

<sup>38</sup> *Um...willen.*

put in charge as a taskmaster unto Christ” (Galatians 3:23-24). To this we add the synonymous statement in Romans 11:32, “For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.”

The law is our taskmaster unto Christ, the one who prepares us for the faith which saves us. This preparation before or for<sup>39</sup> faith, worked through the law, is not to be understood as a moral improvement, but merely as a disposition of the soul, as we have already discussed. The law always prepares us right beforehand for faith. How, by what means? “So,” that is, as we just said, “by means of the fact that” we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. The “being held prisoners by the law” is the preparation beforehand for faith.<sup>40</sup> Or—this is really the same thing—being held as prisoners of sin by God through the law. Or—this is also the same thing—being held as prisoners of unbelief. Just what does that mean, being held as prisoners of the law, of sin, or of unbelief? Law and sin, law and unbelief are correlative here, just as on the gospel side faith and Christ are correlative. The term “held prisoners” is important. It is much stronger than the term used later in Galatians (4:3), “to be in slavery” under the basic principles of the world. “Held prisoners” means being under the law or under sin as if in a prison from which there is no escape. “Being locked up” means being bound and fettered hand and foot as if with handcuffs and ankle irons, tied up, shackled, and trussed with ropes and chains on every limb, so that we are absolutely powerless. This happens so that we may be absolutely powerless, helpless under the power of the law, completely handed over to sin, that is, so that we fall victim to continual sinning, to the killing, eternally condemning curse of God, and to eternal despair.

Is it not unspeakably horrifying that the words of the law promise us eternal life if we keep it, all the while knowing full well that we will never lift a finger to actually do it? That the law does not give us a bit of the power we need to fulfill it? Does this not mean that the law mocks us, and tantalizes us worse than Tantalus?<sup>41</sup> Is it not enough to drive us to despair that the law stirs up in us the very thing it curses, and curses the very thing it stirs up? That the law proclaims wrath and damnation, paints a picture of it before the soul, weighs on the heart to the point of death, and does not show us a way out, but in fact blocks every way out with a thousand obstacles? This is what it really means that we are locked up and put into the custody of sin and the law. It means we are lost, *lost*, eternally lost. And once we have been brought to this inescapable conclusion, to unshakable certainty, we experience hell in the heart.

It is the office of the law, the law’s function as taskmaster unto Christ, to create this spiritual condition in us. Once it has done so, then the gospel can make us righteous through faith.

Our confessions describe the office and working of the law this way:

Here we hold that the law was given by God, first, to restrain sin by threats and the dread of punishment, and by the promise and offer of grace and benefit. But all this miscarried on account of the wickedness which sin has wrought in man. For thereby a part [some] were rendered worse, those, namely who are hostile to [hate] the law, because it forbids what they like to do, and enjoins what they do not like to do. Therefore, wherever they can escape [if they were not restrained by] punishment, they [would] do more against the law than before. These, then, are the rude and wicked [unbridled and secure] men, who do evil wherever they [notice that they] have the opportunity.

The rest become blind and arrogant [are smitten with arrogance and blindness], and [insolently] conceive the opinion that they observe and can observe the law by their own powers, as has been said above concerning the scholastic theologians; thence come the hypocrites and [self-righteous or] false saints.

But the chief office or force of the law is that it reveal original sin with all its fruits, and show man how very low his nature has fallen, and has become [fundamentally and] utterly corrupted;

<sup>39</sup> *dieser durch’s Gesetz bewirkten Vor- oder Zubereitung*. This expression may indicate that Pieper does understand something of the temporal sense of εἰς Χριστόν. See above, note 29.

<sup>40</sup> *die Vorbereitung auf den Glauben*.

<sup>41</sup> In Greek mythology Tantalus, a son of Zeus, was doomed in Hades to stand in water that always receded when he tried to drink it, and under branches full of fruit that were always just out of reach. The verb “tantalize” is derived from his name.

as the law must tell man that he has no God nor regards [cares for] 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; he begins to be an enemy of [enraged at] God, and to murmur, etc... This office [of the law] the New Testament retains and urges, as St. Paul, Romans 1:18, does, saying: “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.” Again, 3:19: “All the world is guilty before God. No one is righteous before him.” And Christ says, John 16:8. “The Holy Ghost will reprove the world of sin.”

This, then, is the thunderbolt of God by which he strikes in a heap [hurls to the ground] both manifest sinners and false saints [hypocrites], and suffers no one to be in the right [declares no one righteous], but drives them all together to terror and despair. This is the hammer, as Jeremiah says, 23:29, “Is not my word like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?” This is not *activa contritio* or manufactured repentance, but *passiva contritio* [torture of conscience], true sorrow of heart, suffering and sensation of death.

This, then, is what it means to begin true repentance; and here man must hear such a sentence as this: You are all of no account, whether you be manifest sinners or saints [in your own opinion]; you all must become different and do otherwise than you now are and are doing [no matter what sort of people you are], whether you are as great, wise, powerful and holy as you may. Here no one is [righteous, holy], godly, etc.

But to this office the New Testament immediately adds the consolatory promise of grace through the gospel... But whenever the law alone, without the gospel being added, exercises this office, there is [nothing else than] death and hell, and man must despair, like Saul and Judas; as St. Paul, Romans 7:10, says: “Through sin the law kills.”<sup>42</sup>

Finally we add a few statements of Luther from his larger Commentary on Galatians:

Therefore if the time of the law were not shortened, no one would be saved. For this reason a quantity and time must be set for the law, beyond which it dare not rule.<sup>43</sup>

The time of the law must be shortened, or else no flesh would be saved. An end must be prescribed for the law where it must cease. Therefore the time of the law is not an eternity, but it has an end, which is Christ.<sup>44</sup>

In such a way the law is just like a beater<sup>45</sup> who drives the hungry to Christ, so that Christ might fill them with his good things. Therefore the proper office of the law is to make us guilty, humble us, kill us, bring us to hell and take everything away from us; but for the purpose that in this way we become righteous, are saved, are made alive, are brought to heaven and obtain everything. Therefore it does not simply kill, but it kills to make alive.<sup>46</sup>

## II. What is the Gospel?

We learned to know the nature, office and work of the law in Part I. It is no independent giant in God’s work of salvation. It is in God’s house what Hagar was in Abraham’s—the maid, the servant girl, the slave. As Hagar served the freewoman, her mistress Sarah, so the law serves the gospel. The gospel is God’s true spouse, the Jerusalem above who is the mother of us all, she of whom we are born by the Holy Spirit, Galatians 4, 1 Peter 1:23. The gospel is the real and last, the final and irrevocable will of God, which should and will remain

<sup>42</sup> Smalcald Articles, Part III, Articles II-III, *Triglot* pp. 479-481.

<sup>43</sup> St. Louis Edition, XI, p. 419.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 453.

<sup>45</sup> *Treiber*. A “beater” is someone who “beats the bushes” and drives the game from cover during a hunt.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 456.

immovable forever. In accordance with it all the world will be judged on the last day and receive its sentence; in accordance with it everyone will be saved or damned, John 3:18.

So what is the gospel? It is the joyful message, revealed from heaven, of the gracious forgiveness of sins for eternal life through faith in Christ, Genesis 3:15, 12:3, Matthew 10:7, 11:28, Mark 16:15ff, John 3:16, Acts 10:43, 26:18, Romans 3:21, etc.

Scripture calls the gospel which we proclaim a great mystery, the secret wisdom of God which was hidden before the world began, that which no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has conceived, that which none of the rulers of this age understood, but that which God destined for our glory before time began and has revealed by his Spirit, Ephesians 1, 1 Corinthians 2, 1 Timothy 3:16.

The Lord himself reveals to us that the same God whose anger against sinners burns down to the depths of hell, has loved the same sinners, so that he gave them his one and only Son, John 3:16. And this love of God for the godless world is not an artificial love. It is a great passion in God, God's inexpressible longing and yearning for mankind, for the salvation and life of the lost. It is so ardent an ardor for us that no earthly father or mother can have it for their children, Isaiah 49:14ff. It is such a tender, heartfelt, deep mercy of God for the damned and wretched, that his heart yearns for them, Jeremiah 31:20, Hosea 11:8, so that he *must* have mercy on them. They are not empty words, but fact and truth, when Luther sings:

But God beheld my wretched state  
Before the world's foundation,  
And, mindful of his mercies great,  
He planned my soul's salvation.  
A Father's heart he turned to me,  
Sought my redemption fervently;  
He gave his dearest treasure.<sup>47</sup>

God swears, "'As surely as I live,' declares the Sovereign LORD, 'I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live,'" Ezekiel 33:11. His heart for all the world is the same as for Israel, "Then I passed by and saw you kicking about in your blood, and as you lay there in your blood I said to you, 'Live!'" Ezekiel 16:6. It is truly no exaggeration when we sing, "Noble Prince of Peace, how great is your *thirst* For man's life and his salvation!"<sup>48</sup> Paul says even more in Ephesians 3:18-19, when he declares how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ for the sinner, and that he wants to know this love that surpasses knowledge. And the LORD himself, when he wanted to reveal his very heart to Moses, proclaimed about himself, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin," Exodus 34:6-7. Through the Holy Spirit Zechariah speaks of the tender mercy of God by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven, Luke 1:78. As Moses asserts in Deuteronomy 33:3, "Surely it is you who love the people." So Paul speaks of "The kindness and love of God our Savior," Titus 3:4. Indeed, God is love, God is the comfort of all the wretched on earth. What passes for love on earth—the love of father and mother, married love and brotherly love—is all just a weak reflection and glimmering of the glowing fire and the boundless sea of God's love for the children of men.

And with this love he embraces the whole world, every person on earth, without one exception, no matter how great a sinner he may be. Cain and Lamech, Ishmael and Esau, Korah, Dathan and Abiram, Saul and Absalom, Ahab and Ahaz, Judas and Caiaphas, Elymas and Alexander the metalworker—they are enclosed in the eternal, fervent love for the sinner just as much as Peter and Paul, Daniel and Jeremiah, Josiah and Hezekiah, David and Samuel, Moses and Aaron, Jacob, Isaac and Abraham, Noah and Enoch, Seth and Abel.

And the eternal love of God for sinners is not a passive feeling, but an almighty active force; love is living and active in God. "For God so loved the world that he gave..." In God this love was his decision and determination, his decree<sup>49</sup> to save the world lost because of sin through his one and only Son. He did this and

<sup>47</sup> "Dear Christians One and All Rejoice," *Christian Worship*, 377, v.4

<sup>48</sup> *Grosser Friedefurst, wie halt du gedurst Nach der Menschen Heil and Leben!* The meter, such as it is, is duplicated in the translation. Reference?

<sup>49</sup> *zum Entschluss and Beschluss, zum Ratschluss.*

sent his Son because of sin in the likeness of sinful flesh, and in his flesh damned sin.<sup>50</sup> In doing this God gave him, gave him to be the ransom in our place as the atonement for sin, gave him as the object of his wrath and curse at our sins, so that Christ might atone for, pay for the debt we had incurred. God placed Christ under the law, under his curse and his demands, so that he would fulfill all righteousness, and through perfect obedience free those who were under the law, that they might receive the adoption as sons.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting men's sins against them. Just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. He made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.<sup>52</sup>

Now that the sin of the world has been atoned for, the debt paid, God reconciled, sin forgiven, whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. Now that a "great peace without interruption"<sup>53</sup> is made between heaven and earth through him, we on our part need not blot out sin, reconcile God, acquire righteousness, do more works. It is all completed, prepared, and quite ready. Now all are to be justified and saved without any of their own work and doing, purely by grace, for no cost, for nothing, absolutely nothing.

The sinners and the cursed should now be of good cheer; they should neither fear nor despair. They should lay hold of courage and trust in God again; they should grasp the hope of salvation. For not only has God made good again in Christ everything they ruined through their fall and sin. He has also established the office that is to proclaim the reconciliation of sinners, has established the gospel,<sup>54</sup> which is to bring to all creation the joyful, saving message that sin is blotted out, that God is reconciled, that all guilt is forgiven and forgotten, and that grace, righteousness, heaven and eternal life are offered to all sinners without exception.

He has established among us the message of reconciliation. We are none other than Christ's ambassadors, acting on his behalf; God is making his appeal through us. Now we implore on Christ's behalf all, all sinners without exception, without condition, "Be reconciled to God!"<sup>55</sup> Only believe his message, put your confidence in him, firmly grasp the reconciliation which he holds out to you so lovingly, so unconditionally. We only repeat in all the world the invitation he himself gave to sinners with outstretched arms, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest," Matthew 11:28-29. "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare," Isaiah 55:1-2. "Whoever comes to me I will never drive away," John 6:37. "The one who trusts in him will never be put to shame," Romans 9:33.

This is the substance of the gospel. We see that it is a completely different teaching from the law. Here there is nothing more about commandment, demand, threat, or curse, but the opposite of all these. The gospel is a story, a history, an account, a message. It tells us what God, out of eternal love, did for those who were lost, who had fallen away from him, were under the curse of the law, and sentenced to hell. The gospel announces what God, out of great, heartfelt compassion, has done for our deliverance, our salvation. It tells how out of his great love God gave up his Son for us, how he did away with the guilt of our sin through him, how he does not count sin against the world any more, but has absolved and forgiven them all. It tells how he has sent the word of reconciliation out into the world, how he calls on all the world to be of good cheer and come to him, to believe in Christ and be saved through faith with no strings attached, at no charge.

In defining the essence of the gospel, everything depends on whether it is a conditional or an unconditional message of grace. Does it offer those cursed unconditionally by the law the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation without any and every condition, or on the condition of faith? Is the gospel an unconditional

<sup>50</sup> Romans 8:3-4. The NIV translation is quite interpretive.

<sup>51</sup> Galatians 3:13, 4:4-5, Hebrews 2:14-17.

<sup>52</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:19-21, Romans 5:18-19.

<sup>53</sup> Perhaps an allusion to Isaiah 9:7, "Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end."

<sup>54</sup> Pieper considers the establishment of the "office" (*Amt*) synonymous with the establishment of the gospel itself. This insight, derived from the first sentence of Article V of the Augsburg Confession (which Pieper is paraphrasing), is the basis for the Wauwatosa faculty's understanding of Church and Ministry.

<sup>55</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:18-20.



or a conditional absolution? This is the point that separates us not only from the Pope and the Reformed, but also from the modern, positive theology of Germany, from the General Synod and Council, indeed, even from the followers of F.A. Schmidt, from the Ohio and Iowa Synods, many of the Norwegians, and other heterodox Lutherans. Naturally it has to do with the role faith plays in the gospel. Does the gospel proclaim, “I forgive you your sin if you believe I want to do it,” or does it simply proclaim, “Your sin is forgiven?”

Note this very well—the question is not whether man’s faith is necessary to appropriate the gospel, to make it effective in the case of each individual. About this there is no disagreement. If anything is clear, this is clear in Scripture, “Whoever believes will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned.” Without faith no one has the grace and forgiveness of which the gospel speaks, even if the gospel would unconditionally offer him grace a thousand times. The righteousness of God of which Paul speaks, the *zidkiah Jehovah* (יְהוָה צַדִּיק) of Isaiah, Jeremiah and other prophets, comes by faith to the one who has faith.<sup>56</sup> Salvation, grace, justification, forgiveness, life and salvation become the sinner’s own personal possession only by means of faith. Whoever does not believe it does not possess it, and finally will not be recognized by God as righteous, but as condemned. Without faith the gospel not only is of no benefit to the sinner, but through unbelief it will even be the very cause of his condemnation. Faith is such an essential part of the order of salvation that without it no one is personally justified before God, no one is in a state of grace, is a child of God, an heir; without faith there is no salvation. In short, faith is the unconditional ordinance for appropriating the gospel, the good news of grace.

But the question is, does this message itself, according to its content, make faith the condition for realizing its promises? Does the gospel plainly say, “Your sins are forgiven,” or does it say, “If you believe I will forgive you your sins, then I will forgive them; if you do not believe that, then I will not forgive you.”

Thank God we know that nothing is more certain than this. The gospel, God’s message of grace to all sinners on earth, has no condition, none at all, not even that of faith. Rather, the gospel is just as unconditional, just as absolute on the one hand as the law is on the other. Without condition the law declares, curses and condemns every person as a sinner, binds everything over to unbelief, sin and damnation through its decree, and does so unconditionally and absolutely. In the same way, the gospel unconditionally proclaims all sinners free from the sentence of the law and declares them all to be free of sin, pardoned, justified, redeemed and saved.

In its essential, bare form the gospel says, “Your sins are forgiven!” It is an unconditional, straightforward,<sup>57</sup> absolute absolution, God’s declaration that he has, in actual fact, torn up the record of guilt of every sinner on earth. The gospel imputes the merit of Christ to sinners and declares them righteous, pardoned, children of God, and heirs of eternal life. And by declaring them to be such, it pours right into their laps, in fact and truth, forgiveness, grace, righteousness, adoption as sons, and eternal life. It offers, holds out, gives, sends, it bequeaths and seals as a last will and testament the entire salvation of Christ as a person’s eternal possession. It does all this more unconditionally and absolutely than any other gift on earth has ever been given.

We now turn to proof. And here you don’t have to look very far. The very first gospel, Genesis 3:15, is an unconditional message of salvation. The woman’s seed will crush the serpent’s head. For Adam and Eve these words were the unconditional promise that the woman’s seed would make good the woman’s sin—exactly what Paul deals with at length in Romans 5:6-21 and summarizes in v. 18, “Just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life to all men.”

The way the covenant between God and Abraham was ratified in Genesis 15 proves conclusively that grace is unconditional. The covenant was ratified according to ancient Chaldean ritual. Abraham killed the animals, cut them in half, and laid the six halves opposite each other and one dove opposite the other, so that a

<sup>56</sup> *Aus Glauben in Glauben*, the phrase from Romans 1:17. Pieper likely understands this to mean, “By faith to faith,” i.e., it comes by faith to the believer, as opposed to the NIV’s choice, “by faith from first to last.” In view of the close parallel each element of Romans 1:17 finds in 3:22-23, the translator too believes that this phrase in 1:17 is the briefer equivalent of “by faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” in 3:23.

<sup>57</sup> “*Schlechthinige*.” Pieper puts this word in quotes; it seems to be a word he coined. “*Schlecht*” means bad, wicked, poor, inferior, but also has a meaning (in a dialect) of simple, straight, plain. Perhaps it’s something like the computer users’ term, “Quick and dirty.”

path was formed between the halves of the animals and doves. Both the contracting parties of the covenant would have to pass between the pieces on this path with burning torches in their hands, as a sign of their loyalty to the covenant. In this way each party would say, “May what happened to these animals happen to me if I break this covenant!”

What happened next? “When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking fire pot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces,” v. 17. This is the same manifestation which is later called “the glory of the LORD,” which appeared to Moses in the burning bush, on top of Mt. Sinai at the giving of the law, then when God entered the tabernacle, Exodus 40:34-38, and appeared and hovered over the tabernacle as a cloud and fire. Later it appeared yet more often, and finally to the shepherds of Bethlehem at the birth of Christ. Here, in Genesis 15, the glory of the LORD passes between the halved animals as a sign that God will keep the covenant with Abraham. And Abraham? We do not hear that he also passed between them, but verse 18 says, “On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, ‘To your descendants,’” etc.

Why does only the LORD, and not Abraham, pass between the halved pieces? Because the covenant was one-sided, not mutual. Only God had something to accomplish, Abraham nothing, because all the doing in this covenant depended entirely and only upon the LORD. Abraham simply received the covenant promises. Since he had nothing to perform and no vow to take, he did not have to pass between the pieces as did the LORD, who had taken it upon himself alone to carry out everything the covenant was to accomplish.

This covenant God made with Abraham here at Mamre is the gospel covenant of grace. Through it God has made known his good and gracious will to save all mankind; through it, since Abraham’s time, all the believing children of Abraham in the Old and New Testaments have been and are still being saved. By contrast, 430 years later the covenant of the law appeared, with its reciprocal promises between God and the people. This covenant made with Abraham is the covenant of the New Testament, of which Paul says in Galatians 3: I 7, “The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God in Christ<sup>58</sup> and thus do away with the promise.” This covenant’s promise is no conditional promise. If you look at all the promises God gave Abraham, from his calling up to the time of his death, you will not find a single instance of a condition; they are all unconditional and absolute promises.

Paul builds his argument in Galatians 3 on this fact, when he sets forth salvation as a gracious gift of the promise, and not as a fruit of keeping the law. “God,” he says, “in his grace gave the inheritance to Abraham free through a promise.”<sup>59</sup> And regarding this translation of *kecharistai* (κεχάρισται) there is nothing further to discuss. Luther understood the Apostle just as well here as he did in Romans 3:28, indeed as well as he understood the gospel in general.<sup>60</sup> The contrast between the righteousness that is by faith, which comes from the promise, and the righteousness of the law, consists of this: the latter is earned merit, the former is a free gift of grace. This covenant with Abraham demanded faith from Abraham afterwards—*a posteriori*—if the covenant were to be fulfilled in his case. But it did not make Abraham’s faith, in and of itself, the fulfillment of a covenant obligation. The promises of Abraham’s covenant, of the gospel, were not conditioned *a priori* by anything, not even by Abraham’s faith. They were unconditional, so that they could be grasped and received through faith.

It is unnecessary to establish in detail that the gospel or messianic promises of the Old Testament are unconditional. Whoever wants to make the effort to look up all the major passages at one time will find that whether salvation is spoken of as a future quality, or as being dispensed<sup>61</sup> through the word, or even as being brought to faith for receiving salvation, all is promised unconditionally. We might just make special reference to Jeremiah 31:31-33, as an example of the unconditional nature of the gospel which is just as good as Genesis 15.

<sup>58</sup> *auf Christum*. The textual evidence for retaining and omitting these words is closely divided; the NIV opts to omit them.

<sup>59</sup> Galatians 3:18.

<sup>60</sup> In Romans 3:28 Luther translated, “We maintain that a man is justified by faith alone, apart from observing the law,” adding the word “alone” to clarify Paul’s point. In a similar way, in Galatians 3:18 Luther translated, “God gave the inheritance to Abraham *free* through a promise” (*Gott hat das Erbe Abraham durch Verheissung frei geschenkt*), adding the word “free” to clarify the meaning of Paul’s word *kecharistai* (κεχάρισται).

<sup>61</sup> *Austeilung desselben durchs Wort*. *Austeilung* is a term more normally used for *administering* the sacraments.

It is the well known passage, “‘The time is coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah,’” etc. The words which follow contrast the future gospel covenant of grace as something completely different from the old covenant of the law from Sinai. Israel did not keep the old covenant of the law; God had to compel them to it. The new covenant shall consist of this: God puts his law in their minds and writes it on their hearts. He gives himself to them as their God and in this way he makes them his people. This is conversion, rebirth, enlightenment. The result is that it will prove unnecessary to externally teach and exhort one person through another, since both great and small will already possess knowledge of the LORD through God’s enlightenment.

This is the first half of the content of the new covenant. The second half is contained in the words which follow: “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” So the forgiveness of sins is the second half of the new covenant. Both parts of the New Testament covenant of grace—the renewal of the heart and the forgiveness of sins (with all that forgiveness includes—life and salvation), are promised without any conditions. Because of this and this alone is the new covenant the opposite of the covenant of the law: the new covenant promises and gives grace, salvation, temporal and eternal life without condition, whereas the old covenant has all this in mind on the condition of complete obedience.

Other than this, there is no difference between the covenant from Sinai and the one from Golgotha. Both are made by the same God. Both pertain to the same people—sinners. Both promise grace and every blessing, temporal and eternal salvation. In all this there is no difference between them at all. The one and only difference is this—the law promises complete salvation only on the condition of its total fulfillment, as it is written, “The man who does these things will live by them,” Romans 10:5. The gospel, however, the word of the new covenant, unconditionally says, “Do not fear, only believe, your sins are wiped out, forgiven!” It promises, gives, and bestows out of grace, for nothing, and without demanding anything in return, everything that the old covenant promised conditionally and demanded to no avail: grace and new obedience. Indeed, precisely because it stood on this condition of getting something in return, the old covenant was powerless and ineffective for salvation and could only be a lowly servant girl in God’s plan of salvation. And only because it has set aside every condition, and presents complete salvation unconditionally and with no strings attached, is the new covenant powerful and effective for salvation.

Whoever does not understand this does not perceive the real difference between law and gospel. This distinction is an essential one.<sup>62</sup> Only its freedom from conditions makes the new covenant altogether different from the old, makes it truly new, makes the gospel the gospel. The instant we take the new covenant and write any kind of condition into it, even the smallest, we destroy its unique nature, its nature as gospel, which distinguishes it from the law, and we turn it back into the old covenant, the covenant of the law. Then the new covenant is no longer different from the old in essence, but, at most, only in degree. It may demand somewhat less than the covenant of Sinai, but it is essentially the same thing—a covenant of law, a covenant which is based on mutual promises between God and the sinner. Indeed, if any condition is put on the new covenant, it is only outwardly and seemingly different from the old covenant of Sinai.<sup>63</sup> If the new covenant demands faith from man as a work, it demands the highest thing the law can and does demand—that we completely fulfill the first commandment and with it all the commandments, the whole law.

The result of this would be that the so-called new covenant would save us just as little, would condemn and kill us just as surely as the old covenant. For no one could fulfill its condition, carry out its demand, because we who are dead in trespasses and sins, who are fleshly minded, cannot by our own thinking and choosing believe in Jesus Christ our Lord.<sup>64</sup> Let us note well the meaning of the words in Jeremiah 31:32, “Because they broke my covenant and I had to compel them to obedience.”<sup>65</sup> They contain the fundamental reason God

<sup>62</sup> Pieper means not only that the difference is important, but also that the difference has to do with the nature or essence of what the law and gospel are.

<sup>63</sup> *Ja, er [der neue Bund] ist dann auch graduell nur ausserlich und scheinbar vom alten Sinaibund verschieden.* I can’t figure out what *auch graduell* might mean.

<sup>64</sup> The translation, like the German, is following the Small Catechism.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. NIV text note.

changes the nature of the covenant made with Israel and wants to make one of another kind. Because Israel has not kept, could not keep, the old covenant, God has to make a new one which they could “keep.” And for this reason it will not be a fruitless covenant like the old. They will keep the new covenant for this reason: what the old covenant demands as a work and places as a condition on what God does, God himself works and carries out in the new covenant by simply putting his law in their minds and writing it on their hearts; so he wants to renew them divinely.<sup>66</sup>

So the new obedience, faith, is not a demand but a gift of the new covenant, not man’s doing but God’s doing. People are simply the objects in whom God keeps his covenant promises; they simply receive the gifts of the covenant. The person has no work to perform at all, not even faith. Rather, God even works the faith, since he is the one who is suited for the task of creating faith in those who are part of the covenant.<sup>67</sup> “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus”—this passage has to do with our being believers.

Those who want to argue against the lack of any condition in the new covenant by saying, “Faith is still a condition of the new covenant, even if it is a condition fulfilled by God himself,” perversely make the matter unclear for themselves. For in this way they subtly make working faith, which is strictly a condition and demand God imposes on himself, into a condition man must fulfill. Under the circumstances, then, one cannot reasonably speak of faith as a condition of grace any more, but only as a part of God’s arrangement of the new covenant, an arrangement which God himself has made.<sup>68</sup>

Out of rationalistic interests, synergism still wants to put a condition on man at one point or another in the way of salvation. So it responds, “Yes, certainly faith is an arrangement of God, but it is still an arrangement made for man, to which God himself binds man.”<sup>69</sup> So again synergism rests on conditional grace, on the Ohio Synod’s “conduct” and F.A. Schmidt’s “man’s status as an ethical person,”<sup>70</sup> and therefore it stands right in the middle of the law. Synergism is compelled to add to the unconditional promise, “I will put my law in their minds,” a condition—“...if they conduct themselves in the right way, that is, if they do not willfully resist.” “I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh,” Ezekiel 36:26—if your hearts are not completely stony. “I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more,” that is, if they as free, ethical persons decide for conversion. If the promises of the gospel were conditioned by the Ohio Synod’s “provided he does not willfully resist” or F.A. Schmidt’s “free choice between life and death,” no one at all

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<sup>66</sup> *Also sie gottlich erneuern will.*

<sup>67</sup> *Sondern auch diesen [Glauben] kistet Gott, sofern er als Leistung inbetracht kommt, durch Schaffung desselben in den Bundesgliedern*

<sup>68</sup> Pieper is talking about the leaders of the Iowa, Ohio, and most of the Norwegian Synod. During and after the Election Controversy, they insisted that faith is a “condition of grace” as Pieper has described. One could almost say they believed that God elected people he foresaw himself giving faith to. As Pieper says, however, such a teaching is really just a subtle way of making faith into a work man must accomplish if he is to be saved.

<sup>69</sup> In the election controversy, Missouri and Wisconsin asserted that faith is *eine gottliche Ordnung*, that is, the way God has arranged to bring us the blessings of salvation, something like saying that the host at a banquet had decided to use plates to serve his guests dinner. The other side agreed with the term, but understood it differently, something like saying that the host had prepared the banquet, invited guests, given them plates, and had decided to feed everyone who brought a plate to the banquet. The second makes the serving of the banquet contingent on an action of the guest; the host’s grace is understood as preparing the banquet and sending plates to the guests. The first views the inviting, the preparation of the banquet, and the decision to serve the food on plates all as part of the host’s plan to serve the banquet; nothing at all is contingent on the action of the guest. *Ordnung* is translated “arrangement” because the more typical English translation, “ordinance,” has a decidedly legal tone, which is precisely what Pieper is teaching us to avoid.

<sup>70</sup> Both of these terms also come out of the Election Controversy of the 1870’s and 1880’s. Quite briefly, the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods clung to the teaching that God’s election is a cause of our faith. The Ohio Synod, and a large faction in the Norwegian Synod led by F.A. Schmidt (as well as the Iowa Synod), taught that God elects us *intuitu fidei*, in view of our faith, i.e., that God’s foreseeing our faith, in some sense, caused him to choose us. As Pieper indicates, their doctrine made man partially responsible for his own conversion. The oft-repeated statement in the Ohio Synod, first made by Professor Loy, was that “Some conduct themselves with greater willingness under grace.” Schmidt often said that coming to faith must be man’s own choice, or else his conversion is not “ethically real” and he is merely a puppet. Schmidt believed, then, that God treats man as an “ethical person” by graciously giving him the opportunity to choose whether he will wantonly resist God’s grace and be lost, or not wantonly resist God’s grace and be converted. Grace, according to these men, gives man the ability to come to faith, but not the coming itself.

would be saved. God be praised that the gospel knows nothing of any condition. To the extent that conversion and faith belong in the order of salvation, in the new covenant of grace, they are not conditions imposed on man. Rather they are the things that are promised, works of God which he, without any condition, freely wills to work in people, since they cannot do it themselves.

This is the gospel: 1) God wants to spiritually resurrect, to bring to faith, us who are dead in transgressions and sins. We are fleshly minded and filled with deadly enmity toward God, we have hardened hearts, we have made our faces “harder than stone,”<sup>71</sup> and do not want to be converted. So God wants to bring us to faith through the gospel of his of grace and give us a tender, humble, obedient heart, wants to create it in us through his Spirit. 2) Through Christ God wants to cancel our burden of sin, which we could not lift a finger to carry. Through Christ he wants to blot out our sins; for his sake he wants to forgive our sins and never think about them again. And it is the nature of things that the last is first, that is to say, this will of God also becomes the means and cause of conversion. In the Jeremiah passage<sup>72</sup> the promise of conversion is linked to the promise of forgiveness with a “for,” in a causal relationship. Knowledge and renewal will be there *because* God wants to forgive sins. Thus the forgiveness of sins is the proper and principal good of the new covenant; everything else depends on it as its central point.

So both the power and efficacy of the gospel depend on the promise of grace being free of all conditions. What is the basis for this? In Romans 1:16 Paul calls the gospel the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, whether Jew or Gentile. Of course this is not saying that the gospel first proves to be the power for salvation only for those who have already become believers in some other way. So also, for example, 1 Corinthians 1:18, “To us who are being saved it is the power of God,” should not be understood to say that it is such a power only for those being saved without the gospel. So also 1:24, “but to those whom God has called... we preach... Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God,” cannot possibly mean that Christ is the power and wisdom of God only for those who are called in some other way. Rather, these and other similar passages assume that faith, being saved, being called is something the gospel brings about. The gospel itself, and it alone, works faith, conversion, renewal, and every spiritual good, and by working these things it also works salvation. Scripture teaches this so clearly and frequently that we can forego extensive references. It is enough to refer to passages such as Romans 10:17, “Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message,” Galatians 3:2, “Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard,” 1 Peter 1:23, and James 1:18.

Our dogmaticians divide the power of the gospel into the *vis dativa* or *collativa*<sup>73</sup> and the *vis operativa* or *medicinalis*.<sup>74</sup> It gives, grants, offers, seals to, and makes us sinners partakers of grace, the righteousness of Christ, the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. The gospel is not merely a speech, a sermon, or a dissertation about the blessings of the kingdom of God. Rather, the gospel is God’s own message to us that all these things are now ours. It is God’s actual declaration that we are freed from our guilt and that God’s entire salvation is now our possession, our *Beilage*.<sup>75</sup> It is an actual, formal absolution, God’s acquittal of the whole lost world of sinners. What the gospel talks about, it thereby gives and imparts to us. No one can hear the gospel without the fullness of grace showering on them at the same time. Any king’s decree of pardon actually provides, effects, and brings about freedom and life for an incarcerated criminal. In the same way the gospel, God’s decree of pardon, efficaciously and *in concreto* conveys grace, freedom, forgiveness, life and salvation to all lost sinners. The words, “Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven,” Matthew 9:2, Luke 7:48, bring with them what they talk and speak about—the forgiveness of sins. These words are nothing less than the most direct form of the gospel applied to the sinner.

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<sup>71</sup> Jeremiah 5:3.

<sup>72</sup> 31:34b.

<sup>73</sup> The imparting or conferring power, i.e., the Gospel actually gives the forgiveness of sins. Pieper describes it in this paragraph.

<sup>74</sup> The operative or medicinal power, i.e., the Gospel, because it always brings the Holy Spirit with it, has the power to change the heart of the sinner. Pieper describes it in the next paragraph.

<sup>75</sup> *Beilage*, according to Cassell’s, is an addition or enclosure, supplement, appendix, the vegetable or garnish on a plate, or the packing or shim for a mechanical device.

The *vis operativa* or *rmedicinalis* is inseparably linked with the *vis collativa*. So that it can shower all grace on the cursed sinner, the gospel breaks the sinner's heart which has been struck by the law, is fighting against God, is held captive and in despair. It awakens and creates a ray of hope, a spark of trust, faith, in his heart. The Holy Spirit impresses on the person's soul the truth and reality of the absolution spoken to him and assures him, "That your sin is forgiven is God's own truth; this message is spoken to you, yes, to *you*." The gospel says to him, "Stop being afraid, only believe! You are not too wicked for God to forgive you!" Then hope and trust steal coyly, gently, slowly into the heart and the sinner begins to believe, his faith mixed with fear, timidity, and doubt. Now the miracle has been done—the hardened sinner has come to faith and is converted. Now his whole attitude toward God changes; he has become a new person.

It is worth noting that only the preaching of unconditional forgiveness works faith. Paul bases the fact that "the gospel is the power of God for salvation" on its announcement of unconditional forgiveness when he says, "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last," Romans 1:16-17. Paul takes the expression "righteousness of God" especially from Isaiah 11. There it is a stereotypical expression, and means the whole salvation of the New Testament which God has prepared for his people, from the compassionate love of God on up to eternal glory. The most important element in this salvation of God, however, is what Isaiah placed at the very beginning of the second part of his book, 40:1-2. "'Comfort, comfort my people,' says your God. 'Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.'" Whoever knows some Hebrew and is familiar with Isaiah 11 knows that the prophetic perfects used here speak of the coming salvation as already at hand in its fulfillment—as if he were living in the New Land and addressing New Testament preachers.

The message of the New Testament, which he bids them preach, which he has the Servant of the LORD himself proclaim (see especially Isaiah 61:1ff), is the message of complete salvation, unconditional forgiveness. With this Jerusalem is to be comforted. All flesh is like grass and does not bring about Israel's redemption, but the word of our God—that is, the word of the coming new covenant, that God himself will take away Israel's sin, and wills to convert them through his Holy Spirit—this word, the gospel, stands firm to eternity. It does not perish. It is not fleeting, worthless grass, but it remains standing and works the people's pardon and conversion.<sup>76</sup> This salvation, therefore, is called the salvation of God or the righteousness of God, since only God could bring it about, and has brought it about in such a wondrous way.

Now Paul says that in the gospel this righteousness, this salvation of God, is revealed, that is, it is disclosed, made known before the whole world, proclaimed in all the world as something which is accomplished in deed and truth. And Paul proclaims that he and all New Testament servants of the word are ambassadors on God's behalf,<sup>77</sup> God's heralds, who cry out, "The salvation of God is here; sin is forgiven. Believe, in this way you are helped!" And where this message works faith which accepts the message, where it causes the grace which it offers unconditionally to be accepted by faith, every believer has, as a personal possession which is actually at hand, what the message talks about—forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. The grace which is presented unconditionally has now become a person's own possession through faith. Grace is certainly not something which is first offered conditionally<sup>78</sup> and then transformed into an unconditional gift. Faith itself is created and produced in the heart without condition; it is not as if the person first gave his consent before being converted. So forgiveness and faith are *in solidum*<sup>79</sup> a free, unconditional gift, the unconditional effect of the freely given, effective grace of God, of the gospel.

We certainly know Scripture says that whoever believes will be saved, whoever does not believe will be condemned. But that does not change the unconditional nature of the Gospel. Our dogmatists say quite

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<sup>76</sup> Isaiah 40:1-9.

<sup>77</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:20.

<sup>78</sup> I.e., on the condition of faith.

<sup>79</sup> I do not know for certain the meaning of this term. It may mean something like "as a package deal," i.e., forgiveness and faith, taken together, are one and the same gift. Or perhaps it simply means "completely."

correctly that this is said *descriptive, objective, conclusive*.<sup>80</sup> These words describe the way in which salvation becomes our own; they describe what the gospel proclaims and brings to us unconditionally. In the same sense Scripture also says, “He who stands firm to the end will be saved,” Matthew 24:13, and “Without holiness no one will see the Lord,” Hebrews 12:14. Such passages make neither endurance or holiness into conditions on the gospel or on forgiveness of sins. Rather, they teach the way in which God wants to lead us to salvation.

It all comes down to this. How will we use these statements which describe faith as the way to salvation, in a gospel sense or a law sense? Both are possible, and Scripture does both. The Lord says, “If you do not believe that I am he, you will indeed die in your sins,” John 8:24, or “Whoever does not believe stands condemned already,” John 3:18, or “Whoever does not believe will be condemned,” Mark 16:16. Here faith is just as much a demand of the law as it is in this preaching of repentance: “Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven,” Matthew 18:3. But faith in this sense does not belong to the gospel but to the law. Whoever brings faith in this sense into the gospel mixes law and gospel, pollutes the gospel, and makes it powerless. This is the unrecognized but disastrous error of all false teachers. By mixing the law into the gospel they make all of Scripture unclear for themselves and can never make their way free of error. This is what happened to our opponents in the election controversy. Whoever sees this point clearly will not go wrong in the teaching of election and conversion. But our opponents have not distinguished law and gospel, and up to the present day they have not learned that the gospel is a free, unconditional absolution. And that is precisely what is essential.

Whoever wants to speak evangelically about faith does not make faith into a condition on the validity of the absolution or the gospel. Rather, he proclaims to despairing sinners, “Your sins are forgiven! Do not be afraid, only believe!” He entices and allures people to faith with the unconditional message of salvation, and works faith in them through God’s power.<sup>81</sup> In this sense alone does faith belong to the gospel, as the opposite of the despair worked in the heart by the law and the opposite of the legalistic delusion of work righteousness. In short, only he speaks evangelically about faith who brings it to the terrified heart with the message of unconditional forgiveness.

### III. The Proper Combination and Division of Law and Gospel

What we have said so far about the different nature, purpose and effect of law and gospel, we have said *in abstracto*. Now we must put it into practice in all our preaching, *Seelsorge*, and the other duties of our office, with the unconverted and converted, non-Christians and Christians, the hardened and the penitent. All this can be summarized in two points: we must never separate law and gospel and we must never mix them together.

Law and gospel must always be proclaimed in combination with each other;<sup>82</sup> they must not be torn apart from each other. We must never proclaim one of them alone, as something to use independently for God’s purposes, i.e., for conversion and sanctification, without the other being sufficiently proclaimed. The law in and of itself is part of God’s word, and the gospel part of that same word. Yet neither is God’s word without the other, just as half a man is not a whole man. The word of God consists essentially of both law and gospel. The two of them together in their God-given union make up the word of God. And it is not one part of the word, no matter how essential, but it is first and foremost the entire word that brings salvation. The law by itself only

<sup>80</sup> All three terms (Latin adverbs) indicate that the statement, “Whoever believes will be saved” does not describe a causal relationship, “He is saved because he believes,” as the opponents in the election controversy claimed. Rather, it simply describes (*descriptive*) the person (*objective*) who is saved as one who, when all is said and done (*conclusive*), has faith, without saying how faith and salvation are related. It was pointed out during the election controversy that by injecting causal relationships into passages like this, one could prove that a person is saved because of his works, since “Faith without works is dead” would then mean that “works cause faith.”

<sup>81</sup> I.e., through the Gospel, which is God’s power for salvation.

<sup>82</sup> The original reads, “*Gesetz und Evangelium müssen nimmer in Verbindung mit einander gepredigt werden, sic dürfen nicht von einander geriffen...*” For this to be correct, he seems to need an “*aber*” or “*sondern*” after the comma. And a couple of paragraphs later Pieper says that preaching God’s Word rightly means “*Gesetz und Evangelium zusammen, mit einander verbunden...*,” virtually synonymous with the first clause above. I therefore take “*nimmer*” as a misprint for “*immer*.”

kills. The gospel by itself, without the preceding law, is and remains a stumbling block for Jews and foolishness for Gentiles, even though in and of itself it is the power of God for salvation.

That is why God has revealed both teachings as necessary for the salvation of the sinner. That is why God has put them together with each other—so that each may play its part in pardoning, converting and sanctifying the lost. Certainly they are not twin sisters of the same nature and value, but they are like maid and lady, servant and mistress. They belong together in their work and never, ever should one go her own way and fulfill her calling apart from the other.

We must never forget that as different as law and gospel are in their nature, office, and effect, they have the very same goal—to save and sanctify sinners. Each does its own unique work to this end. They are therefore related to each other from the outset, corresponding to each other like hook and eye, bail and socket, or male and female. They are correlative. Just as man without woman and woman without man cannot give birth, so the law without the gospel and the gospel without the law cannot give spiritual birth for eternal life, cannot cause someone to be reborn, cannot save.

The creation of man would have been pointless, meaningless, without reference to woman, and vice versa. In the same way, the revelation of the law with all its commands and prohibitions, threats, curses and terror would be useless for converting and saving sinners, without reference to the gospel which rescues sinners from the hands of the law, and comforts and heals them again in order to save them. If, after the fall into sin, the law were the only revelation of God, the world would be just as surely damned with the law as without it. Not only would it be of absolutely no value for salvation, it would also make the damnation that much worse. So, too, the revelation of the gospel would be meaningless without the law as its counterpart—if the law had not driven sinners to the gospel, so to speak, had it not worked as a taskmaster unto Christ. The gospel alone in the world, without the law preceding it, could only increase fleshly security and impenitence and evoke ridicule and scorn in sinners who have experienced no terror, who are confident and secure. No, law and gospel are effective for conversion, sanctification, and salvation only in close connection with each other and in combination with each other. The law would not have been revealed had the gospel not been there, and the gospel would not have been revealed had the law not been there. They are inseparable correlatives. Whoever separates them and makes them independent agents frustrates their purpose and destroys their effectiveness for saving the sinner. They must always be preached together.

First of all, law and gospel must go together for the unconverted, the heathen, the people of the world, the fallen away, the Pharisees, the slaves of sin, the wise, the worldly minded, mockers and blasphemers, those who grumble and quarrel—whenever the question is conversion or reconversion. The law alone does work a knowledge of sin and contrition. But if the gospel is not added, it is only the *contritio passiva*, which plunges people into despair and damnation. It is a worldly sorrow that, without fail, works death. Only when the gospel is added, which calls forth hope and faith in God's grace, are sinners converted. The gospel brings about a godly sorrow that works repentance for salvation, which no one sorrows over.<sup>83</sup>

Nothing would be more perverse than going to the heathen, or to the marketplace of a godless metropolis, and for half a year, four weeks, indeed, even for a single sermon preaching only the flaming, damning law and completely silencing the gospel at first. The intent might be to get the unconverted good and terrified, and not to diminish this effect of the law by adding the gospel too quickly. That would certainly be a horrible sermon and a wicked undertaking. That is not God's will. We would only bring about bitterness, blasphemy and despair. We do not know how quickly or slowly the law may work its terrifying, killing results in different individuals. We must not, by withholding the gospel, make ourselves guilty of murdering souls through absolute despair or hardening. We dare not withhold the comfort of the gospel for even an hour from someone terrified by the law, for Satan can murder his soul in that hour. We have no right to let someone who has been affected by the law lie in torment, and in danger of despair or hardening of the heart, for even an

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<sup>83</sup> “*Das Evangelium...entsteht die gottliche Traurigkeit, die da wirkt zur Seligkeit eine Reue, die niemand gereut,*” literally, “The Gospel...brings about the godly sorrow which works for salvation a repentance, which no one repents of,” that is, which no one is sorry about. cf. 2 Corinthians 7:10ff.



instant longer than necessary. He needs God's comfort at once. Together with the agony and danger he must learn the way out.

It is a false, utterly unevangelical, thoroughly legalistic, not to mention Pharisaic thought that someone's terror at God's wrath must first be truly deep and thorough, or must first progress to a predetermined level, before we may awaken the hope of grace through the gospel. This is found nowhere in Scripture; it is called adding to God's word. This is man meddling in God's work and wanting to improve on his method of conversion. Nowhere has God said how deep the terror at his law must be to make conversion through the gospel genuine and thorough. Whether, where, when, and how deeply he wants to shoot his arrows into the heart of this or that person is his business, his alone. That belongs to his majesty. Whoever meddles in this sets himself up on God's throne and ruins God's work for him. Where only slight terror of God's anger exists, he can still work a right, genuine, true, saving faith through the gospel.

Truly the results, whether of the law or the gospel, are not our business at all. We can bring about neither the death worked by the law nor the making alive worked by the gospel. Our efforts cannot add the least little bit to it. Not the results, but the preaching, is our responsibility, so we should see to it that we preach his word correctly. In this context that means preaching law and gospel together, combined with each other, each always placed in immediate relation with the other—placed in the relation God himself has given, of course.

It would be just as perverse should a pastor want to confront someone living in open sin, someone fallen away into unbelief, or someone who is impenitent and hardened, only with the rigor and severity of the law, perhaps until he sees that the person is broken and contrite. He'll have a long wait. For the law does not work true contrition in the sense of true repentance. True repentance, the repentance of Peter, comes only from the Lord's look, punishment and pardon, sternness and love, law and gospel combined with each other. The law by itself does work terror, but at the same time it works rebellion, bitterness, hardening, and not a spark of the saving repentance of Peter.

The prophets of the old covenant, as well as John the Baptist, the Lord himself, and the apostles of the new covenant—all thoroughly rebuke the sin and unbelief of the Jewish nation and their elders. They call it a falling away from the Lord who revealed himself to Israel as the God of grace, who overwhelmed the nation with all grace and kept covenant and faith with them. Always, always their preaching of the law is set in relation with the gospel. Their preaching of repentance is a rebuke and an invitation at the same time, the combination of law and gospel. "Return, faithless Israel...only acknowledge your guilt..." Jeremiah 3:12-13. That is the tone of the Old Testament preaching of repentance. "Repent and believe the gospel," "Repent, the kingdom of God is near," is the form of the New Testament proclamation. We must never, ever forget that the gospel only works repentance when preached on the basis of the law.

The "brotherly admonition" based on Matthew 18 is neither an admonition nor brotherly if it operates only with the law, if it condemns sin but does not appeal for or invite a return with the grace of God. No one should consider Nathan's words of repentance to David (2 Samuel 12) a pure preaching of the law. Before Nathan announces the sword of the Lord, he has held up all the special grace God has shown him, which naturally included universal grace and the adoption as sons of God. Nathan places David's frightful punishment in relation to the gospel from the outset. In this way he brought the king to the confession, "I have sinned against the Lord."

Even excommunication is not an independent transaction of the law. The maid does not put the impenitent outside the church until and unless the royal mistress has carried out her saving office in vain, and has handed him over for execution as one who despises the gospel. Even then it is not an unconditional handing over to death, but to imprisonment, "as long as he does not repent," conditioned by the hope of his turning around, "so that his sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord Jesus," 1 Corinthians 5:5. Here once again the law clearly shows its deference to the gospel, and even in excommunication shows itself a taskmaster unto Christ. Likewise, the final rejection of the Old Testament people of the covenant, the Babylonian exile, was a rejection of hope—hope for their repentance and turning around and returning again to the land of promise, in the gracious arms of their ancient God. The Old Testament Scripture, in the final chapter of the last prophet, resounds with frightful threats, but at the same time points to

the grace that was coming with the promise of the Sun of Righteousness and the turning of the hearts of the children to their fathers.<sup>84</sup>

Just as the law is never to be preached apart from its relation with the gospel, so the gospel must only be proclaimed with regard to the preceding law. The gospel is never independent, standing there by itself, alone in its greatness, apart from all preaching of the law. The gospel is essentially a proclamation cut out for the law which has gone before. Every concept, every movement of the gospel presupposes the law—the proclamation of the law, the demands and curse of the law, the breaking of the law and the resulting condemnation, being lost under the law. Mercy, grace, Christ's incarnation, his obedience, suffering, and death, his entire vicarious atonement, in short, everything of Christ, the gospel as a whole and in all its parts—all of it is based on concepts and concerns resulting from the law: sin, guilt, and condemnation with its dreadful consequences as an actual reality for mankind.

The gospel first begins where the law has done its work. It only takes a person out of the hands of the law; it cannot get at him any other way. The gospel can only approach someone who is bound and chained by the law. The gospel refers only to him; only for him is it valid and powerful. The gospel has absolutely nothing to talk about with those who stand outside the law, the righteous. It falls on its face and becomes absurd. The gospel is essentially a correlative of the law; where there is no law, there is no gospel.

Now someone could get antinomian ideas from this essential relationship of the gospel to the law. Antinomianism considers preaching the written law<sup>85</sup> superfluous, since "The reproving of sin, repentance, and sorrow over sin is to be taught, not from the law, but from the gospel."<sup>86</sup> Our Confessions rightly reject this idea with detailed proof. It is true that the gospel confirms the proclamation of the law, and "What more forcible, more terrible declaration and preaching of God's wrath against sin is there than the very 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. For the gospel and Christ were never ordained and given for the purpose of terrifying and condemning, but of comforting and cheering those who are terrified and timid."<sup>87</sup> Like ordination confirms a pastor's call, but cannot replace it, the gospel certainly confirms the law, but cannot and should not replace and supplant the law. For the repentant, this "declaration and preaching of God's wrath against sin" on the basis of Christ's suffering and death may indeed intensify and refine the knowledge of sin already received from the law. But for the impenitent, the message of Christ's suffering and death is incapable of creating the knowledge of sin which comes from the law, or the necessary despair and terror. This comes only from the law as such. Only the law binds and chains the sinner with his sins in the way the gospel needs to find him.

Therefore we must not think we can convert the heathen, the godless world, the rebellious, or those in our own congregations who have fallen away, exclusively by preaching the gospel. The command of the Lord, "Preach the gospel to every creature," is said *a potiori parte*.<sup>88</sup> This command does not exclude, but includes the law. Even the fact that the natural man, including the heathen, has the law in his conscience and therefore has a certain knowledge of sin, a consciousness of guilt, and anxiety before God—even this does not make proclaiming the written law superfluous. Nothing worked by the natural knowledge of the law brings someone to that utter despair in which the gospel wants to find him. Natural man's knowledge of sin is as shallow as can be, and the nature of his knowledge is distorted besides. Man's presumptuous wisdom and self-righteousness, his love for the world and sinful desires have captured his heart.

So without the specific proclamation<sup>89</sup> of God's wrath, natural man continues to live in fleshly security, rocks himself to sleep with a thousand false hopes, and despises the gospel as foolishness. Not even after the

<sup>84</sup> Malachi 4:2,6.

<sup>85</sup> *Besondere Gesetzespredigt*. See above, note 10.

<sup>86</sup> cf. Formula of Concord, *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 957, 15.

<sup>87</sup> Luther. Cf. Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, Article V, 12-14, *Concordia Triglotta* pp. 955-957.

<sup>88</sup> "The more important part for the whole." In other words, the word "Gospel" is used here in the wide sense, meaning "All of Scripture, of which the Gospel is the most important part," not in the narrow sense as the opposite of the Law.

<sup>89</sup> *besondere Predigung*.

written law is revealed and proclaimed is the world willing to acknowledge its wretched condition. The wayward of Israel have a face harder than stone and do not want to repent; God strikes them, but they feel no pain; he crushes them, but they refuse correction, Jeremiah 5:3. In fact, the harder God beats them, the more they rebel, Isaiah 1:5. How, then, without the proclamation of the written law, could the heathen come to that despair which drives them into the alluring arms of the gospel? Aren't these the very people who not only do things which, according to their knowledge of God's righteousness, they know deserve death, but also approve of those who practice them, Romans 1:32?

God certainly would not have revealed the written law unless he wanted that law proclaimed. He would not have made known so many signs of his zeal and wrath against transgressors when he gave the law, nor would he have attached such terrifying threats and curses to it. And after revealing the written law at Sinai, he has it proclaimed over and over again through his prophets. "Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins," Isaiah 58:1. John the Baptist has to be the forerunner for the appearing Savior, and prepare the way for him by preaching the written law. The Lord himself not only explains the law, but calls down one woe after another on the hardened Pharisees and on the towns which have rejected his gospel. The gospel promise, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved," has its law flip side, "Whoever does not believe will be condemned," Mark 16:16. Peter summarized Christ's commission to the apostles to preach the gospel to the world with a two-fold statement "He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead." That is the law. The other is the gospel, "All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."<sup>90</sup>

We find neither a prophet nor an apostle who is silent about the law and has exclusively proclaimed the gospel. To say nothing of the prophets or Christ himself, Peter in his first sermons in Jerusalem, as models for later times, sharply proclaimed the law right in the midst of the gospel, as a glance at the first chapters of Acts reveals. Stephen does the same, Acts 7, as does Paul in all his sermons and letters. So there is no excuse for those who think it unnecessary to tell unbelievers about their sins right to their face, and to condemn their ways with the written law, since the gospel alone is God's power for salvation, and so it is enough to make these tidings known to the world. This opinion is not based on Scripture, but on their own wisdom. It is born of their fear of men and of the curse of the cross.

It seems even more right not to proclaim the written law to fallen and wayward church members. Surely they have richly learned to know and understand the law in its revealed form. Why preach more written law? But this is also man's own wisdom. When dealing with the impenitent—and here we are speaking of them alone—we cannot shirk our duty to call the sin they have committed what it is, and to proclaim God's wrath to the impenitent. In no other way can they come to repentance. Wanting to be silent about sin and win the impenitent only with the sweetness of the gospel amounts to denying God's zeal and holiness and suppressing his threats. It amounts to hypocrisy, practicing spiritual quackery. It means leading the poor people to fleshly security instead of to faith, and casting the pearls before the swine. Under all circumstances the impenitent need the law, I Timothy 1:9ff, and only next, afterwards, the gospel.

There really are pastors—thankfully not among us—who regard every discipline in doctrine and life as something legalistic and unjustified. They want to govern everything with the gospel alone, punish no one, excommunicate no one. They want to bear, cover and improve everything with the gospel. This is not evangelical, but denial of the truth. The word applies to them, "They are all mute dogs, they cannot bark," Isaiah 56:10. The result is that the congregation becomes a desolate house, a Babel, like the state church congregations in Germany, and souls go to ruin.

No, not the law alone—that only makes the unconverted into Pharisees or despairing Judases. But not the gospel alone either—that only strengthens sinners in fleshly security. But law and gospel together, one always related to the other in the proper way—the law as a taskmaster unto Christ, the gospel as the salvation from the law's curse. That is the word which saves, the power of God for salvation for the unconverted, the lost.

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<sup>90</sup> Acts 10:42ff.

But also the converted, believing, pious, dear children of God, who work out their salvation with all earnestness, must have law and gospel together preached to them. Even they cannot do without with the proclamation of the written law. But isn't it written, "The law is not made for the righteous but for lawbreakers," 1 Timothy 1:9? Yes it is, and we must not sell this passage the least bit short. We Christians are redeemed not only from the curse, Galatians 3:13, but also from the slavery, the press and duress<sup>91</sup> of the law, Romans 7:1-6, Galatians 3:25ff. We are no longer slaves, but children of God who are of age, Galatians 4:1-7. We have received the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of sonship by whom we cry, "Abba, Father," Romans 8:15ff. We Christians, as such, do not even need the external law as an instructor any more, to teach us what is pleasing and displeasing to God. Through our conversion and the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit we are all taught by God, John 6:45, Isaiah 54:13. His law is written in our heart and put into our minds, so that one need not teach the other, since all, from the least to the greatest, know the Lord (Jeremiah 31:33ff). This has been given us through the gospel, which teaches us to know God again by faith as the one great Good, as the First Commandment presents him.

Still, we must not forget that all this is said only of us Christians, insofar as we are Christian, born again, spiritual. We are not wholly Christians, however, but only partly. We still have very much of the sinful nature, the old Adam, on and in us, which wants to know nothing about what the law teaches and to hear nothing about what it commands and forbids. Rather, this sinful nature always wants to go the wrong way, always wants the opposite of God's will; it is always struggling against the law. Because of this, even we Christians cannot do without the law, not its teaching, its compulsion, or its curse. On the contrary, proclaiming the written law must always be in fashion with us.

Nothing better has been written about this than Article VI of our confession, the Formula of Concord, Epitome and Thorough Declaration, "Of the Third Use of God's Law," to which the reader is referred. At the end of the Epitome and the Thorough Declaration it says, "We reject and condemn as an error pernicious and detrimental to Christian discipline, as also to true godliness, the teaching that the law, in the above-mentioned way and degree, should not be urged upon Christians and the true believers (*vere credentibus*), but only upon the unbelieving, non-Christians and the impenitent."<sup>92</sup> We note that the confession strongly emphasizes that the law must always be held before us Christians, because of our Old Adam, not only for teaching and as a mirror of our sin, but also as force and intimidation. "For the old Adam, as an intractable, refractory ass, 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 often-times by the club of punishments and troubles, until the body of sin is entirely put off, and man is perfectly renewed in the resurrection..." Thorough Declaration, VI, 24.<sup>93</sup>

So the regular public sermon in the Christian congregation must also be a preaching of the law, not only because there are always hypocrites mixed in with the visible church, and because sometimes unbelievers come to a service, but also because of the sinful natures of God's beloved children. They need instruction from the law continuously, so that better and better they can test and approve what is the good, pleasing and perfect will of God.<sup>94</sup> Indeed, the law must be revealed in all its depth and shown to its whole extent. Our Christians must come to a thorough knowledge of the law, and not be left with the outward letter. That is why special catechetical sermons have been preached from time to time in our Lutheran churches, which above all explain the Ten Commandments. The epistles of the church year offer especially ample opportunity for sermons on the law, and these sermons do not have to become lengthy or legalistic just because they are about the law.

It is worthwhile for Christians to foster an ever deeper knowledge of sin. Through it they become ever more humble, and they are also always learning to shun the sins that are so prevalent in the world. It is worthwhile to train Christians to have a tender conscience, which consents to no sin and considers so-called little sins to be large. Above all this comes about through the gospel; but to the extent that it involves knowing what sin is, and what its sin is, it comes from the law. So again and again the law must be held up to Christians

<sup>91</sup> *Drang and Zwang*.

<sup>92</sup> *Concordia Triglotta*, pp. 807 and 971.

<sup>93</sup> *Concordia Triglotta*, pp. 969-971.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. Romans 12:2.

as a mirror that sheds light on the hidden recesses of the evil heart with all its base desires, as a mirror which reveals original sin as the chief abomination. Then daily repentance does not seem excessive to them, but is always becoming more earnest and thorough. In all the circumstances of life, in every station and calling, in each and every association with the world, in the midst of all the false ideas about morality which surround them, Christians should be fit to walk in the right way. Right in the middle of this evil generation they should shine as lights in the world. Indeed, they should work at their inner sanctification. Through the Spirit they should put to death the misdeeds of the flesh and unceasingly devote themselves to all virtues. The strength for it comes from the gospel; the law shows the way there for those who are not yet entirely spiritual, as a lamp for our feet and a light for our path.

In the same way as the whole congregation, the individuals in the congregation, even if they are faithful Christians, need the teaching of the law when they do not know the way. They need the rebuke of the law when they stumble or get lazy. They need its warning against sin, false teaching, unbelief, the ways of the world, as well as its threat of God's anger and punishment, when they are inclined to let the sinful nature have its way. So the spiritual training of Christians to maturity does not come about without the law.

But of course with Christians, even more than with the unregenerate, the law must be nothing more than a maidservant. At times the law wants to do more than teach Christians insofar as they have sinful natures and serve as a mirror, wants to do more than warn and compel obedience with threats and inner torments. And when the law puts on airs, as if it could create spiritual fruit of any kind, everything goes to ruin. The proclamation which is especially for Christians is the gospel. From it alone, by faith, Christians draw delight and desire, succor and strength<sup>95</sup> for spiritual life. Faith in and of itself draws life only from the gospel, and not from the law to any extent. So the law must not be proclaimed and administered alone, or as the chief thing, in Christendom even less than in the unbelieving world. As soon as the law shows the way to a God-pleasing way of life, the gospel must come and hold out to the Christian the desire and power for it. As soon as the law has revealed sin, the gospel must proclaim forgiveness for it and work repentance. All law should only make room for grace, and allow grace alone to have rule over believers.

Now we come to the second part of our thesis. Law and gospel must be purely separated from each other; they must not be mixed together with each other. No hint of gospel dare be mixed into the law; no hint of law dare be mixed into the gospel. From the foregoing it is obvious we do not mean the combination of law and gospel for the purpose of working repentance and sanctification. Rather, we mean that the nature of the gospel must not enter the law, and the nature of the law must not enter the gospel. The law must not have an evangelical sound or tone, and the gospel must not have a legal sound or tone. The law must lose nothing of its severity, and the gospel nothing of its sweetness.

This means that part of the law's harshness is already undone if we narrow its scope and do not let it embrace every aspect of man's conduct or every inclination of man's heart, or if we say that something is not commanded or forbidden which God has commanded or forbidden. So as the saying goes, "Thoughts are free before men, but not before God." Not only do gross Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism fall into this category. So does the subtle synergism which allows natural man any kind of spiritual strength at all. It matters little whether it is only Melancthon's *facultas se applicandi ad gratiam*,<sup>96</sup> F.A. Schmidt's doctrine of man's "status as an ethical person," or the Ohio Synod's teaching that the unregenerate have the ability, under prevenient grace, with powers given as a gift by grace, to make a decision for grace or to cease their willful resistance against it. Both gross and subtle synergism unscripturally soften the law, and deny what the law clearly teaches about the total corruption of original sin. Synergism denies man's spiritual death, as well as what the law teaches about natural man's fierce enmity against God. It robs from the gospel whatever power and glory it ascribes to man, from whom they have removed the law's judgement.

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<sup>95</sup> *Licht und Luft, Saft und Kraft.*

<sup>96</sup> This is one of the most well-known of Melancthon's synergistic statements, taken from one of the later editions of his *Loci Communes*. The entire sentence said, "Free will in man is the faculty for applying himself to grace, that is, it hears the promise and tries to assent to it, and abstains from sins against conscience."

This is more than breaking “one of the least of these commandments.” It turns the laws whole judgement on natural man’s unspiritual condition on its head, and makes law and gospel ineffective at this point. Synergism, by falsely speaking of his own spiritual powers, prevents the unregenerate person from utterly despairing of himself, and deceives him with a false, self-made conversion. Synergism is not different from gross Pelagianism, humanism, deism, rationalism, and the religion of the lodges in essence, but only in degree. It is a refined and hidden way, while the others are coarse and obvious ways, of overthrowing the law, and therefore of ruining the saving word of God.

Weakening the law’s intensity falls into the same category. Scripture has a comprehensive doctrine of the wrath of God. He is angry about every sin, even about original sin. His wrath burns down into the deepest pit of hell. He has spoken the sentence of death, ruin in time, and eternal torment on every sin, even the smallest, and above all on original sin. In fact, without exception he has already condemned all mankind to hell. Whoever presents original sin as no evil at all, or as only a minor one, whoever uses original sin to excuse actual sin or excuses one sin with another, whoever does not believe and does not preach that God is so angry that he sets our iniquities before him, our secret sins in the light of his presence, whoever glosses over and weakens sin, whoever denies the eternity of punishment in hell, whoever inserts a purgatory between heaven and hell or teaches a state of development after death, whoever speaks of God as though he is not in earnest with his threats, as though he is far too good and kind to inflict death and damnation because of sin and unbelief, as though he is satisfied if a person just tries to some degree to live honorably, to be a virtuous person—whoever does any of these things mixes evangelical thoughts into the law and annuls law and gospel.

We Christian pastors are especially in danger of mixing the gospel into the law by making Christ into a stopgap for those who are too weak to fulfill the law. “Do as much as you can, for the rest trust in Christ who has come to save sinners, weak people.” Along the same line lies the false comfort, which we so like to give ourselves, that together with our otherwise Christian conduct we can indulge this or that sinful desire without coming under God’s wrath, or put off repentance with the thought that God would not close the gates of grace just yet today. In short, taking anything away from the zeal, content, demands or validity of the law, either by toning it down or by subtly mixing evangelical thinking with it, keeps the law from doing its work and closes the way to repentance for the sinner. Impenitence in one part of the law is impenitence in all of it, and the law robbed of its earnestness is no longer the double-edged sword which penetrates and divides, i.e., demoralizes,<sup>97</sup> soul and spirit, as Hebrews 4:12 pictures it. The law must be so empty of all grace, patience, and leniency, so completely proclaimed in its relentlessly demanding, damning nature to both Christian and non-Christian that every listener must say with David, “My flesh trembles in fear of you; I stand in awe of your laws,” Psalm 119:120.

Even less may a legal tone come into the gospel if the gospel’s essence is not to be destroyed and its working annulled. This happens just as soon as the smallest condition is attached to the gospel promises. We have already established that the gospel, by its very nature, bestows grace just as unconditionally as the law pronounces a curse on the sinner. Even faith is not a condition, but an effect of the absolution which is unconditionally announced through the word.

We want to reiterate this briefly here. The descriptive sentence, “Whoever believes will be saved,” can, by itself, be understood as law or gospel. It is to be taken as gospel only when it is presented as the opposite of righteousness by one’s own works. Then it is not a condition of righteousness which is imposed on man, but rather it is part of the teaching of free, unconditional, unmerited grace; in fact it is proof that we, without accomplishing anything on our part, are saved only and completely by grace. So Paul argues in Romans 4:16, “Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may stand firm for all Abraham’s offspring.”

The law also promised grace, but only on the condition of obedience. This promise did not stand firm, since the obedience on which it is based was lacking. If the gospel were also a conditional promise based on human accomplishment, it would stand no firmer than the first promise. The promise of the gospel can stand

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<sup>97</sup> *zerseßt*, which literally means “decompose, disintegrate” and figuratively means “demoralize, undermine.”

firm only if it is not conditioned by any accomplishment of man, if it comes by faith. Only then can righteousness come by grace, by absolutely free good will, if it comes to us not by works but by faith. A person would have to be blind not to see that here faith is not a demand of the law, a condition for justification. Faith is rather the opposite of every condition of the law, the means for appropriating the unconditional righteousness which is given as a completely free gift. “Therefore, the promise comes by faith”—because it is unconditional in nature, and because the promise is to stand truly firm for all his offspring.

So whoever proclaims faith as a condition for justification sets a demand before the person to be justified, that is, proclaims the law to him, and in fact proclaims the greatest law of all, the first commandment. He proclaims the law just where he should be announcing to him nothing but the pure gospel, the free, unconditional absolution. He has mixed the law into the gospel and annulled the essence of the gospel. He has ruined its justifying, faith-working power, and has hindered the creation of faith with the law’s demands. For faith will not be produced by any demand, but only by the evangelical, unconditional, divine assurance of grace, by the gospel alone, a gospel not polluted by mixing in elements of the law. And only through such a gospel will faith be preserved and strengthened. Just as no one can come to faith through a conditional gospel, so it follows that no one can remain in faith if faith is always proclaimed to him as a condition of justification. Faith is essentially confidence in grace, certainty of grace. “I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day,” 2 Timothy 1:12, Romans 8:35ff.

Here Paul is speaking only and entirely in terms of the gospel. He wants to comfort himself and other troubled Christians who are heavy-laden with sorrow. He sustains himself in his troubles with the gospel promises of God (see especially the Romans reference). They are unconditional. The faithful God has promised him and all his dear children in the gospel, “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand,” Isaiah 41:10. And this promise is not based on man’s good conduct foreseen by God, his perseverance in faith, or on anything of the kind.<sup>98</sup> Rather, it is based only and exclusively on God’s free, spontaneous mercy alone; it has its foundation in him alone, in his gracious good pleasure in Christ. Indeed, this promise is given in spite of our evil conduct over against grace foreseen by God. It is given to comfort us in the face of all the wickedness of our flesh, the world, and Satan. “You have not called upon me, O Jacob, you have not wearied yourselves for me, O Israel. You have not brought me sheep for burnt offerings, nor honored me with your sacrifices...But you have burdened me with your sins and wearied me with your offenses. I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remember your sins no more,” Isaiah 43:22ff.

This one word, which makes us sure we will be preserved in faith in spite of all the evil tricks of the devil, the world and our flesh, stands here as a representative of all gospel promises. These assurances are unconditional, as are all gospel promises, all grace. If that is true, then I can also rely on them unconditionally. The assurance of faith—and this is being clearly stated yet again on purpose—is by its very character and nature an unconditional assurance, just as unconditional as the promises on which it is based. So also my assurance regarding the future, regarding my being preserved in faith—which Paul combines with assurance of the present state of grace in 2 Timothy 1:12 (they are really one and the same thing)—this assurance is an unconditional, *completely* unconditional assurance, since God’s promise to preserve me until the end is a totally unconditional promise.<sup>99</sup>

But now comes the big, obvious objection. Isn’t it also written, “Be faithful, even to the point of death, and so I will give you the crown of life,” Revelation 2:10. “Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God,” Revelation 3:11ff. “Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,” Philippians 2:12. In addition to 2 Timothy 1:12, doesn’t Paul

<sup>98</sup> These phrases were used by the Ohio and Iowa Synods, and the followers of F.A. Schmidt in the Norwegian Synod, during and after the Election Controversy.

<sup>99</sup> In the Election Controversy, Ohio, Iowa, and the followers of F.A. Schmidt maintained that no one can be assured he will be preserved in faith until the end. They were willing to speak of a “conditional assurance,” (“If I remain in the faith, I will be saved”) but called the idea of unfailing or especially of “absolute certainty” (see Pieper’s comment below regarding this term) or assurance the height of Calvinistic presumption.

also speak the other word in 4:7-8, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. *Now*, i.e., as a result, there is in store for me the crown of righteousness...?” “He who stands firm to the end will be saved,” Matt. 10:22?

In all these and a thousand other passages, is not the salvation of Christians promised conditionally, namely on the condition of faithfulness, of fighting the good fight, of standing firm? We answer, “Quite obviously!” Yes, but because of this is not every assurance of salvation of necessity a conditional assurance, on the condition of our being faithful Christians? We answer “No,” and a thousand times no! Whoever answers “Yes” only shows he does not understand how to divide law and gospel, shows he is totally unaware that he has mixed the law into the gospel and ruined the one with the other. He has committed the fatal error of viewing the so-called gospel admonition as the pure gospel promise. Confusion prevails concerning this point throughout the length and breadth of Christendom, and tragically also in many parts of the Lutheran church. To make it dear we wish to say the following.

There are three forms of divine teaching. The first is the law, with its absolute demand and condemnation, which is to be proclaimed to all who are not reborn, and to all Christians insofar as they are not yet reborn. The second is the gospel, with its absolution, its absolute verdict of not guilty, which is to be proclaimed to all who are terrified by the law, whether they are still unconverted or are already Christians, so that they believe and are completely assured of their salvation and—if one will understand it correctly—become absolutely certain. The third form is the gospel admonition, by means of which Christians are to be urged on to sanctified living. It consists of a combination of law and gospel corresponding to the present condition of the Christian. In this life the Christian is, speaking concretely, a combination of spirit and flesh. He is a new and an old man in one and the same person. Insofar as he is spirit, regenerate, born of God, of a godly, spiritual nature, he does not need any more law at all; he lives purely from the gospel by faith. But insofar as he is still flesh, the gospel is pure poison to him; he needs the pure law and nothing but the law. As spirit and flesh at the same time he needs both—gospel and law correctly combined, yet also always purely distinguished from each other.

Now Christians are not two equal-sized halves, spirit and flesh. Rather, the spirit predominates in them; it is the principle which guides and rules in them. While their flesh is certainly very strong, it does not dominate them; it only clings to them and makes them sluggish in doing all good. They are spiritual in substance, but still burdened with the flesh. In order that they might become more and more complete in sanctified living, God wants his twofold word, law and gospel, applied to them as admonition. God wants the law proclaimed in such a way that it is always showing them, insofar as they are still flesh, how they should behave, what they should do, what they should strive for, what they should do with the spiritual power in them. God wants the gospel proclaimed in such a way that it is giving them, insofar as they are ruled by the Spirit, more and more desire and power to do all the good works to which the law directs them. The earnest but evangelical warning and threat is along the same lines, has the same basis and the same purpose. For example, when Paul says, “For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die,” he immediately adds the admonition given in the form of the promise, “But if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live,” Romans 8:13. Also when the warning and threat are followed through on, the chastisement (the Formula of Concord’s “club of punishments and troubles”<sup>100</sup>) is no different.

Therefore God combines his law and his gospel for Christians for gospel admonition, warning, threats, and chastisement, so that we attain his sanctification and become more and more complete in fulfilling the law. Note this well—the gospel admonition is not only law nor only gospel, but a unique combination of both. Its goal is not to assure salvation to a sinner terrified by the law, but its goal is sanctified living, the fulfilling of the law. So of necessity, it does not have the form, “Do this, *then* you will live,” “Be faithful, *then* I will...,” “If you crucify the flesh, *then* you will live”—it does not have the form of law and promise. The sense is exactly the same as when Paul says in Romans 12:1, “I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices...” Here as always, the command is law, the motive for doing it is the gospel. Or Philippians 2, “Work out your salvation...for it is God who works in you to will and to act...” So also the Beatitudes in the

<sup>100</sup> Formula of Concord, VI, 24, *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 969.



Sermon on the Mount. It is all gospel admonition—law in the ordering, gospel as the foundation for it. The only difference is that in the gospel part, the grace that is to move us to action is sometimes in the future, sometimes in the past, sometimes in the present.

Because of the form of promise in which the gospel element of the admonition often appears, people are led into the fatal error of believing and asserting that the gospel itself is a conditional promise, since it is written, “Whoever believes and is baptized, *he* will be saved.” Again, “He who endures to the end will be saved.” “Be faithful, even to the point of death, and *then* I will give you the crown of life.” Therefore, they believe, also the assurance of salvation can only be a conditional one.

The first passage, “Whoever believes...” does not belong in the same class as the others at all, because in its opposition to all salvation by works it is pure gospel. But aside from the first passage, here we have the gospel admonition, which is half law, being confused with the pure gospel promise. The law part of the gospel admonition, which the Christian needs for the sake of his Old Adam, is smuggled into the pure gospel promise, which is unconditional, and in this way the unconditional gospel is made into a conditional one.

And then this poisoned gospel (which is no gospel at all any more) is used for a wrong purpose. They do not use it as an admonition for the Christian who is truly spiritual, but also still of the flesh, as an encouragement and inducement to sanctified living. Instead it is held out to the alarmed, shattered soul as comfort for the distress of sin, danger and perdition. So a person gets a complete misunderstanding of the nature, office and effect of law and gospel, because the law is mixed into the gospel. From this comes a conditional gospel, conditional absolution, conditional comfort—and through one’s own conduct, one’s own faithfulness, comes a conditional assurance of grace and salvation. Consequently it never lets the sinner come to faith, to assurance, to peace of soul, but forever leaves him to hover between heaven and hell in doubt and agony.

We can summarize. Correctly dividing law and gospel is the evangelical pastor’s one great, necessary art. If he can do it he can become a faithful servant and effective tool of Christ for saving many lost souls. If he cannot do it all his preaching and ministering is spiritual quackery which only ruins everything. Therefore we must learn it. It is an easy and, at the same time, a difficult art. It is easy because the Holy Spirit, according to his good pleasure, works it in us without our doing, through the word which shines brighter than the sun. It is difficult because our reason does not grasp it and our flesh always wants the wrong way. Ask and it will be given you! Seek—in the Scripture—and you will find.

The proper preaching of law and gospel can be divided into three parts. First, preaching the law, with its absolute demand and damnation, to all who are not reborn, as well as to those who are reborn insofar as they still are not reborn, to work utter despair in them. Second, preaching the gospel with its absolute absolution to all who are in terror because of the law, both to those who are not reborn and to those who are, so that it may bring forth faith, and assurance of salvation—unconditional assurance. Third, combining the law with its demand and the gospel with its promise for gospel admonition, warning, and threatening. This is intended only for the spiritual children of God who, however, are still burdened with the flesh, in order to work sanctified living.

Or—Christian doctrine can be summarized in these three sentences: 1. You are damned! 2. Your sins are forgiven! 3. Therefore go and sin no more! The first part is the bare law, the second the bare gospel, the third the gospel admonition. Preaching each part in its proper order is called the correct division and combination of law and gospel and saves many souls.