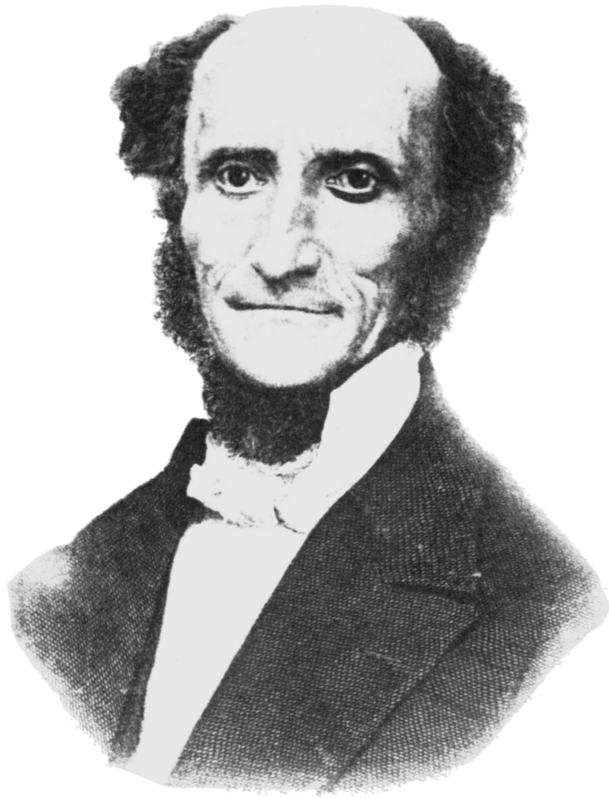


# **Law and Gospel**



**SELECTED WRITINGS  
OF C.F.W. WALTHER**

# **Law and Gospel**

**Herbert J.A. Bouman, Translator**

**Aug. R. Suelflow, Series Editor**



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## Introduction

It is an ambitious project to permit C. F. W. Walther (1811—87) to address English readers. Efforts to do so have occurred in the past from time to time. But this English edition constitutes one of the most significant contributions made to the study of the theology of Lutheranism in America within past years. The stereotype of Walther heretofore imposed upon him by those who were unable to read his German writings will now be significantly altered! It is to be regretted that a rich treasury of many other works from Walther's pen still await a future project.

Dr. Henry E. Jacobs (1844—1932), late president of Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Pa., said of Walther:

He is as orthodox as John Gerhard, but as fervent as a pietist, as correct in form as a university or court preacher, and yet as popular as Luther himself. If the Lutheran Church will bring its doctrines again to the people, it must be as faithful and as definite in its doctrine and as interesting and thoroughly adapted to the times in form, as is the case in Walther. He is a model preacher in the Lutheran Church ("Dr. Walther as a Preacher, *Lutheran Church Review*, III [October 1889], 319).

In each of the volumes a special effort was made to select the most significant and relevant materials and to have Walther speak contemporary English. We have further endeavored, wherever possible, to quote from the American Edition of *Luther's Works* and to utilize the Revised Standard Version of the Bible for Scriptural references. Quotations from the Lutheran Confessions were keyed to the Tappert edition of the *Book of Concord*. It was helpful to be able to consult some resources which Walther had in his own library.

Walther was an exceedingly involved church leader. A founding father of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, he served as its first president 1847—50 and 1864—78. He was Concordia Seminary's (St. Louis) foremost instructor from 1849 until his death in 1887, and served as its president 1850—87.

His concern for Lutheran unity is demonstrative. He conceived the "Free Conferences" in the aftermath of the confessional crisis in 1855. Later, in 1872, he was elected the first president of a new pan-Lutheran federation, the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference.

The project to translate Walther into English received support from The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in 1962, when a special committee was formed. When funds were not available, the project was transferred to Concordia Publishing House. It has now become a pioneer in publishing both Luther's and Walther's select works in English.

Walther's classic *Law and Gospel*, generally considered one of the most important books produced within American Lutheranism, deserves a volume of its own. In it we see him as theological professor, with his students gathered around him.

Another volume acquaints us with Walther the preacher. He made a great impact on his hearers, and much of his sermonic and homiletical material was published in German during his lifetime and in the years following his death. In spite of this, several thousand sermon manuscripts still remain untouched.

In a further volume we see Walther the convention essayist. None of these essays, presented to Western District conventions between 1873 and 1886, with their ever-recurring theme "To God All Glory!" have seen the English light of day until now.

Of particular importance were Walther's writings on the church, and one of our volumes brings a condensation of these. *Church and Ministry* (1852), *The Proper Form* (1863), and *The True Visible Church* (1866) give the theological foundation for the Missouri Synod's strong emphasis on the congregation and on lay involvement.

We include a volume of Walther's correspondence. It lets us see him in his intense and complex relationships with many different people. Concordia Historical Institute, with funds provided by the Aid Association for Lutherans, has in recent years transcribed several hundred original *Fraktur* letters. Only a few have been published in English heretofore, and we too can bring only a selection.

Finally we take a look at Walther the editor—one of his most important functions. Through *Lehre und Wehre* (from which we bring articles never before presented in English) and *Der Lutheraner* Walther exerted a strong influence toward orthodox Lutheranism.

The translators of this edition hope that readers and users will develop a new appreciation for this 19th-century hero of faith, but above all, that Walther, as the preceptor of Luther in America, will direct the readers to the very cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, his and our only hope.

Aug. R. Suelflow, *Series Editor*



## Translator's Preface

In 1577 the Formula of Concord, last of the 16th-century Lutheran Confessions, declared: "The distinction between Law and Gospel is an especially brilliant light which serves the purpose that the Word of God may be rightly divided and the writings of the holy prophets and apostles may be explained and understood correctly" (Solid Declaration, Art. V, par. 1; Tappert, p. 558). Ever since then Lutheran theology has given much space to this approach to Scripture.

Dr. C. F. W. Walther was a Lutheran theologian in the classic mold. By his writings and lectures he did much to introduce Lutheran theological classics to the Lutheran Church in the new world. This is evident also in this book, particularly in his extensive quotations from Luther.

In addition to his regular schedule of classroom lectures to the students at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Walther set aside Friday evenings of the school year for series of informal lectures on a variety of theological topics. The longest, most detailed, most noteworthy, and also the last was the series on the proper distinction between Law and Gospel, in 39 lectures, from Sept. 12, 1884, to Nov. 6, 1885, thus spanning all of one school year and part of a second. A student, Th. Claus, made a stenographic record of the entire series. Another student, L. Fuerbringer, edited the material for its initial publication in German, 1897. A third student of Walther's, W. H. T. Dau, offered the lectures in English translation, 1928.

The present translation was prepared on the basis of the German original, occasionally borrowing a felicitous phrase from Dau. The current work represents a considerable abridgment and condensation of the original. Many of Walther's extensive citations from Luther and other authors were either reduced to their essential point or deleted entirely. As a rule, the Bible passages were retained, or at least the references were given, while much of Walther's running comment was condensed. These cuts in the material were dictated by the publisher's space limitations.

It is, nevertheless, this writer's belief that nothing essential has been omitted. Walther's lectures were delivered freely from extensive notes and are often quite rambling and diffuse, even repetitious. It was possible, therefore, to reduce the volume very extensively without sacrificing any of

Walther's lines of thought. In many cases where Walther quotes from Scripture we added the reference, putting it into brackets.

As Luther spoke relevantly and incisively to issues, problems, and heresies of his day, so Walther dealt vigorously and uncompromisingly with the ills of church and theology as he saw them in his time. If we would be true to our heritage, we must deal with contemporary issues responsibly by translating the great Biblical and theological insights of our fathers in Christ into relevant application today. Then we shall let the "brilliant light" of the distinction between Law and Gospel illuminate the darkness of this age.

Herbert J. A. Bouman





## First Evening Lecture

(Sept. 12, 1884)

My dear friends: If you want to become able teachers in church and school, you must necessarily become thoroughly acquainted with all teachings of the Christian revelation. But that is not all that is necessary. You must also know how to *apply* these teachings correctly. Not only must you clearly grasp them with your mind, but they must also have penetrated deeply into your hearts and exerted their divine, heavenly power. They must all have become so precious, so valuable, so dear to you that you cannot help affirming them with glowing hearts and saying with Paul, "We believe, and so we speak," and with all the apostles, "We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard." To be sure, you have not, like the apostles, seen it with physical eyes and heard it with physical ears, but you must come to experience it with spiritual eyes and ears.

Since it is the objective of my courses in dogmatics to ground you and give you certainty in every doctrine, these Friday evening hours are designed to make you thoroughly practical theologians and speak Christian doctrine into your hearts in such a way that you will one day take your place as living witnesses "in demonstration of the Spirit and of power"; not stand in your pulpits like lifeless statues, but confidently and cheerfully dispense your help wherever possible.

The first and foremost teaching is the doctrine of justification. A close second is the right way to distinguish Law and Gospel. Let us give this matter our serious attention at this time.

Luther says that one who has mastered the art of distinguishing the Law from the Gospel should be given the top place and be called a doctor of Holy Scripture [St. Louis Edition, IX, 802; cf. *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Vol. 26, p. 342]. But, please, do not think that I want to assume that position. That would be a big mistake, even though people at times accuse me of this. But I, too, want to remain a humble pupil of Luther and sit at his feet, just as he learned this doctrine from the apostles and prophets. Whenever you come to these lectures, do so with the silent prayer that God would richly grant us His Holy Spirit to aid you in hearing and me in effective teaching. Let us, then, go to work in full confidence that God will bless us in our own souls and the souls of those whom we are to save.

As we compare Holy Scripture with other writings we note that no

book appears to be so full of contradictions as the Bible, and not only in peripheral matters but in the central issue, in the doctrine of how we may come to God and be saved. In one place forgiveness of sins is offered to all sinners, in another, the sins are retained for all sinners. In one place eternal life is offered to all gratis, in another, man is ordered to do something himself. This riddle is solved when we bear in mind that Scripture contains two completely different teachings, the doctrine of the Law and the doctrine of the Gospel.

### **Thesis I**

*The doctrinal content of all of Holy Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, consists of two diametrically opposite teachings, namely the Law and the Gospel.*

My aim during these hours is not to treat the doctrine of Law and Gospel systematically but rather to show you how easily they can be mingled in spite of their great difference, to the detriment of your hearers, thus frustrating the purpose of both. However, you will be interested in this point only after you see clearly just what the difference between Law and Gospel is.

Law and Gospel must not be differentiated as if the Gospel were a divine teaching but the Law of human origin, the product of human reason. No, what Scripture has to say about both of them is all the Word of the living God Himself. Again, the difference is not that only the Gospel is necessary but not the Law, as if it were merely an addition we could do without. No, both are equally necessary. Apart from the Law we do not understand the Gospel, and apart from the Gospel the Law is of no use to us. Nor is this the difference, as is often naively supposed, that the Law is the teaching of the Old Testament and the Gospel that of the New. No, the Gospel is in the Old Testament and the Law in the New. In the latter the Lord opened for us the seal of the Law by purging it of Jewish ordinances. Again, the difference is not that each has its own final goal, as if the Gospel were given for salvation and the Law for damnation. No, the ultimate goal of both is man's salvation, except that since the fall the Law cannot bring us to salvation; it only prepares us for the Gospel. And subsequently the Gospel gives us the power to keep the Law to some extent. Nor is this the difference, that these doctrines contradict each other. There are no contradictions in Scripture. These doctrines are merely different and yet in complete harmony. Again, it is not that only one of these two is intended for Christians. The Law continues to apply also to the Christians. In fact, whoever no longer makes use of the one or the other is no longer a true Christian.

The difference between Law and Gospel consists of the following: They are distinguished: 1. In the manner of their revelation to mankind; 2. in their content; 3. in the promises offered by both; 4. in their threats; 5. in the function and effects of both; 6. in respect to the persons to whom the one or the other is to be proclaimed.

All other differences can be subsumed under these six points. Now we shall offer proof from the Word of God.

First of all, then, Law and Gospel are different in the way they were revealed to mankind. The Law was written in man's heart at his creation. To be sure, because of the Fall this writing in the heart has become greatly blurred, yet not entirely erased. Therefore when the Law is proclaimed to even the most ungodly person, his conscience tells him, "This is true." But his conscience will not tell him this when he hears the Gospel; he may even become incensed. The most depraved person understands that he ought to do what the Law demands. Why is this? Because the Law is written in his heart. It is different with the Gospel. It contains the proclamation and revelation of nothing but free acts of God's grace, and these are by no means self-evident. What God has done according to the Gospel He was not forced to do, as if He could not do otherwise if He wanted to remain just and loving. No, God would have remained eternal Love even if he had let all people go to the devil.

The apostle testifies that also the blind heathen have the Moral Law in their hearts and consciences, even without a supernatural revelation (Romans 2:14-15). The Ten Commandments were given to restore the faded writing in the heart. In Romans 16:25-26 it is clearly stated that since the beginning of the world the Gospel could not be discovered. It has become known only because the Holy Spirit gave it by inspiration to holy men of God.

But how important is this difference! All religions know something of the Law. Some heathen even recognized that also an inner cleansing of the soul, of thoughts and desires, was required. But nowhere is there anything about the Gospel except in the Christian religion. If the Law had not been written in men's hearts, no one would listen to the preaching of the Law, but everyone would turn away and exclaim, "That is cruel! Nobody can live up to it!" But go right ahead and preach the Law! Even if the people blaspheme, they do it only with their mouth; for what you preach is what their conscience tells them every day. And we would not convert anybody with our Gospel if the Law had not first done its work, if the Law had not been written in the heart. . . .

Secondly, Law and Gospel differ in their content. The Law tells us what we must do, while the Gospel speaks only of what God does. The Law

talks of our works, while the Gospel proclaims the great works of God. The Ten Commandments tell us ten times: “You shall!” The Law has nothing more to say to us. The Gospel, on the other hand, demands nothing at all. Don’t think, “But the Gospel does demand faith.” Imagine you are inviting a hungry person to come to the table and eat. He surely will not say, “I don’t have to take orders from you!” He will accept your “command” as a kind invitation. So it is with the Gospel. It is a kind invitation to partake of heavenly blessings.

A very important passage is Gal. 3:12: “The Law does not rest on faith, for ‘He who does them shall live by them.’ ” The Law knows nothing of forgiveness or of grace. The Law does not say, “If you are sorry, if you amend your life, the rest will be forgiven you.” Not a word of it. The Law only orders and demands. The Gospel only offers; it wants to take nothing, it wants only to give. Accordingly, the apostle says: “The Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). The Gospel contains nothing but grace and truth. How important that is! As we read and study the Law and measure ourselves by it, we are appalled by the many demands made upon us and we would despair and be lost if we had nothing more. But, God be praised! we have another teaching, the Gospel, and we cling to that.

Thirdly, Law and Gospel differ in their promises. The Law promises something just as great as what the Gospel promises—eternal life and salvation. But there the great difference becomes manifest: The Law promises everything under certain conditions, on condition that we keep it perfectly. Therefore, the greater the promise, the more tragic it is. The Law offers us food but keeps it out of our reach. It offers salvation to us as to Tantalus (always just beyond reach). To be sure, it says to us, “I will quench the thirst of your soul and satisfy your hunger,” but it is unable to do so, for it always says, “If you do what I tell you, you will have it.” How different it is with the lovely, sweet, consoling Gospel! It promises us God’s grace and salvation without any condition at all. It is a promise of free grace. It makes no demands; it just says, “Take it, and it is yours.” However, that is not a condition but purely a kind invitation.

God says: “You shall therefore keep My statutes and My ordinances, by *doing which* a man shall live” (Leviticus 18:5). Hence none can be saved by the Law except he who keeps it. In telling the self-righteous Pharisee: “Do this, and you will live” (Luke 10:28), the Lord is saying that only one who keeps the Law can obtain salvation. Even so, there would be no merit in the fact that those who do God’s will would be saved; it would be God’s goodness. As for us, this condition attached to the Law plunges us into despair.

“Go into all the world,” Jesus instructs His disciples, “and preach the Gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mark 16:15-16). No condition is attached to the Gospel; it is a promise of grace. (See also Romans 3:22-24; Ephesians 2:8-9). What a precious difference! When the Law has struck us down, we may again cheerfully lift up our heads; for alongside the Law we have a teaching that makes no demands whatever. If we were to ask the Lord Christ, “What must I do to be saved?” He would answer, “No works! I have done everything. You need not drink one drop of My cup.” My friends, if you truly grasp that, you will leap and jump for joy that this glad message has come also to you. One who nevertheless remains downcast and thinks, “I am a disgraceful person; there can be no forgiveness for me,” well, he rejects the Gospel, he rejects Christ. And even if I had committed the most heinous sins and would have to say with Paul, “I am the foremost of sinners,” and had committed the sins of Judas or of Cain, I should still accept the Gospel, for it demands nothing of me.

Fourthly, Law and Gospel differ in their threats. The Gospel has no threats at all, only words of consolation. Wherever you find a threat in Scripture, you can be sure that it is Law. How blessed that person who properly consoles himself with this fact! However, the Holy Spirit must effect this in each person; otherwise a human being remains unbelieving. But we must not think that the Gospel lulls into security because it has no threats. By no means. The Gospel removes from the believer the desire to sin. The Law knows nothing but threats. As Abraham gave Hagar a piece of bread and some water and sent her into the desert, so the Law hands us a piece of bread and drives us into the desert.

The Law lays a curse on all who do not keep it perfectly (Deuteronomy 27:26). In fact, man is ordered by the Law to curse himself. Only one surrounded by the darkness of hell believes that he can cope with the Law. The Gospel acts quite differently. Paul shows that even the foremost sinner receives no threat but only the sweetest promise (1 Timothy 1:15). In His address to the assembly in the Nazareth synagogue (Luke 4:16-21) the Lord defines the content of His teaching, that is, the Gospel, as if to say, “I did not come to impose a new Law, but to proclaim the Gospel.” His preaching is pure consolation and salvation for sinners. How blessed is the person who knows that! May God grant us all this knowledge!

## Second Evening Lecture

(Sept. 19, 1884)

My friends, as long as a person still wants to be a Christian but actually is not yet one, he will be quite content with knowing Christian doctrine in a superficial way. All else, in his opinion, is for pastors and theologians. A non-Christian is not interested in gaining a clear understanding of all that God has revealed. But as soon as one becomes a Christian he has a lively longing for the teaching of Christ. Even the most uncultured peasant is suddenly aroused when he is converted. He begins to reflect on God and heaven, on salvation and damnation, etc., and occupies himself with the greatest problems of human life.

Think, for example, of the many Jews, as well as the apostles, who came to Jesus. The crowd heard Christ with great pleasure and were astonished that He spoke with authority and not as the scribes. Yet most of them did not go beyond this benevolent attitude and admiration. How different it was with the apostles, who were also unlettered men! They did not rest but came to Christ with various questions and requests for an interpretation of His parables. Similarly, the Bereans examined the Scriptures daily [Acts 17:12]. What the Apology says is, therefore, quite true: "Good consciences cry out for the truth and proper instruction from the Word of God. For them even death is not as bitter as being in doubt about one point. For that reason they must seek where they may find instruction" (Apology, Art. XII, par. 129, German text; *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 290; our translation).

If it is a necessary mark of any Christian that he strive for the truth and divine certainty, it is even more necessary for a theologian. A theologian who is not keenly interested in Christian doctrine is unthinkable. Anyone who has made only a beginning of faith in his heart will consider no point unimportant, and every doctrine will be gold, silver, and precious jewels to him. God grant that this may be so with you also! Then you will not come to these lectures with a blasé attitude but will ask again and again, "What is truth?"—not like Pilate but like Mary, who sat at Jesus' feet and listened to every word. Then this hour will bring great blessing also to you, no matter how lowly the instrument through which the truth is being brought to you.

We come now to the fifth difference between Law and Gospel. It deals with their function and effect. What is the effect of the Law? It is threefold.

First, the Law tells us what we must do but gives us no power to do it. On the contrary, it has the effect of increasing our aversion. To be sure, many handle the Law as if it were a mathematical rule. But once the Law penetrates the heart, the heart rebels against God and rages against Him

who demands the impossible. Indeed, in his heart he curses God and would murder Him if he could, cast Him down from His throne if that were possible. Hence the effect of the Law is to increase the desire to sin.

Secondly, the Law uncovers a person's sins but offers him no way out and thus plunges him into despair.

Thirdly, the Law indeed produces contrition, fear of hell, of death, and of God's wrath, but it has not one drop of comfort for the sinner. If nothing else is added to the Law, man must despair and die and perish in his sins. Since the Fall the Law can have no other effect in man, as Romans 7:7-9 shows.

No heathen knows that already the evil desires of the heart are sin. The greatest moralists among them have said, "That is not my fault; I can do nothing about it, I can't help it." But the divine Law says: "You shall not covet!" We are to be free even of inbred lust. Apart from the Law sin goes in and out and the person is not even conscious of sinning. Ask a child of the world, and he will be surprised and answer, "I have done no wrong. I have killed nobody, I have not committed adultery, I have not stolen, etc." He is quite unaware of the sin that dwells within him.

But when the Law strikes him like lightning, he discovers what a great sinner he is, what dreadful, godless thoughts he harbors. Therefore the apostle says that "sin revived" when the Law came. It uncovers sin but gives us no comfort. If we had nothing else and nothing more, we would have to perish eternally in hell. The penalties and curse of the divine Law will be felt only in hell; for the Law must be fulfilled, and it must keep its divine authority.

"The written code kills" (2 Corinthians 3:6). The apostle calls it the written code, or the letter, because God wrote it on tablets of stone. Even heathens have observed that the Law effects the opposite of what it commands. You may be familiar with what the immoral poet Ovid said: "We are always after what is forbidden and crave what is denied." Ovid was himself a swine, and he puts his attitude bluntly: "See, this is the way I act; I always do what others consider forbidden."

When the Israelites received the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai, the whole mountain quaked. As nature trembled, so their hearts trembled within. God wanted to show at the outset that this is the effect of the Law. We also recall the rich young man who came to Christ and asked how he might obtain eternal life. He was so thoroughly blinded that he did not recognize his sinful corruption at all; "he went away sorrowful" (Matthew 19:16-22). Christ could not yet offer this young man the Gospel, for He first had to convince him of his inability to keep the Law. When Paul preached to Felix the governor, about justice and self-control and future judgment,

Felix was alarmed and said: “Go away for the present; when I have an opportunity, I will summon you” (Acts 24:24-27). But he never did summon Paul again, because he wanted to be rid of the thunder and lightning of the Law. When Peter preached the Law at the first Pentecost the hearers “were cut to the heart.” But then they asked, “Brethren, what shall we do”—that is, to be saved? Peter answered, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:37-38).

The effects of the Gospel are totally different. First of all, the Gospel calls for faith but grants and bestows faith in the demand. When we preach: “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ!” God gives people faith through our preaching. We preach faith, and whoever does not willfully resist receives faith. It is, of course, not the mere sound of the words but the content that achieves this result.

A second effect of the Gospel is that it does not punish the sinner at all, but removes all terror, all fears, all anxiety and fills the sinner with peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. When the prodigal son returns home, the father does not in a single word refer to the son’s dreadful and disgraceful conduct; he says nothing, nothing about that, but simply embraces and kisses the prodigal and prepares a splendid banquet for him. That is a glorious parable, showing us what the Gospel accomplishes. It removes all alarm and fills us with a blessed, heavenly peace.

Thirdly, the Gospel demands nothing good of man whatever, no good heart, no good will, no improvement, no piety, no love, either to God or to man. It issues no commands, but it transforms man, implants love in his heart, and equips him for all good works. It demands nothing but gives everything. Doesn’t that make us want to leap and jump for joy? (These effects of the Gospel are clearly set forth, for example, in Acts 16:30-34; Romans 1:16; Ephesians 2:8-10; Galatians 3:2).

Finally, in the sixth place, Law and Gospel differ in respect to the persons to whom the one or the other must be addressed. Both the persons and the purposes are entirely different. The Law must be preached to secure sinners and the Gospel to terrified sinners. Certainly both must be proclaimed, but we must ask about the persons to whom the Law, not the Gospel, must be preached, and vice versa.

In 1 Timothy 1:8-10 the apostle describes those to whom only the Law is to be proclaimed without one drop of Gospel. As long as a person is comfortable with his sins and is unwilling to give them up, only the Law that curses and condemns him must be preached to him. But as soon as he is terrified, the Gospel must come at once, for then he is no longer a secure

sinner. Hence, as long as the devil still holds you captive in *one* sin, you are still a person to whom not the Gospel but the Law applies.

Isaiah 61:1-6 speaks of the afflicted and brokenhearted to whom the good news of the Gospel is to be proclaimed. Not one word of Law must be preached to them. Woe to the preacher who still applies the Law to such a famished sinner! To him the preacher must say: "Just come! There still is room! Oh, come to Jesus!" Such people are the proper addressees for the Gospel.

[*Editorial note:* Here Walther cites passages from Luther's *Sermon on the Distinction Between Law and Gospel*. St. Louis Edition, IX, 802 f.; see also the extended discussion in Luther's *Lectures on Galatians*, 1535, ch. 3, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Vol. 26, pp. 186 ff.]

We see that Luther does not develop this teaching scientifically but bears witness to it like a prophet. For that reason he made so deep an impression. If he had written a scholarly Latin book on this subject and had systematically divided and subdivided the material according to a strict outline, the people would have said, "What a learned scholar that man is!" But it would not have made the same impression. In the writings of the church fathers we find hardly anything on this distinction between Law and Gospel.

## **Third Evening Lecture**

(Sept. 26, 1884)

The way of pure doctrine is as narrow as the way to heaven of which Christ speaks, for pure doctrine is nothing else than the teaching concerning the way to heaven. But as easy as it is for a person to stray off a narrow, little-traveled path through a dense forest, either to the right or to the left, without wanting to stray or even being aware of it, so easy is it to stray off the narrow path of pure doctrine that is also little-traveled and leads through a dense forest of false teachings. The person who strays will plunge either into the swamp of fanaticism or the abyss of rationalism. This is no joking matter. False doctrine is a poison dangerous to the soul. Just as a large company of people at a table may drink physical and temporal death if the common cup contains arsenic, so a large number of hearers can incur spiritual and eternal death if false teaching is mixed in with the sermon. Even only one false comfort, even only one false reproof may deprive a person of his soul's salvation. This can happen even more easily because all of us are by nature much more accessible to the blinking and blinding light of reason than to the truth. "The unspiritual (natural)

man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them” (1 Corinthians 2:14).

From this you may see how foolish, indeed what a dreadful delusion, it is when so many people nowadays ridicule pure doctrine and say to us, “Will you finally quit with your clamor for pure doctrine! Pure doctrine! That can only lead to dead orthodoxism. Be more concerned about a pure life, and then you will establish a proper Christianity!” That is just as if I would say to a farmer, “Quit being concerned all the time about good seed and be more concerned about good fruits.” The concern for good seed is precisely the concern for good fruits. Just so, concern for pure doctrine is the proper concern for a genuine Christianity and for a decent Christian life. False doctrine is the weed seed, sown by the enemy, from which the children of wickedness will sprout. The wheat seed is the pure doctrine; that is the seed of the children of the kingdom, who belong into Christ’s realm already in this life and will one day be received into the kingdom of glory. Oh, that God would even now implant in your heart a profound fear, yes, a true loathing of false doctrine, and by grace grant you a holy yearning for the pure truth, revealed by God Himself and leading to salvation! That’s primarily what these evening hours are for.

We must say a few more things about our first thesis. We have already seen how Law and Gospel differ from each other. Now we must also offer an example of how both teachings are to be presented without mingling them. Let us hear a passage from Luther’s *Sermon on the Gospel of St. John*, chs. 6—8, from the years 1530—32. (Young people as a rule are more interested in beauty of language and style than in content. But that is very dangerous. You must always ask more about the What rather than the How.) The Law must indeed be preached in all its severity, but the hearer must be able to note, “That is for the good of the person who is still secure in his sins.” And the Gospel must be preached in such a way that the people can notice, “That applies only to those who have been struck by the Law and need comfort.” This is the most important thing to consider in a sermon.

Now, Luther says about the words of Christ in John 7:37: “These two points must be made: The Law creates a thirst and leads us to hell; the Gospel, however, satisfies the thirst and leads to heaven. The Law states what we must do, but that we have fallen short of doing it, no matter how holy we may be. Thus it produces uncertainty in me and arouses this thirst” (*Luther’s Works*, American Edition, Vol. 23, p. 270 ff.).

Such a thirsty person must do only one thing: Drink, receive the comfort of the Gospel. How a truly thirsty person is refreshed by even one small glass of water! But if he is not thirsty, you may pour glass after glass

down his throat, and it won't do him any good; it won't refresh him. [The quotation from Luther about spiritual thirst continues at length. Walther comments:] One who has not experienced being refreshed by the Gospel after the Law has driven him to thirst is a sound without meaning, "a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" (1 Corinthians 13:1). But when a preacher has himself gone through this experience and his message now comes *from* the heart, it will also find its way *to* the heart. It is purely by accident if someone is awakened and converted by an unconverted preacher. The preacher must prepare a battle plan in order to gain his hearers for the kingdom of God. Otherwise, the hearers might well say, "That was a lovely sermon," but that is all. They will leave the church with an empty heart. [The long quotation from Luther about the difference between Law and Gospel continues. Walther concludes:] Thus Law and Gospel must be presented without any mingling.

One who does not preach in simple words preaches himself, and he who preaches himself preaches the people into hell, even if they say, "That was beautiful! He is quite an orator!" Even a true and honorable preacher will have such proud thoughts suggested to him by his sinful flesh. But as soon as he becomes aware of it, he casts the suggestion from him and asks God to rid him of such accursed thoughts of pride. He will then enter the pulpit a humble man, and the people will be able to notice whether his preaching comes from the heart or not. You will, of course, not have the ability of a Luther, yet you must give heed to the question, "How can I preach the Law to secure sinners and the Gospel to stricken sinners?" Both teachings must have a place in every sermon. If either one is missing, the other is false, for a sermon that does not offer all that belongs to salvation is a false sermon.

You must not think, however, that all is well when one part of the sermon preaches the Law and the second part the Gospel. Such a topographical division is meaningless. Both may be contained in the same sentence, but every hearer must be able to say, "That is meant for me!" Every sermon, no matter how comforting and winsome, must also contain the Law.

In his commentary on Psalm 23:3, "He restores my soul," Luther says: "But because our Lord has a twofold Word, the Law and the Gospel, the prophet makes it sufficiently clear that he is speaking here not of the Law but of the Gospel when he says, 'He restores my soul.' " When you come across words that contain threats and penalties you know they belong to the Law. If they are words that console, give, bestow, offer, they are Gospel. You will not find any Gospel lesson on the basis of which you could not preach both Law and Gospel.

Luther continues: “The Law cannot restore the soul, for it is a Word that makes demands on us and commands us that we shall love God with all our hearts, etc., and our neighbors as ourselves (Matt. 22:37, 39). It damns him that does otherwise. . . . The Gospel, however, is a blessed Word. It demands nothing of us, but announces everything that is good” . . . (*Luther’s Works*, American Edition, Vol. 12, pp. 164 f.).

One might ask why it is that the Law produces the horrible sin of despair. That is a purely accidental feature of its function. In and of itself also the Law is good.

[*Editorial note:* Here Walther offers further support for his thesis from Luther’s comments on Galatians 2:13-14 (*Luther’s Works*, American Edition, Vol. 26, pp. 113—17).] Our own righteousness is for this life, but that bestowed by the Gospel is a heavenly righteousness.—As we will hear later, one must rightly divide Law and Gospel not only in the sermon but above all in one’s own heart.

## **Fourth Evening Lecture**

(Oct. 3, 1884)

If a theologian refuses to yield or make concessions in a single point of Christian doctrine for the sake of finally bringing peace to the church, his behavior looks to reason like intolerable stubbornness and even open malice. As long as they live such theologians will, therefore, be loved and lauded by very few. In fact, they will be denounced by most people as disturbers of the peace, yes, destroyers of the kingdom of God. They are regarded as utterly detestable. In the end, however, it becomes manifest that a decided, inexorable insistence on the pure doctrine of the Word of God by no means wrecks the church. In the midst of the greatest strife this is what builds the church and ultimately brings true peace. Therefore woe to a church that does not have such men who will stand as watchmen on the walls of Zion, announce the charge of every enemy trying to gain entrance, and enlist under the banner of Jesus Christ for the holy war!

Try to picture this to yourselves: Suppose Athanasius had yielded just a little in the doctrine of Christ’s deity, made a compromise with the Arians, and quieted his conscience with the thought that, after all, the Arians said they, too, believed Christ to be God, except that He had a beginning (“there was a time when He was not”) and then became God; but they added, “Nevertheless He is to be worshiped because He is God.” What do you think would have happened? Already then the church would have fallen from the Rock on which it is founded, and that Rock is none other than Jesus Christ.

Again, picture this: Suppose Augustine had yielded just a little in the matter of free will, or rather of man's total impotence in spiritual things, had made a compromise with the Pelagians, and quieted his conscience with the Pelagians' statement that, of course, no one can be saved without the help of God's grace—if God's grace is understood as a divine endowment given to everyone. What would have happened if Augustine had given in? Already then the church would have lost the heart of the Gospel, and nothing but the empty, hollow shell would have been preserved; yes, the church would have kept nothing of the Gospel but the name. For the teaching of the Gospel that man is righteous before God and will be saved by the pure, unadulterated grace of God through the merits of Jesus Christ is the most important teaching of all, the heart and kernel of Christian doctrine. Where this teaching is not proclaimed there is no Christ, no Gospel, no salvation. There people are lost; there the Son of God has come into this world in vain.

Finally, picture this: Suppose Luther backed down just a little in the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, made a compromise with Zwingli at Marburg, and quieted his conscience with the word of the Zwinglians, "We, too, believe a kind of presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper, but not a physical presence, for God does not expect us to believe what is beyond comprehension." By this declaration Zwingli called all of Christianity into question, so that even Melancthon, who was usually inclined to make concessions, said that Zwingli had relapsed into paganism. What do you think would have happened? Already at that time the church would have succumbed to rationalism, which places reason above the clear Word of God.

Therefore blessed be all the faithful warriors who fought for every point of Christian doctrine without concern for men's favor or fear of their displeasure! Although the disgrace they suffered was great, it was not in vain. They went their way until death as accursed, but now they wear the crown of glory and enjoy the most blessed fellowship of Christ and of all the angels and elect. Also their labor and their fierce battles were not in vain, for after more than 1,500 years, or several centuries, as the case may be, the church is still reaping what they sowed.

My friends, we too must cling to this treasure of pure doctrine! Do not be surprised if we must then also bear the disgrace those men bore. Bear in mind that we too will then experience the truth of the statement: "Strive even to death for the truth, and the Lord God will fight for you" (Ecclesiastes 4:28). Let that be your motto! "Strive even to death for the truth, and the Lord God will fight for you."

We now come to a thesis that tells us: Since both doctrines, Law and

Gospel, are so different from one another, we must distinguish between these doctrines also in our sermons.

## **Thesis II**

*Only he is a pure teacher who not only presents all articles of faith in accordance with Scripture but also correctly distinguishes between Law and Gospel.*

This thesis has two parts: The one asks that a pure teacher present all articles of faith in accordance with Scripture. In our day such a demand is unheard-of. People, even among the so-called believers, are shocked when someone says, "I have found the truth and have come to certainty in every teaching of revelation." Such a claim is regarded as arrogance. Certainly, people say, a young student should not talk that way. "Just don't close your mind," they cry in Germany; "don't you believe that you have already discovered the truth! Keep on studying until you have reached the goal!" But the goal is never reached, for if anyone would say, "I have reached it!" he would be highly suspect.

There are people who do not seek gratification in eating and drinking or in riches and pleasant days, but in appeasing their quest for knowledge. To be sure, this attitude is not exactly approved, and yet this is basically what professors do when they warn their own students, "Don't come to final conclusions about Christian doctrine!" They are afraid that theologians will be finished with some article, instead of trying eternally to roll the stone uphill (like Sisyphus). For that reason Kahnis, once a faithful Lutheran, tried to justify himself in the preface to his wretched *Dogmatics* with the words, "One day teaches the next" (*Dies diem docet*). That is to say, "A year ago I believed so and so, but since then other ideas have come to me and I have discovered other teachings." What a wretched and horrible attitude! No, God's Word demands that we preserve it altogether clean and pure, so that when we leave the pulpit we can say, "I can swear that I have preached God's Word correctly; yes, even if an angel came from heaven, I could still say, I have preached correctly!" This is why Luther made the paradoxical statement that when a preacher descends from the pulpit he should not pray the Lord's Prayer. He should do that before the sermon. But after the sermon an orthodox preacher need not pray, "Forgive me my trespasses." Rather he should say, "I have proclaimed the pure truth." Anyone saying that nowadays would be taken for a half lunatic. To such a degree people have become immersed in skepticism.

The Lord says through the prophet Jeremiah: "Let him who has My Word speak My Word faithfully. What has straw in common with wheat?" (Jeremiah 23:28). Hence our sermons should contain only wheat and no

straw. Paul warns the Galatians: “A little leaven leavens the whole lump” (Galatians 5:9). He means to say that a single false doctrine destroys all doctrine. Moses warns: “You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it” (Deuteronomy 4:2), and John closes the whole Bible with the same words [Revelation 22:18-19]. Now, if anyone says, “It is impossible to reach the point where articles of faith can be presented in accordance with Scripture,” he is teaching a devilish doctrine. Especially when students hear it, a truly infernal poison is injected into their hearts; for then they will not be diligent to get to the bottom of the truth and to gain clarity in it.

However, even if one could say, “There was no false doctrine in my sermon,” all of it can be wrong. Can you believe that? The second part of our thesis says just that. “Only he is a pure teacher who . . . also correctly distinguishes between Law and Gospel.” This is the ultimate test of a proper sermon. It is not only a matter of having drawn all statements in the sermon from the Word of God and conforming them to it, but also of properly distinguishing between Law and Gospel.

Two builders can be given exactly the same building material, yet the one erects a beautiful structure while the other botches the whole job with the same material. If he is out of his mind he might begin with the roof, put all the windows in one room, or take the building stones and pile them on top of one another in such a way that everything is crooked. The one house is thoroughly botched and it collapses, while the other stands firm and is comfortable and beautiful. Thus in two sermons all doctrines may be stated, but the one is lovely and precious, while the other is wrong from beginning to end. Be sure to bear that in mind!

When you hear the sermons of Enthusiasts you may say, “He preached the truth,” and yet feel unsatisfied. The key to this mystery is that the preacher failed to distinguish Law and Gospel, and that makes everything wrong. He preached Law truth when he should have preached Gospel truth, and vice versa. Whoever follows this preacher will go astray; he will not reach the sure ground of divine truth and will not come to certainty with regard to grace and salvation. This often happens also with the sermons of students. There are comforting statements to the effect that “it is all by grace,” and then we are told, “You must do good works,” and then again, “We can do nothing by our own efforts.” Everything is mixed up and no one understands it, least of all the one who needs the one more than the other. Law and Gospel must be properly distinguished. Take care that you work out your sermons according to this rule! Perhaps, for once, the words flowed smoothly; but now reread the sermon and check whether Law and Gospel are properly distinguished. Often you will find that you

have failed at this point. Then the sermon is wrong even though there is no false doctrine in it.

For Bible passages in support of this teaching I refer you to 2 Timothy 2:15; Luke 12:42; Ezekiel 13:18-22; Zechariah 11:7.

Also nature teaches that certain things simply cannot be mixed if they are to retain their salutary power. Certain substances are in themselves beneficial but turn into poison when mixed with each other. So it is with Law and Gospel. Or look at the colors. Mix yellow and blue together, and you get neither blue nor yellow but green. And if in a sermon Law and Gospel are mingled, you get a third something that does not belong there. In fact, it causes both Law and Gospel to lose their effectiveness.

You may formulate quite correctly what Law and Gospel say, but if you say it in such a way that they are mixed together, you produce poison for souls. Law and Gospel are indeed God's Word, but they are two kinds of teaching. Whoever does not know the real difference has nothing. Of course, merely knowing and learning this difference does no good either—for such knowledge can be acquired in a few hours, well enough to pass an examination—but experience must be added. Only then will the discovery be made that the difference between these two doctrines is a glorious one! (See Luther's *Sermon on the Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, St. Louis Edition, IX, 799 f.)

## **Fifth Evening Lecture**

(Oct. 17, 1884)

It is marvelous and beyond comprehension that God does not govern the kingdoms of this world directly but through human beings, even though, aside from all else, they are far too shortsighted and far too weak. Yet it is incomparably more marvelous that God does not plant, manage, enlarge, and preserve even His kingdom of grace directly, but does it through human beings who are totally unfit for the task. This is a testimonial to God's loving-kindness and condescension, but also to His wisdom which no human mind can grasp or fathom. Who can measure the greatness of God's love which is revealed in the fact that God not only wants to save the world that has fallen away from Him but also that He determines to use human beings themselves, hence fellow sinners with others, for this purpose? Who can estimate the riches of God's wisdom, that He knows how to accomplish His work of salvation through people who are totally unfit and unqualified, and that He has hitherto accomplished this work so gloriously and continues to do so?

O my friends, you have every reason not only to be humbly astonished but also to be heartily joyful and enraptured that God desires to make such instruments of His grace also of you! Just think: If you could learn here how to prolong by 50 years the life of those entrusted to you, or even to restore the dead to a new earthly life, how exalted and glorious your calling would appear not only to you but to all people! How they would mob you! What extraordinary men they would consider you to be! What a treasure they would think they have if they could get you!

And yet all of this would be as nothing compared with the grandeur and glory of the calling for which you are being prepared here. You are not to prolong the poor earthly life of those entrusted to you, but to give them the life that includes all blessedness, the life that is eternal and therefore without end. You are not to resurrect your people to this earthly existence, from physical death to this poor life, but to snatch them out of their spiritual and eternal death for entrance into heaven.

Oh, if you would properly reflect on the high honor God has thereby bestowed on you, you would daily, yes hourly, fall on your knees; yes, you would throw yourself face down into the dust of the earth and say with the psalmist: "O Lord, what is man that Thou dost regard him, or the son of man that Thou dost think of him?" (Psalm 144:3). At the same time this would spur you on to offer yourself daily and hourly to the merciful God and say: "Here, Lord, I am Thine with body and soul and all my powers! I want to be consumed in Thy service." How eager you would be to sacrifice all on behalf of your calling and let yourself be formed into an instrument of God!

Yet the most important thing for you is that you first come to a thorough and living knowledge of what God has revealed through His prophets and apostles for man's salvation before you impart it to others. Therefore let us joyfully continue in the consideration of our highly important subject.

John Gerhard, though without the divine rhetoric to speak of matters of experience as only Luther could, had studied Luther carefully and presented his teaching in a systematic way. He wrote: "Although the Law and the Gospel must be distinguished everywhere"—mark well, everywhere! There is no doctrine in which their proper distinction is not called for at once—"yet the distinction must be observed above all in two points. First, in the doctrine of justification, since our justification does not come from the Law. Because of the corruption and weakness of our flesh a certain although accidental impotence is ascribed to the Law in this matter, Romans 8:3."—The Law has no place in the doctrine of justification. How important that is! We cannot be saved through the Law, and so God

provides us with another means through which we may be saved. It only depends on whether we accept it, namely the Gospel, this joyful message. If you remove the doctrine of justification from the Bible, it becomes merely another ethical book.—Gerhard: “Justification comes from the Gospel, in which the righteousness which counts before God is revealed apart from the Law, Rom. 3:21, because the Gospel is ‘the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith,’ Rom. 1:16. Therefore the people must be exhorted, indeed urged, to do good works in accordance with the Law, but these must not be brought into the arena of justification before God, for there is here a constant antithesis between doing and believing, between faith and works, between Law and Gospel.”

Woe to us if we set out to offer the Gospel and then mix in the Law! But that is what we do if we say anything more than “Accept it!” Then it would be Law. The Gospel demands nothing of us at all but only says, “Come, eat and drink!” The Gospel brings us the great supper. Here is where most preachers go astray. They are afraid that, if they preach the Gospel too clearly, the people will fall into sin and the preachers will be to blame. That will only feed the flesh, in their opinion. It is indeed true that the Gospel becomes “a fragrance of death to death” [2 Corinthians 2:16] for many, but that is not the fault of the Gospel. On the contrary, it happens only because such people do not accept the Gospel in faith. The idea, “I believe,” is not yet faith. My whole heart must be captured and must rest in the Gospel. Then I will be transformed, then I cannot do otherwise than love God and serve Him. Even after people have come to faith they must continue to be most earnestly admonished, but these admonitions must not be brought into the arena of justification. First the Law must perform its office so that the hearers, starving and parched, will receive and drink the Gospel in big gulps. As soon as a person has become a poor sinner, as soon as he understands that he cannot save himself, and even when there is not yet any love in him, Christ says, “There is My man! Come to Me just as you are. I will help you, I will remove the burden that oppresses you, and the burden I place upon you is light and My yoke is easy.” This is the chief thing when I tell a person how he can become righteous, that I proclaim God’s free grace, hold back nothing, say nothing but what God says in the Gospel. A hedge must be built around Mt. Sinai, but none should be put around Mt. Calvary. There God’s wrath has been appeased for all.

Now, the Lord has given the church two keys, and through the church to all preachers: the binding key and the loosing key. The binding key locks the door to heaven, while the loosing key unlocks it. The preacher holds these two remarkable keys in his hand, for when the church gave him the office of preaching, it equipped him with these keys.

[*Editorial note:* Here Walther cites Gerhard on the necessity of distinguishing Law and Gospel in the use of the keys, the second point where this is most necessary. See Gerhard, *Loci theologici, De Evangelio* (On the Gospel), par. 55. Walther comments:]

It would be a disgraceful mingling of Law and Gospel if the latter were preached to the impenitent, just as if I wanted to keep on stuffing food into the mouth of a person who already had too much.—If I know that a person is in no condition for the Gospel to help him, I must not proclaim it to him. However, it is different in public, where I must give chief consideration to God’s elect children. Yet I must preach the Law even there. In fact, a sermon without Law is worthless. In every assembly there are some who are still impenitent, and these must be shaken out of their sleep of sin.—One who says, “Don’t bother me with that stuff,” proves that his heart has not yet been broken.

[*Editorial note:* Here follows another section from Gerhard’s chapter on the Gospel, par. 52. Gerhard lists three reasons why the distinction between Law and Gospel must be rigidly observed: “1. The article of justification will not and cannot keep its integrity if the distinction of these doctrines is neglected, as the history of the early church amply demonstrates; 2. The blessings of Christ are greatly obscured if the doctrine of the Gospel is not strictly delimited against the doctrine of the Law; 3. The confusion of Law and Gospel necessarily entails the disturbance of consciences, since no true and firm consolation remains for great and serious terrors of conscience if the gracious promises of the Gospel are adulterated.” Walther concludes:]

The mingling of Law and Gospel leads to disturbed consciences. No matter how consoling the message, it will do the people no good if a sting is added. The honey of the Gospel will at first taste sweet, but if a sting of the Law is mixed in, everything is spoiled. The conscience can have no peace unless I say, “God accepts you by grace.” If the preacher says, “ ‘Come, for all is now ready,’ but—you must first do so and do,” I will be lost, for then I must always wonder, “Have I really done what God wants?” Then nothing will do me any good.

## **Sixth Evening Lecture**

(Oct. 24, 1884)

A pious old Lutheran theologian said of students of theology, “When they come to the university, they know everything. In the second year they discover that there are, after all, some things they do not know. At the end

of their last year they are convinced that they don't know anything." It is easy to see what that old theologian wanted to impress on his students, namely that no delusion is worse than the idea that one has come a long way in his knowledge, and that being conceited about one's knowledge is a sure indication that it must be very superficial. No doubt the old theologian was entirely right. His judgment agrees fully with what the apostle Paul says: "If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know" (1 Cor. 8:2).

For that reason all the great pedagogs and teachers have told their students, "*Non multa, sed multum*" ("Not many different things, but much of one thing"). It is not so much a matter of what and how much a person knows, but of *how* he knows it. The more he gets into his field of study, the more quickly he will come to the conviction that he still has much to learn. He does not parrot the watchword of our time, "Look how much we know!" but, on the contrary, he echoes the word of a great philosopher, "How much there is that we do not know!" The more learned a man is in truth, the more modest he is, because he knows how much he still lacks, and how narrow are the boundaries in which his knowledge is contained, and how much more there is that has never been explored.

If this is true of all knowledge, of every area of learning, it is true to a far greater degree in the field of theology. Here the cited statement of the apostle Paul applies, which refers not to genuine knowledge but to the knowledge a conceited person claims to have. For that reason Luther exhorts every lazy student: "Study and keep on reading! You cannot read Scripture too much; and what you read you cannot understand too well; and what you understand you cannot teach too well; and what you teach well, you cannot live too well. Believe one who has had experience!"

True understanding, true knowledge in theology is connected with great difficulty, great labor. But this is especially true of the doctrine with which we are dealing in these evening hours. To become clear on this, the third thesis now gives us an excellent opportunity.

### **Thesis III**

*To distinguish properly between Law and Gospel is the most difficult and exalted skill of Christians and theologians, a skill that only the Holy Spirit teaches in the school of experience.*

Some of you may perhaps think, "What? Is that really true? I have already heard five lectures on the subject and am perfectly clear on it. Can this be the most difficult skill? I have mastered it." But, my dear friend, you are badly mistaken! Bear in mind, the thesis does not mean that the doctrine of Law and Gospel is so difficult that it could not be learned

without the assistance of the Holy Spirit. It is easy, even for children. Every child can grasp this teaching; it is stated in every catechism; it is not strong meat but milk; it belongs to the ABCs, the first principles of Christianity, for without this teaching no person can be a Christian. Even a little child soon observes: "The first chief part treats of the Ten Commandments and the second of the Creed. First we are told what we must do, and then, that we must only believe in order to be saved, for nothing is demanded here." The circumstances of this doctrine are entirely different from those of the doctrine concerning the properties by which the Persons of the Trinity are distinguished. This teaching differs altogether from the doctrine of predestination with its many impenetrable mysteries; it is totally different from the doctrine concerning the communication of the properties of Christ's deity to His humanity. Those are teachings that children cannot grasp, for they are beyond their understanding. It is a different matter when we come to Law and Gospel. You, too, now know this doctrine.

But here we are speaking about its application and function. It is the practical application which is so difficult that no human being can achieve it on the basis of his own reflection. The Holy Spirit must teach it to us in the school of experience. First of all, it is so difficult and such a high art for the preacher as a Christian, and secondly, it is so difficult and such a high art for him as a preacher.

First, then, properly to distinguish Law and Gospel is so difficult and such a high art for the preacher as a Christian. In fact, this is the greatest skill a human being can acquire.

In Psalm 51:10-11 David prays for a "right [or steadfast] spirit." He lacked certainty since his dreadful fall into the sins of murder and adultery. When he acknowledged his sin, he received absolution, and yet we do not read that David cheered up immediately, but we gather from many psalms that he experienced great misery and trials. When God's messenger told him, "Your sins have been taken away," he said within himself, "No, that is impossible; my sin is too great." He soaked his bed with tears, walked around bowed and stooped, his body wasted away, and his strength was dried up as by the heat of summer (Psalm 32:3-4). This exalted and royal prophet knew the doctrine of Law and Gospel very well. His psalms are full of the difference between the two. But when he himself fell into sin, he was unable to put his knowledge into practice. He cried, "Put a new and right spirit within me."

That is characteristic of Christians. They accept Scripture as true, as God's infallible Word. But when they need comfort they cannot find it and they cry for mercy and get down on their knees before God. And God let David taste the bitterness of sin. We observe, in general, that after his fall

David experienced more grief than joy and that one calamity upon the other struck him. God did not do this as though He had not forgiven him his sin, but in order to preserve him from a new lapse. God acted out of pure love and mercy. Naturally, one who is still dead in sins will think: "How stupid of David to keep on tormenting himself, even though God had forgiven him his sins!" Such a person turns the Gospel into a soft pillow; he continues to live in sin, and he thinks he will get to heaven anyway. But that is a carnal Gospel.

Luke 5:1-11: The Lord came to His disciple whom He called *Petros*, the "Rockman," and told him and his companions to let down their nets, even though they had caught nothing all night. Peter obeyed, although he perhaps thought he would not catch anything anyway. But behold, they caught so many fish that the nets began to break. Then Peter was afraid and thought, "That must be the almighty God Himself! That must be my Creator! That must also be the One who will one day be my Judge!" He fell down at Jesus' feet, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." Is this not remarkable? Peter thinks the Lord will say to him, "Look, you have committed so many sins and are therefore a man worthy of condemnation."

Whence this fear? Why did he not fall down at Jesus' feet and thank Him? Because his sins were vividly before him, he could not be joyful and grateful, but was driven in fear and trembling to his knees, where he uttered those dreadful words to his Lord and Savior: "Depart from me!" It was the devil who had robbed him of all comfort and induced him to speak thus to Christ. He thought nothing else than that the Lord would annihilate him. He was unable to distinguish Law and Gospel. If he could have done so, he could have confidently approached Jesus, knowing that He had forgiven him all his sins. How often he must have thought later on, "What a big fool I was then! I should have said, 'Abide with me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man.'" Indeed, that is what he did later on when he had fallen once again. Then he was filled with inexpressible joy when Jesus looked upon him full of grace.

1 John 3:19-20: "By this we shall know that we are of the truth, and reassure our hearts before Him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and He knows everything." When our heart does not condemn us, it is easy to distinguish Law and Gospel. And that is the state of a Christian. Yet he, too, will get into situations where his heart condemns him. Do what he will, he cannot silence this voice. It constantly calls to him and reminds him all at once of former sins. He suddenly remembers a sin he had long forgotten, and a terrible fear assails him. If a person is then able to distinguish Law and Gospel, he will fall down at

Jesus' feet and be consoled by His merit. But this is difficult. It seems foolish to one who is spiritually dead to be tormented about past sins. He becomes ever more indifferent to all sin. A Christian, however, is conscious of his sins and also feels the witness of his conscience against them.

Finally, however, when Christians correctly practice the distinction between Law and Gospel, they will say with St. John: "God is greater than my heart; He has rendered a different verdict, and that applies to me too." But that is so difficult! Blessed are you if you have learned this skill! And once you have learned it, do not think you have mastered it; you will always remain a pupil. There will be hours when you will be unable to distinguish Law and Gospel. But when the Law condemns you, you must reach for the Gospel at once.

Luther treats this subject more gloriously than anyone since the days of the apostles, and yet he confesses that in practice he often succumbed. The devil often tormented him, even though he had committed no gross sins and had led a virtuous life. The devil often assailed him about spiritual sins so that he did not know where to turn. Frequently he then went to his father confessor, Bugenhagen, made his confession, knelt and received absolution. Then he departed in good cheer.

[*Editorial note:* Here follow quotations from Luther's *Sermon on the Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, St. Louis Edition, IX, 806 f.; 808 f.; 802.]

In his *Table Talk*, Luther says: "There's no man living on earth who knows how to distinguish between the Law and the Gospel. We may think we understand it when we are listening to a sermon, but we're far from it. Only the Holy Spirit knows this. . . . Because I've been writing so much and so long about it, you'd think I'd know the distinction, but when a crisis comes I recognize very well that I am far, far from understanding. So God alone should and must be our holy master" (*Luther's Works*, American Edition, Vol. 54, p. 127). Note that this confession comes from Luther, who had for so many years written large volumes on this subject! We are always more inclined to listen to the Law rather than to the Gospel.

[*Editorial note:* Walther quotes from Luther's commentary on Psalm 131—St. Louis Edition, IV, 2077 f.—to the effect that dying persons are often frightened by the Law. Walther continues:] In the agony of death the devil comes and seeks to snatch the poor Christian away from the Gospel in his last hour. When Christians are about to enter eternity, they wonder, "Am I really fit for it?" They recall many Bible passages, among them, "If you would enter life, keep the commandments," and they forget that that is Law. Then their hearts will say, "You are not fit, you cannot be saved." In that moment they simply cannot distinguish between Law and Gospel.

Therefore it is good for you to learn it already in your youth. Don't think: "We have been thoroughly instructed on this doctrine. Hence, in case I experience the agony of death, I will resort to it." Yes, if that were within our power! The devil will throw you into such confusion that you won't know where to turn. Nor must you think, "I'm still young!" How often God snatches away a person in the full bloom of his youth in order to remind others of the necessity of giving thought to their death!

We are still talking about how a preacher as a Christian should distinguish between Law and Gospel. For he should be a Christian; otherwise he should not be a preacher. Whoever has not arrived at knowing and practicing this distinction is still a heathen or a Jew. It is of the very essence of being a Christian that he knows how to seek his salvation in Christ and thus to escape from the Law.

Let me cite Luther again: "But when it comes to experience, you will find the Gospel a rare guest but the Law a constant guest in your conscience, which is habituated to the Law and the sense of sin; reason, too, supports this sense" (*Lectures on Galatians*, 1535, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Vol. 26, p. 117). Unless we learn it by experience, we will not learn it at all. . . . When the comfort of the Gospel is in your heart, those are glimpses of light on a certain day; sometimes there are none at all for several days. But one should always keep in mind: "For poor sinners like me, the Gospel, the sweet Gospel, is available. I have forgiveness of sins through Christ."

[*Editorial note:* Walther again quotes Luther, to the effect that there is a proper time for everything—a time to hear the Gospel, and also, when public duties are to be performed, a time to hear the Law and perform the duties according to it. Walther continues:]

So, when one is to do in public what is right, then is not the time to hear the Gospel but the Law, when one is thinking of his calling. When it is not a matter of your relationship to God, then you must act according to the Law—however, not like a slave but like a child.

## Seventh Evening Lecture

(Nov. 7, 1884)

When I told you 14 days ago that Luther says no one is able to distinguish Law and Gospel without illumination by the Holy Spirit, and that even Luther was himself only a humble beginner in this high and glorious art, it was by no means my intention to depress and discourage you. On the contrary, I wanted those who had thought it a skill very easily

acquired to be cured of this great self-delusion and, on the other hand, I wished to hearten and encourage the faint-hearted among you who think, "Well, if even Luther had such a hard time acquiring this skill, my chances are very much smaller."

Remember: If a person can learn how properly to distinguish Law and Gospel only in the school of the Holy Spirit and genuine Christian experience, he may have studied in all kinds of other schools and still not have acquired this skill. He dare not think that the remarks about the difficulty of this matter apply only to weak people, but not to gifted and knowledgeable young men. On the contrary, the more gifted and knowledgeable a person is, the more easily he flatters his own ego and trusts in himself; he does not take the matter seriously and will probably never learn to know how these teachings must be related to one another and distinguished from one another.

Just think of Chrysostom, a great scholar and so outstanding an orator that he was called John Goldenmouth. He appeared to have the ability to move his hearers any way he wanted. He could make them happy, if he wanted; he could make them sad, if that is what he wanted; he could make them shout for joy, or mourn, weep, or sigh. Yet this good man accomplished very little, on the whole, because he was so poor at distinguishing Law and Gospel and constantly and dangerously mingled them.

Another example is Andrew Osiander, a learned and astute man, an orator without an equal. At first he distinguished Law and Gospel very well, as may be seen from his preliminary draft of the Augsburg Confession. However, this situation continued only as long as he was willing to be Luther's pupil. He became proud of his fine gifts and splendid learning and was finally entirely blinded in his judgment. As a result he became guilty of the most horrendous mingling of Law and Gospel. He taught that man is justified before God not because of the righteousness won for him by Christ through His bitter suffering and death, but because Christ dwells in man with His essential, divine righteousness. Therefore be on your guard!

Now, once a person has learned in the school of the Holy Spirit how to distinguish Law and Gospel correctly, the weakest people—if only they are true Christians, if only they themselves have felt the force of the Law and the comfort of the Gospel, the power of faith—will be the best equipped to apply to others what they themselves have experienced. For that reason the least gifted among preachers are often the best ones. Without a doubt, at the time of Chrysostom many a simple, poor, unheralded presbyter in the hinterland distinguished Law and Gospel better than the great orator in

the world metropolis Constantinople, better than the philosophically trained Clement of Alexandria, better than the many-sided scholar Origen.

The same holds true at the time of the Reformation. A simple pastor named Cordatus, a close friend of Luther, undoubtedly distinguished Law and Gospel a thousand times better than Melanchthon, the “teacher of all Germany,” even though the latter derisively called Cordatus *Quadratus*, a clumsy “square,” because he had unmasked Melanchthon when he went astray in the doctrine of free will. Therefore one who has come to the love of his Lord Jesus and has experienced the power of the Law and of the Gospel will become the most proficient in the art of distinguishing them, no matter how difficult it is.

We are now ready to consider that the correct distinction of Law and Gospel is also the highest and most difficult skill for the *theologian*, and that all else he must know is inferior to this skill.

2 Timothy 2:15: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved . . . rightly handling the Word of truth.” “Do your best” suggests that it is a high and difficult art to distinguish Law and Gospel properly.

In Luke 12:42 the Lord calls that steward faithful and wise who gives the members of the household “their portion of food at the proper time”—not when he speaks the Word of God in general, or, to stay with the picture, when he gives everyone a little of the food he was authorized to distribute. No, the steward is commended when at the proper time he gives each person his proper portion, precisely what he must give to correspond to each one’s spiritual condition. And this must be done at the proper time, for he is a poor steward who gives the members of the household some morsel and after a lengthy interval repeats the process without asking how much he should give them and how often. Thus a preacher must know the art of giving each person at the proper time what he needs, be it Law or Gospel.

This skill is acquired only through the Holy Spirit, as 2 Corinthians 2:16 and 3:4-6 show. The apostle says that “our competence is from God” alone for this high and difficult art. The “written code” is the Law, while the “Spirit” denotes the Gospel. We are clearly told that both must be proclaimed side by side. And by nature no one has the ability to do this; God Himself must supply it. Therefore a pastor must no longer have the spirit of this world. One who still has this spirit within him can never learn how to make this distinction properly. For the Spirit of God cannot dwell in a heart where the spirit of the world is still in control. Hence the world cannot receive the Spirit. Anyone, therefore, who desires to be a servant approved by the Lord must first become a Christian. He may be able to present all the dogmas correctly, but that is not enough. He must also

know how to give each soul in his audience what it needs. This is possible when the preacher can investigate the condition of each soul. Of course, that is extremely difficult, just as the diagnosis is the most difficult task for the physician.

It is not enough for you to use the living and sharp Word of God. With this sharp sword you could easily kill the souls if you did not give them what they need. For that reason a preacher must be able to perceive whether he is dealing with a hypocrite or an honest Christian; whether it is one still spiritually dead or one aroused from the sleep of sin; whether it is one assailed by the devil and the flesh, or one who because of his willful malice has been consigned to the devil. One who has no experience may easily mistake a hypocrite for a genuine Christian, etc. You must preach in such a way that every hearer thinks, "That applies to me! He has pictured the hypocrite exactly the way I am." Or the pastor has described the person suffering from trials in a way so true to life that he cannot but think, "That's how it is with me." Also the penitent person must quickly become aware, "that word of comfort is for me, and I must make it my own." The terrified one must think, "Oh, that is a sweet word! That's for me." Even the impenitent must be able to say to himself, "Yes, that is exactly a picture of me."

Hence the preacher must know how to present an accurate portrait of each hearer. If he merely sets forth the various doctrines in an objective way, that will not be enough. One who is indeed orthodox and has comprehended the pure teaching but is not himself in communication with God, has not yet come to terms with God, has not yet become sure as to whether his sins are forgiven or not—how can he produce a Christian sermon? Here too the pagan proverb applies, "It is the heart that makes one eloquent." Indeed, only in the school of the Holy Spirit and through trial can we learn how to distinguish Law and Gospel correctly.

For that reason people love to read Luther's sermons. To be sure, at first his sermons have little appeal. But once people overcome their dislike (perhaps bringing themselves to overcome it because the preacher recommended the collection as "the most precious sermon book"), they like these sermons so much that they want nothing else. And it is indeed a joy to read Luther's sermons. You find yourself on every page. First he scares the living daylight out of you and hurls you down into the depths. But he has hardly done that when he says, "Do you believe that?" "Yes." "Good, come back up!" There is thunder and lightning, but then immediately the gentle breath of the Holy Spirit in the Gospel. It is impossible to resist. We are compelled to say, "This is good, invigorating daily bread, the proper food for my soul." Luther does not prescribe a long

journey, nor does he offer detailed instructions on how to get out, but once he has led a person to acknowledge himself a poor sinner, he says, "Stop; Christ's grace is greater than all the world's sin." He constantly preaches Law and Gospel side by side, so that the Law is illustrated in a far more terrifying way by the Gospel, and the Gospel is made far sweeter and more consoling through the Law. You must learn this from dear father Luther. Then the people will listen to you. This will interest them. It will make them feel that in this hour the preacher wants to bring them up from destruction, so that they must leave the church rejoicing.

But how careful the preacher must be not to say something wrong! Therefore you must always go over your sermon once more and ask, "Is all this entirely correct? Is it neither against the Law nor against the Gospel?" So, for example, it would be wrong to say, "Whoever is still afraid of death is not a Christian; for a Christian is not afraid of death." That is a great lie. It may well be true that Christians are not afraid to come before God, but they are still afraid of decaying and moldering in the grave, etc. A preacher must delete such a sentence at once. Furthermore, young preachers who like to be active and accomplish something (a very fine ambition!) enjoy speaking about a Christian's salvation to children of the world. But often they go too far and say, "Those poor people, those children of the world, have no pleasure, no peace, no rest at all." That is not true. When children of the world hear this, they will think, "That simple-minded preacher! What does he know? We have lots of pleasure and peace." The preacher must express it differently. He must say that the children of the world indeed have joys and pleasures, but then all at once thoughts such as these will come to them: "What if the Christians' words are true? What if they are right? What will happen to me then?" In the midst of high living the thought of death intrudes like a ghost and turns joy into bitterness. Then such people must admit: "Yes, the preacher really knows how to draw a true picture of us!"

Or, if you picture Christians as people who are always happy and never have any trouble, that too is false. Christians have more anguish and trouble and tribulation than the world. And yet the Christian is far more blessed. If God should come during this night to take his soul, he will think: "Praise God, it is finished! I will soon be with my Savior." In tribulation he will think: "It won't last very long; then I will reach home, and all the misery and grief of this earth will vanish and be forgotten." Christians weep, and the angels rejoice over them. Christians experience anguish and terror, and God has their best interests at heart and says to them, "You are My dear children." These are just a few examples to show that you dare not go too far, even with the best intention.

Your second concern in preparing your sermons must be not to say anything that can be misunderstood. For example, "One who sins deliberately and knowingly falls from grace." That is subject to misunderstanding, for at times even true Christians sin knowingly and willingly, but in a state in which they are, so to say, *overcome* by sin inwardly or also outwardly. These are called rash sins. Someone has a hot temper but is otherwise amiable. Suddenly something crosses his path, and he gives vent to his temper. Then the Spirit of God reproves him, "Look what kind of person you are!" and he begs God for forgiveness. It is true, when a Christian sins knowingly, he grieves the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit wants no part of it. Therefore you must tell the people: "That is a dangerous path! The Holy Spirit will draw back, and you will suffer a relapse instead of going forward. And unless you proceed in true repentance, this sin can lead you to destruction."

It would be just as misleading to say, "Good works are not necessary, but faith alone." If I say, "They are not necessary for salvation," it is correct. But if I do not do good works I cannot stay on the right path. After all, God has commanded them. It is His will that we do good works.

Again, it is misleading to say, "Sin will not hurt a Christian." To be sure, a sin of weakness will not at once subject the person to God's disfavor, but it still does damage. "There is . . . no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus," says Paul [Romans 8:1]. He does not say, "there is nothing sinful." In short, we can't be too careful in our preaching.

However, it is also wrong if at times a subject is not sufficiently explained. When Aegidius Hunnius was still at school, he once heard these words in church: "There is, however, one sin that cannot be forgiven. It is the sin against the Holy Spirit." These words pierced his heart like a dagger. He thought at once that he had committed this sin. In fact, he thought of taking his own life. He recalled that the Holy Spirit had repeatedly knocked at the door of his heart during the sermon but that in youthful frivolity he had put it out of his mind. But God in a wonderful way delivered him from the agony of conscience. One day, taking his seat, he found a page torn out of a fine book of devotions by Spangenberg. On this page there was a discussion of the sin against the Holy Spirit, stating that a person guilty of that sin *refused to his dying day to repent*. So Hunnius was rescued. Because of that he became a great theologian, since he had to experience such great trials already in his youth.

It is even more difficult to distinguish Law and Gospel in the pastoral care of the individual. In the pulpit the preacher may say various things and think, "That will surely knock on the door of their hearts." But when people come to him as their pastor, it is much more difficult. He will soon

realize, "That one is a Christian and that one is not." This is not to say that he could not be mistaken in the case of someone who puts on a very pious mien and yet is a hypocrite. But if the pastor can properly distinguish Law and Gospel, some people may still deceive him, but it will not be his fault. He will assume a dreadful burden of responsibility only if he himself is to blame when people misunderstand him. If, however, people act like Christians in order to deceive me, it is not I who am deceived, but those people themselves. There the preacher must treat a person as a Christian if he appears so to him, and vice versa.

But non-Christians are not all alike. One is a coarse scoffer and a despiser of the Bible, another is orthodox with the dead faith of the intellect, but the preacher notices that he is still blind and in a state of spiritual death. One who is still caught up in sin will naturally not know how to judge such a person. Now, when an unchristian man is thoroughly alarmed and full of unconscious dread because of his many sins, yet still unbroken, the pastor must note that he must still be crushed. One person is a slave of vice, another is self-righteous. And this is the great difficulty, namely to discover these different classes of the unconverted and to apply the proper treatment to each. My purpose is to convince you that only the Holy Spirit can properly prepare a preacher.

Finally, it is still more difficult to treat genuine Christians in accordance with their specific spiritual condition. One is a weak Christian, another is strong; one is cheerful, another is dejected; one is lukewarm, another is aglow with zeal; one has scant spiritual knowledge, another is deeply grounded in the truth.

One more thing: It is extremely important for a preacher to recognize different temperaments if he wants to judge people fairly and deal with them accordingly. My spiritual eye must not be allowed to be blind to good traits because of faults of temperament. For example, a person of sanguine temperament may always be cheerful and not trouble himself with sad thoughts, and yet not be a Christian; it is simply his nature. If, then, you discover that he is a sanguine character, and he becomes sad when you preach the Law to him, you will know that the Word has been effective. And if you then preach the Gospel to him, you must discern whether his becoming cheerful again is merely due to his nature or not. Or you may run into a melancholy person and note that he is very sad and downcast. Then you must not immediately conclude that he is sad because of his sins. But if the Gospel suddenly animates him and you see him act contrary to his temperament, you may be sure that the Gospel has reached him effectively. Or you may be dealing with a phlegmatic person who always loves to take it easy and hates to be disturbed in his thoughts. If you have calmed him,

you must not think at once that you have done so through the Gospel. Or you have before you a choleric individual. If he becomes despondent, you may be sure that the Word of God is responsible.

## **Eighth Evening Lecture**

(Nov. 14, 1884)

If Scripture were really so obscure that no certainty could be obtained as to the meaning of those passages on which the articles of the Christian faith are based, and that without some other authority it would be impossible to determine which of several possibilities is the only correct interpretation—then Scripture could not be the Word of God. What kind of revelation would that be that leaves us in the dark particularly as to its essential content? In the Middle Ages Jewish Biblical scholars said the literal sense was obvious, but there was a hidden meaning of prime importance which could be discerned only by means of the Cabala. They stated that the Hebrew letter Aleph occurred six times in both the first and last verse of the Hebrew Scriptures. An ordinary person could not know what that signified, but the Cabala provided the answer. It meant that the world would remain for 6,000 years.

This is, of course, ridiculous, yet even within Christendom, in the papacy, it is taught that Scripture is so obscure that it is largely unintelligible, or at least that many important teachings of the Christian religion cannot be demonstrated from Scripture. Therefore tradition is indispensable. But that is blindness! To them applies the word of Paul that “the Gospel is veiled only to those who are perishing” (2 Corinthians 4:3). Luther is right in saying: “No book on earth is as plain as Holy Scripture; compared to all other books, it is like the sun compared to all other lights” (*Interpretation of Psalm 37*; St. Louis Edition, V, 334; see also Luther’s *Address to the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany That They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools*, *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, Vol. 45, pp. 363f.; for similar statements see *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, Vol. 39, pp. 164 f.).

Luther is entirely correct. Holy Scripture is far clearer than the most lucid human writing, for it is given by the Holy Spirit, the Creator of languages. Therefore, as long as we remain with the words of Scripture, we cannot possibly cite an error or a contradiction in Scripture. Therefore that precious Communion hymn states: “Firm as a rock this truth shall stand, unmoved by any daring hand or subtle craft and cunning” (*The Lutheran Hymnal*, 306:3).

Yet although anyone who knows the language can grasp the historical-grammatical sense of Scripture, no one—be he ever so great a linguist, ever so famous a philologist, ever so logical a thinker—can understand Scripture for his salvation without the Holy Spirit. The apostle Paul says, “The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14). “We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles” (1 Corinthians 1:23). But to gain a saving knowledge of Scripture one must, above all, understand the distinction between Law and Gospel. With this understanding all Scripture becomes clear; without it, the whole Bible remains a book sealed with seven seals.

Now before we go on to our fourth thesis, listen to a few quotations from Luther. When we hear the sermons of inexperienced preachers, we perhaps cannot say that they misstated the Law or the Gospel, and yet we must often observe that Law and Gospel have been intermingled. In his *Sermon on the Distinction Between Law and Gospel* Luther states: “It is quite easy to show that the Law is a word and teaching different from the Gospel. But to distinguish them in practice is difficult and arduous. St. Jerome wrote much on the subject, but the way a blind man speaks of color” (St. Louis Edition, IX, 806 f.). Luther had great respect for the learned. He cherished Erasmus for reviving the languages. But Luther never called him a doctor of theology. Why not? Because he did not have *this* skill. And even though a most talented person were to spend 50 years in preparation for the holy ministry—but had not received the Holy Spirit—he would not rightly distinguish Law and Gospel. This is indeed the Scylla and Charybdis. On both sides one can lead souls to destruction and grievously sin against poor Christians.

Commenting on Galatians 2:14, Luther says: “Whoever knows well how to distinguish the Gospel from the Law should give thanks to God and know that he is a real theologian. I admit that in the time of temptation I myself do not know how to do this as I should” (*Lectures on Galatians*, 1535, *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, Vol. 26, p. 115). A simple preacher can be an excellent theologian, while another, who has mastered all Oriental languages and has studied who knows what else, perhaps does not yet deserve that title. It all depends on whether God has made him a theologian or not.

As for you who object that this is really going too far, you are still blind! If you had experienced it, you would admit that this art is exceedingly difficult.

## Thesis IV

*The true knowledge of the difference between Law and Gospel is not only a glorious light for the correct understanding of all of Holy Scripture, but without such knowledge Scripture is and remains a closed book.*

Paging through Scripture before we know the difference between Law and Gospel makes us think it contains nothing but contradictions, even more than the Koran. At one place the Bible pronounces a person blessed, at another place it condemns him. When a rich young man asked Jesus: "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" he was told: "If you would enter life, keep the commandments" [Matthew 19:16 f.]. When the jailer at Philippi put the same question to Paul and Silas, he was told: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household" [Acts 16:31]. In Habakkuk 2:4 we read: "The righteous shall live by his faith"; John says: "He who does right is righteous" (1 John 3:7); and the apostle Paul replies: "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" [Romans 3:23-24]. In one place Scripture says that God does not want sinners; in another place: "Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved" [Romans 10:13]. In one place Paul exclaims: "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men" [Romans 1:18], and Psalm 5:4 says: "Thou art not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not sojourn with Thee." Yet Peter tells us to "set your hope fully upon the grace that is coming to you" [1 Peter 1:13]. In one place we are told that the whole world is under God's judgment (see Romans 3:19), while at another place the message is, "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life" [John 3:16]. Also noteworthy is 1 Corinthians 6:9-11. . . .

On reading all this, one who has no idea of the difference between Law and Gospel can only be thoroughly confused and ask, "What? This is supposed to be God's Word? A book full of such contradictions?"

Nor is it true that the Old Testament reveals a wrathful God, while the New shows us a gracious God; or that in the Old Testament salvation is by works, while in the New it is by faith. We find statements of both kinds in both testaments. But as soon as we know the difference between Law and Gospel, the sun rises over Scripture. Then we discover the most beautiful harmony. We learn that the Law was not given that we might be righteous through it, but that we might see our impotence, that we might see what weak people we are. Then we will note what a sweet message the Gospel is, what a glorious teaching it is; then we will accept the Gospel with thousandfold joy.

Church history also demonstrates the importance of this knowledge. The church's downfall set in when Law and Gospel were mingled, as the writings of the church fathers show. To be sure, up to the sixth century we still run across beautiful statements, but then we also note that this light is going out and this distinction is being forgotten more and more. This is evident also in the monastic life, which became more and more prominent. The monastics even regarded as necessary for salvation what the Lord had told that rich young man. They proclaimed the Law when they should have proclaimed the Gospel.

At the height of papal rule the knowledge of this distinction was completely snuffed out; a truly infernal darkness descended, so that bald paganism and idolatry came into the church. Think of our dear Luther! Compared with the prevailing darkness, he was quite enlightened, even at the beginning, but he did not yet know how to distinguish between Law and Gospel. How he tortured himself! He scourged himself, he fasted, almost to the point of death. What he found most difficult and terrifying was the statement that the righteousness of God is revealed in the Gospel [Romans 1:17]. "How dreadful!" he thought. "The Law demands fulfillment, and now the Gospel also orders us to become righteous!" He even entertained blasphemous thoughts. But then he was suddenly enlightened as to what kind of righteousness is revealed in the Gospel. Henceforth he became aware of the distinction between Law and Gospel throughout Scripture. [*Editorial note: See Luther's own account of his experience, in his Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings, Luther's Works, American Edition, Vol. 34, pp. 327 ff., esp. pp. 336 f.*]

From the moment Luther understood this distinction he became the Reformer. That is why he was so remarkably successful. By this knowledge he delivered the poor people from the wretchedness to which they had been driven by the Law-preaching of their priests.

You, too, must know how important this is for you, especially when you must act as pastor. Whenever someone comes to you wretched and afraid, it is always because the Law has had its effect and he does not remember that he can be saved through the Gospel. All he can think of is, "I am a poor sinner who has deserved hell." Then you must say to him: "True, you are a lost and condemned sinner. But that is Law. However, there is another teaching in Scripture. The law has done its work in you to bring you to a knowledge of your sin. Now leave Sinai and come to Golgotha! Behold there your Savior bleeding and dying for you." Yes, when you assume the pastoral office you will learn for the first time how significant and important the distinction between Law and Gospel is, and how an understanding of this difference alone enables you to conduct the

office that is to save the world. Naturally the most important thing is for you to have experienced this distinction in yourself. I am not thinking of those who have never been terrified by their sins, who imagine that because they have grown up in a Christian family they are orthodox, but I am thinking of those who are concerned about their salvation. At times you will feel you are God's children, and then again you will think your sins have not been forgiven. In that case you can have peace only by understanding the distinction between Law and Gospel.

The Apology tells us that "rightly to understand the benefit of Christ and the great treasure of the Gospel (which Paul extols so greatly), we must separate, on the one hand, the promise of God and the grace that is offered, and, on the other hand, the Law, as far as the heavens are from the earth" (Ar. IV [III], par. 185 [65], German text; *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 173; cf. Tappert, p. 132). Formula of Concord Art. V is devoted to the importance and nature of the distinction between Law and Gospel (Tappert, pp. 477 ff. and 558 ff.). If these two doctrines are not kept separate, the Gospel is darkened and the merit of Christ is obscured. If I fear the threats of the Law, I have forgotten Christ, for He says to me: "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." The preacher will proclaim this correctly only if he has received an indelible impression of the distinction between Law and Gospel. Only such a one can calmly take to his deathbed. In whatever way the devil assails him, he will say to the devil, "You are quite right, but I have another doctrine, which tells me something different. I am glad the Law dealt with me as it has, for now the Gospel tastes all the better."

[*Editorial note:* Walther cites Formula of Concord Art. V, par. 27 (Tappert, p. 563), which speaks of the danger in mingling Law and Gospel. He continues:] We are in the same danger. Read the writings of those who claim to be the best preachers! They are so harsh because they mingle Law and Gospel, so that the people are assailed by doubts on their deathbed. Many a one will think, "I wonder if God will accept me." But to die in such uncertainty is not to die a blessed death. And who is to blame in many cases? The preacher.

Nor may the preacher say that the Law has been repealed, for that is not true. The Law stands and is not repealed. But we have another message. God does not say: "Through the Law comes righteousness," but "through the Law comes knowledge of sin" [Romans 3:20]. Indeed, in the Letter to the Romans [4:5] it says: "To the one who . . . trusts Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness." Hence, just

when I realize that I am ungodly, I am on the right road, the road to salvation.

Luther on Galatians 3:19: “Unless the Gospel is clearly distinguished from the Law, Christian doctrine cannot be kept sound. But when this distinction is recognized, the true meaning of justification is recognized. Then it is easy to distinguish faith from works, and Christ from Moses, as well as from the magistrate and all civil laws” (*Luther’s Works*, American Edition, Vol. 26, p. 313).

As Chemnitz says (*Loci theologici*, “On Justification,” 206), no other light has dispelled the darkness of the papacy but the fact that the distinction between Law and Gospel became prominent. Mighty emperors tried, great councils of the church attempted a reformation, but what did they accomplish? Nothing! In fact, matters became worse. How, then, could a lowly monk accomplish it? Without a doubt because he restored this candlestick to the sanctuary. Without that distinction he might have preached ever so evangelically, but the Christians would not have been comforted. For when they found the Law they would have thought: “I was mistaken after all! I must keep God’s commandments if I want to enter life.” Most preachers fall short here. Hus preached the Gospel very well, but he did not correctly show the difference between Law and Gospel, and so his work did not endure.

*May God preserve to us this light which He has kindled for us!* I am thinking especially of you. We older people will soon lie in our graves. In our time this light has begun to shine again. See to it that it is not extinguished! If you think you will have mastered it in a few hours, you are on the wrong track. If this light is not diligently guarded, it will soon be extinguished. Thus we find this light burning only in the writings of the earliest church fathers. They are followed by others who have nothing definite to say on the subject. For that reason the papacy invaded the church so rapidly. But the same danger threatens us too.

Our thesis rests principally on Romans 10:2-4. The Jews had an unenlightened zeal for the Law, because they were “ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God.” they failed to understand that “Christ is the end of the Law”; otherwise they would not have become enemies of the Gospel, and the dreadful darkness surrounding them would have been dispelled.