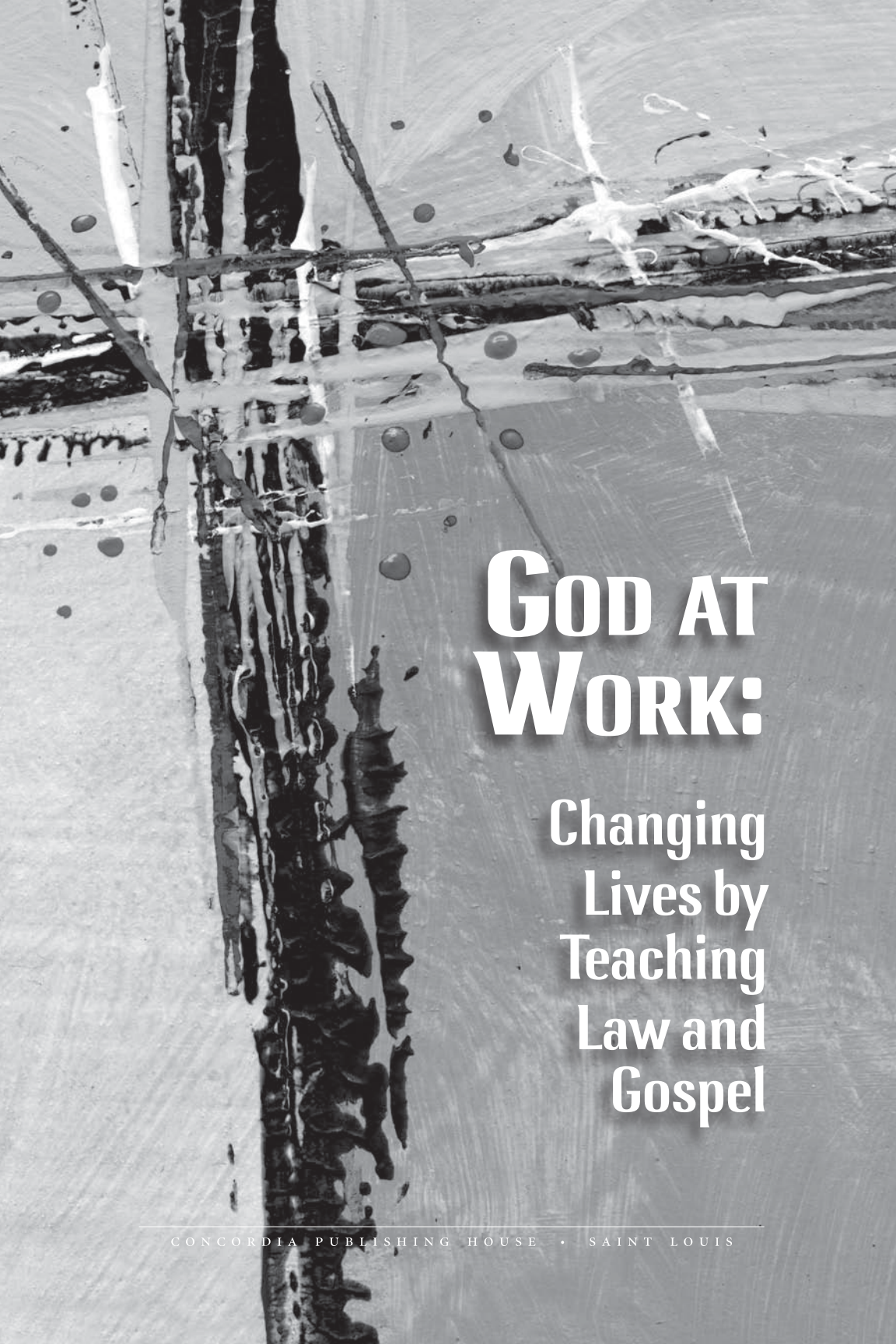




GOD AT WORK:

Changing
Lives by
Teaching
Law and
Gospel

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So why should I care about using Law and Gospel?

Does it matter if I *know* the difference between Law and Gospel?

Does it matter *how* I teach them?

Does it matter *when* I teach them?

The answers are yes, yes, and yes again!

To find out why, note the six differences between Law and Gospel.

1. Law and Gospel differ in how they were revealed to humans.

- Everyone has the Law written in his or her heart, but not everyone has heard, understood, or believed the Gospel.
- That makes a *big difference* in how I teach.

2. Law and Gospel differ in their contents.

- The Law tells me what to do. The Gospel reveals to me what God is doing. It doesn't demand anything of me.
- I need to help my students know they sin, cannot please God, and need a Savior; and know and believe that Jesus did all the work to give us grace, mercy, salvation, and forgiveness.

3. Law and Gospel differ in their promises and how we receive them.

- The promises of the Law—eternal life and salvation—come with conditions. I must fulfill the Law perfectly. I must do the work.
- Gospel promises come without conditions. The Gospel asks nothing. Instead it offers a kind invitation, promising the grace of God, salvation, and faith. God in Christ did the work for me.
- When Law is taught without Gospel, self-righteousness or despair, anxiety, and fear reign in people's hearts.
- When Gospel is taught without the Law, sinners fall into self-justification, or think their actions don't matter, or that God doesn't care what they do. Tedium and ingratitude rule.
- I need to teach both Law and Gospel so that my students understand and trust God's grace in Christ Jesus.

4. Law and Gospel differ regarding their threats.

- Teaching the Law comes with threats. The Gospel contains no threats; rather, it decreases believers' desire to sin.
- I need to teach both messages so each can do its work.

5. Law and Gospel differ regarding their functions and effects.

- Since I can't do what the Law demands, I become frustrated, discouraged, and unwilling to try. The Law shows me my sin, but it doesn't help me to get rid of it. The Law works in me and makes me contrite, but it does not comfort me. It tells me what to do but doesn't help me do it.
- Without the Law, sin reigns and I don't realize I'm sinning.
- While the Gospel demands faith, at same time it offers and gives me faith. It removes all terror, fear, guilt, and anguish. Instead it fills me with peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. It doesn't give me a to-do list, but it does change me into someone who cannot help but serve our Lord and others.
- Without the Gospel, I am a lost and condemned sinner.
- So it matters when I teach Law and Gospel because each affects my students differently.

6. Law and Gospel differ regarding the persons to whom each teaching is to be preached.

- I can teach the Law to sinners who are content to be sinners.
- I can teach the Gospel to sinners who are troubled, in need of God's grace.
- Because each person hears the message they need to hear at that moment, I need to be able to identify and teach Law and Gospel effectively.

May the Holy Spirit inspire you and fill you with His grace and knowledge as you sharpen and improve your teaching skills!

How could I use this resource?

- Use the articles individually or in a group.
- Study one article at a time, or do a few related ones together.
- Discuss or ponder the beginning thought.
- Consider how the article impacts teaching the Christian faith.
- Talk about how the content applies to your setting.
- Use the Law and Gospel theses as a guide and summary. (See appendix on pages 78–80.)
- Read more in *Law & Gospel: How to Read and Apply the Gospel* by Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther. This readers' edition also offers helpful background information.

Source for the six differences: C. F. W. Walther's first two lectures on Thesis 1. *Law and Gospel: How to Read and Apply the Bible*, pages 11–24.

SECTION

A

Get it in your head!

What is Law and Gospel?

When we compare Holy Scripture with other writings, we notice that no book seems to be as full of contradictions as the Bible. And this seems to be true not only in minor points but also even in its main point, namely, regarding the doctrine of how we may come to God and are saved.

For instance, in one passage, the Bible offers forgiveness to all sinners, yet in another passage forgiveness of sins is withheld from all sinners. Or, in still another passage, life everlasting is offered freely to all people, but in yet another, people are directed to do something themselves in order to be saved.

This riddle can be solved when we consider that there are two entirely different doctrines in Scripture: the doctrine of the Law and the doctrine of the Gospel.

C. F. W. Walther

Law and Gospel: How to Read and Apply the Bible,
introduction to lectures on Law and Gospel, page 10

A powerful paradox

1

Jeffrey E. Burkart

AN OPENING THOUGHT (TO PONDER OR DISCUSS)

- Name a contradiction that you see in your everyday life.

Read this

Whenever the terms Law and Gospel are used in the same sentence, they present a powerful, and sometimes confusing, paradox—a seeming contradiction in terms.

Our theological language is full of such paradoxical duets:

- To live we must die.
- We are both righteous and sinful.
- God is hidden and revealed.
- Christians are free lords of all, subject to none, and dutiful servants of all, subject to all.

Paradoxes such as these are difficult to comprehend, especially for children who tend to want things explained in a direct fashion. Let's take a moment to define Law and Gospel so that each can be distinguished from the other, though they are inseparable (another paradox).

The Law

The Law is often defined in terms of its purposes. It keeps order and checks our behavior (a curb); it shows us our sins (a mirror); it guides us as to how to lead a God-pleasing life (a rule).

But this definition needs to be expanded if students are to realize that curbs that keep order and rules that help us do good are not the things that save us. The Law needs to be seen as that which condemns us—that which drives us to despair because of our inability to keep it.

If we say we've kept the Law, we sin because of the pride we have in our own accomplishments. When we try to keep the Law and fail, the Law drives us toward despair. We may even reject any hope of being forgiven.

The Law is a paradoxical gift; when we try to live according to its precepts, we find the gift has pretty sharp teeth. It simultaneously accuses and convicts us. Try as we might to keep it, it testifies as a witness against us.

The Gospel

The Gospel has the opposite effect. It is the proclamation of the Good News that God loves us unconditionally in Christ Jesus. In spite of all the evil that surrounds us, in spite of our transgression of His Law, God washed away our sins in the blood of His Son and brought us to faith through the power of His Spirit in our Baptism.

When we teach about the Law and Gospel, we need to make sure that children know that grace comes by faith in Jesus alone—no works we do can make us right with God.

According to repeated surveys, more than 50 percent of Lutherans believe they can do something to earn their salvation. More than half think they can keep the Law and, by keeping it, earn God's favor. Now that's a paradox that can change only through proper teaching of Law and Gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit.

God's Word so clearly shows us that these two beliefs are not true: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8–9).

Teachers are privileged to pass on the Good News of salvation by grace through faith alone. May God bless you as you grow in God's Word, sharpen your teaching skills, and share the life-changing grace of God in Jesus our Savior.

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT (OR DISCUSS)

- My biggest "ah-ha!" moment about this topic was . . .
- I really need to find out more about . . .
- When have I expected God to do something or give me something because I did something good for someone or for His Church?
- Where have I clearly heard and understood the Gospel, God's unconditional love for me in Christ Jesus?

Teaching the Bible with Law and Gospel eyes

2

John T. Pless

AN OPENING THOUGHT (TO PONDER OR DISCUSS)

- To me, faithful teaching of the Bible means . . .

Read this

It is the great joy of Christian teachers to open God's written Word to their students. Teachers delight in introducing children to the people of the Scriptures and in sharing the narrative that begins with creation in Genesis and finishes with the eternal reign of the Lamb in the Book of Revelation.

Lutheran teachers know that in our teaching, we must read, study, instruct, and believe according to the Author's ultimate intention.

These [things] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name. (John 20:31)

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:14–17)

Teaching God's Word faithfully means teaching both Law and Gospel. One of our Lutheran Confessions, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, puts it like this: "All Scripture ought to be distributed into these two principal topics: the Law and the promises. For in some places Scripture presents the Law, and in others the promises about Christ" (The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article IV, paragraph 5).

Impossible demands

Law is characterized by demand and requirement. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession reminds us that the Law, summarized in the Ten Commandments, requires not only “outward civil works, which reason can in some way produce. But they also require other things placed far above reason: truly to fear God, truly to love God, truly to call upon God, truly to be convinced that God hears us, and to expect God’s aid in death and in all afflictions” (Article IV, paragraph 8). That is to say, God’s Holy Law lays on us a demand that we cannot meet.

Lutheran teachers will not attempt to diminish the Law by reducing its uncompromising requirement that we fear, love, and trust in God above all things. We will recognize the Law for what it is—that good and Holy Word of God that orders our lives in this sinful world and shows us how far short we sinners fall before God.

But knowledge of the Law does not save. In fact, Satan would use the knowledge of the Law to drive your students into despair and harden them in unbelief.

Incredible love

Christ Jesus has another purpose in mind when you teach the Law according to the Scriptures. He uses the Law not to drive to desperation and false belief but to close down every path to salvation except Himself. Because Christ alone is Savior, we confess that the Law cannot save.

To use the language of our Confessions, the Law stands in the service of the promises. So teach the Law in all of its severity. Don’t diminish its demands by listening to the old Adam’s lies that if we do the best we can, God will do the rest. The Law requires much more than good intentions or right motivations!

The righteousness that saves is the righteousness of Jesus, who has fulfilled the Law by His sinless life, His perfect obedience, and His sin-atoning death. This is the promise that your students need to hear from you when you open the Scriptures.

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT (OR DISCUSS)

Restate the purposes of God’s Law and Gospel in your own words.

- When I am confronted with the Law, I often feel . . .
- What thoughts or fears keep me from sharing God’s word of Law with my students? How can I change my thinking about this?
- What are my favorite words or images that explain the Gospel?

AN OPENING THOUGHT (TO PONDER OR DISCUSS)

- My favorite law is . . .

Read this

Reformation theologians struggled with a question that confronts teachers today who want to faithfully teach God's Law and Gospel in their classrooms. Once the Law has accused and the Gospel has created faith, what purpose does the Law serve in the Christian's life?

We see the Law at work in the world, providing order and discipline as a curb to prevent total moral chaos. The chief function of the Law, however, is as a mirror that shows us the ugliness of our sin. But do Christians need the Law? Yes, believers in Christ need the Law because we are at the same time both sinners and saints. The old Adam in us continually needs to die and drive us back to Christ Jesus for forgiveness of sins and newness of life.

Obedience to the Law does not sanctify us; Christ alone does that by His atoning death. The Law shows us what good works are, but it has no power to produce them from our sinful flesh. Only the free gift of the Gospel can create a "free, cheerful spirit" that produces the fruit of the Spirit.

The Formula of Concord carefully asserts, "When a person is born anew by God's Spirit, liberated from the Law (i.e., freed from this driver), and led by Christ's Spirit, he lives according to God's unchangeable will revealed in the Law. Since he is born anew, he does everything from a free, cheerful spirit. . . . For such people are no longer under the Law, but under grace, as St. Paul says in Romans 8:2" (Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, Article VI, paragraph 17).

Freedom from the Law's curse

We teach God's Law to our students to direct them away from what the Lutheran Confessions call "self-chosen works," projects we think please God but lack His commandment.

Freed from the curse of the Law, the Law remains to direct the Christian to live in the world and serve our neighbors in love. The Gospel alone rules the conscience of the Christian; the Law rules the body.

So the teacher will teach the Law in such a way that students learn to follow Luther's encouragement to embrace and claim our baptismal grace in Christ. Help students stay within set limits and practice overcoming the flesh, but don't let their consciences trouble them. Remember that we are God's beloved baptized children.

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT (OR DISCUSS)

- What sentence popped off the page to me?
- One thing I still wonder about is . . .
- Now I understand that . . .
- How can I put these concepts to work in my teaching right away?

AN OPENING THOUGHT (TO PONDER OR DISCUSS)

- A Gospel truth I know is . . .

Read this

Christians use the word *Gospel* frequently in our conversations and classrooms. What does this little word mean?

The Formula of Concord offers this succinct definition: “Everything that comforts, that offers God’s favor and grace to transgressors of the Law, is, and is properly called, the Gospel. It is a good and joyful message that God will not punish sins, but will forgive them for Christ’s sake” (Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, Article V, paragraph 21). In other words, the Gospel is God’s own gift to comfort sinners broken by the condemnation of the Law.

God’s revelation in Christ

The Gospel is never about what we do; it is always about what Christ Jesus gives us in His living, dying, and rising again from the grave.

One of Luther’s favorite pictures of the Gospel was that of *testament*, the word used by Jesus when He instituted the Supper of His body and blood. We speak of the legal document that designates the distribution of a deceased person’s property as “a last will and testament.” The Gospel is the Lord’s own last will and testament, set in motion by His death, and naming all who believe in Him as heirs of His promise and the forgiveness of sins.

The Gospel is not just good news in a bad situation. It is the Good News that God’s own Son took our sin on Himself, endured a sinner’s death for us, and rose again to life for those who are dead in trespasses and sin. (Explore the expanse of God’s love for us in Ephesians 2:1–10.)

The Gospel declares that your students belong to Jesus. Sin, death, and the Law are not their master, because Jesus was crucified and raised to give them His own righteousness, and with it, joy and peace.

Repetition with a purpose

Sometimes we assume that our students know the Gospel, but this is both deceptive and detrimental to Christian teaching. We cannot speak the Gospel often enough. While it is necessary that the Law be taught to uncover unbelief and its varied fruits, it is only the evangelical message that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself that delivers the goods: forgiveness of sins, righteousness before God, peace with God, and the promise of eternal life.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Corinthians 5:18–21)

Without Jesus' death and resurrection, there is no Gospel. And without the Gospel, there is no comfort for sinners, even young ones.

Take a look at your lessons and evaluate your words. Is the Gospel dominant—not merely assumed or alluded to—in every lesson. Make sure your teaching rings with the glad news of Jesus, Friend, and Savior of sinners. Your students need to hear it over and over again.

Our thinking and reasoning often fight against the Gospel. Because sin is at work in us all the time, we need to hear God's love, acceptance, and assurance of forgiveness again and again. May we be blessed by repetition with a purpose.

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT (OR DISCUSS)

- I was surprised . . .
- I really want to find out more about . . .
- What reasons might someone give for not teaching the Gospel in every lesson?
- What does the Gospel give that we can't get anywhere else?
- Thinking back to my most recent lessons, did the Gospel dominate my words and actions? If not, what do I change?

Use every chance to teach the Gospel

5

Carl Fickenscher II

AN OPENING THOUGHT (TO PONDER OR DISCUSS)

- Name a Bible story that gives challenges for teaching the Gospel.

Read this

She was nine years old, and she spent Saturday night with her friend, a student in your class. She may not have realized that Sunday School was part of the bargain. She was sleepy—she and her friend had talked long into the night after lights out—and she wasn't used to getting up on Sunday. In fact, she'd never gotten up on Sunday morning for this, never been in a Sunday School class or church in her life. Maybe she never would be again. But this day, this hour, she's in your class.

Gospel every sermon

Pastors are taught that every sermon should contain enough clear Gospel that if someone never heard a word from God before or after, that person would hear in that sermon what he or she needs to believe to be saved.

C. F. W. Walther said, “Now, [I say to] the preacher who steps out of his pulpit without having preached enough Gospel—so that some poor sinner who may have come to church for the first and the last time is not saved—woe to him! [That sinner's] blood will be required of [that preacher]!” (*Law and Gospel: How to Read and Apply the Bible*, Thesis XXV, p. 462).

We should certainly hold the same standard for every Christian education class. Of course, not every lesson is the story of Good Friday. Some weeks, in fact, it may seem as if the Bible account has nothing at all to do with Jesus' death and resurrection. We might think we accomplished the teaching task quite well by teaching the facts about Noah's ark, Paul's second missionary journey, or even Jesus teaching His disciples the Lord's Prayer.