

Applying Law and Gospel In a Mission Setting

By Pastor Mark Hayes

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Introduction

I had finally finished the first of my major seminary dogmatics papers. I was at my academic peak as a student. I was certainly approaching my finest hour as a dogmatician. Rarely had the clear and concise doctrine of the infallible Word of God flowed so naturally from any seminarian's pen. The day of glory was approaching. We were to receive our grades for the paper that morning. I received my paper and my grade with great pride. As anticipated, I had received an A. However, my eyes, my heart, and my mood for the rest of the day were not fixed on the A, but on the comments that accompanied it. The professor wrote to me the following words which I will never forget. *"Good paper. Your doctrine is precise. But, Mark, where is your pastoral heart!"* He exchanged the question mark with an exclamation mark and it resonated with me that day. I never questioned him on it. I couldn't argue. It's like his heart broke when he read "my doctrinal masterpiece to God" and now I didn't even care about the A. That scarred me. And yet, much like a burn scar that reminds you not to play with matches, this scar reminds me never to burn myself or others with doctrinal fire. Doctrinal integrity is not to be taken lightly. Doctrine is the message that God has entrusted to us. It must be regarded *as it actually is, the word of God* (1 Thessalonians 2:13) However, doctrine is not a weapon – at least not in the sense that we hurt people with it. It is the tool that the Holy Spirit uses to create and strengthen faith in God's dear children. Our job is not primarily to battle the heretics. Rather it is to communicate the message of salvation to God's people. That message includes both Law and Gospel. God's children include both weak and strong

The theme of this paper is "Applying Law and Gospel in a Mission Setting." The term "mission setting" could take on several different faces. For the sake of this paper, a mission setting is a setting in which a majority of the hearers have grown up with very little, if any, Biblical training. Put simply, they just don't know what you are blessed to know. Many are unchurched and have been for some time. Many did not grow up going to church at all or have had negative experiences with churches that have kept them away. A Christian upbringing was not the norm in the families in which they were raised. This definition of a mission setting describes the ministry in which I have been blessed to serve. I believe the applications can and will be helpful in any setting since we all minister to people who have had very little Biblical background.

2 Timothy 4:2 is the template for the manner in which we carry out this awesome task. ***"Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction."*** With that verse before us, I will share Scriptural and personal examples in order to provide suggestions for demonstrating a pastoral heart while maintaining doctrinal integrity. In doing so, please recognize the following:

- 1) The bibliography of cited works for this paper is absent. The specific and practical scope of this paper has not been the subject of any book I could find. I reread Walther's *Law and Gospel* to keep that proper distinction always in the foreground. It served well to maintain that foundational balance in this paper. I erred on the side of leaving quotes out of the paper rather than reprinting the book for you here. With the principles fresh in mind, the practical nature of this paper allowed me to discuss this topic as it relates to our current ministry settings.
- 2) I am making myself vulnerable and open to criticism for the sake of worthwhile discussion. I do not claim that I always make the right call. In some cases I will demonstrate the opposite. My goal is to lead you to think and weigh carefully every decision you make in your role as a shepherd of God's people.
- 3) When I share suggestions, I am not presuming to provide a recipe for "How To Handle This and Similar Situations In Your Ministry." My intention is to share experiences that will in some way echo

some of your own experiences in an effort to provide a forum for examining and perhaps re-evaluating how you do things and why you do them a certain way.

As stated, the thrust of the paper will be in the application of Law and Gospel. That means I will talk about attitude and approach in communicating Law and Gospel as well as keeping a proper balance and distinction between Law and Gospel. Any time you read a paper such as this, the presenter himself serves as his own disclaimer. You will filter what I say through what you know about me. Take what you find useful and apply it. Set the rest aside. I consider it a privilege to be in front of you. I pray that this paper will be at least of some benefit to you, even if it is only to generate a further examination of why you do what you do.

What is a Mission Setting? Understanding My Audience Exploratory 101 - Summer/Fall 1998

I officially began as an outreach exploratory pastor in July 1998. My first Bible Information Class (BIC) was held at the kitchen table of the very first people to actually take me up on the offer after weeks of canvassing the neighborhoods. I very confidently asked the couple to turn to John 3:16. The wife politely asked, "What's that?" "Well, it's a book of the Bible," I replied, thinking she must have misunderstood me. It took more than the few seconds it should have taken me to understand this very simple concept-- not everyone grew up the way I grew up. Not only do they not have the knowledge I have of the Bible, but they have exactly zero knowledge of the Bible. There are two concepts embedded in this discovery. Both are important. First of all, be a patient instructor. Take the time to properly teach from the ground up. Assume nothing. More importantly, lack of experience or knowledge in one specific field is not ignorance or stupidity. Teach the basics of Scripture without being condescending or patronizing to your students. Think of it this way. If you went to work with someone in your BIC and were expected to do their job and have the same skill set and knowledge as they have, you would be intimidated to say the least. You would *feel* ignorant and stupid. But should you? Of course not. You've never learned their trade. How would you know? How could you? In love, give your students the courtesy and security of recognizing that fact. Tell them up front that there is no prerequisite for studying the Bible and that you yourself wouldn't know their job any more than they know yours. That is, in fact, why you teach the class and why they have agreed to take it.

The following lessons have stuck with me: 1) Have a pastoral heart. 2) Don't act like everyone knows what you know. In short, act and teach with humility and patience. As for their specific applications with real people in real life, I'm still very much a student. I will begin this discussion with how NOT to apply Law and Gospel in a mission setting. I will use the labels I have given to myself in order to help us navigate the poor models I have emulated. In each case I attempted to use a methodology, without being aware of my attitude or motive. Being diversified, I have managed to dabble in all three examples.

Approaches with an Attitude #1: The Old School Legalist

The Old School Legalist operates with this motto: "When in doubt, invoke a policy." The implication is that if you do not yet have a policy to invoke, make one. If you want to have a relatively easy ministry, this is the way to go. You never really have to teach anyone anything. You just cite the policy with conviction and make quick, easy decisions. Here are some common ones:

- You will not commune here; we're not in fellowship.
- You may not get married here; you're not members.
- You will not get married here unless you live apart for 4-6 months. (Time varies based on geographic location of the church and how good the parents' offerings are).
- We will not perform your funeral; you are not a member.
- We will not baptize your baby. You probably won't bring it to church anyway.

- Your kid is a Boy Scout? Be gone!

A bereaved dog owner came to St. Lederhosen Lutheran Church requesting a funeral for her dog. When the minister politely but sternly refused, she mentioned, "We were planning on making a \$5,000 donation to your church for your trouble." Pastor Lefse quickly responded, "Oh, well you didn't tell me the dog was Lutheran."

My above examples are somewhat exaggerated, but you get the point. Some of the statements might even be legitimate but will be completely misunderstood if handled improperly. If you treat God's Word merely as a list of rules, and you apply it only as a set of policies, you hurt people. When you give no explanation at all for what you do, you sour them to churches at large and, perhaps, even to God. You also miss tremendous opportunities to do just the opposite--to teach and nurture your flock. When administering Scriptural principles, your doctrinal integrity will guide you to stick to the truth of the Word at all times and your pastoral heart will lead you to strive for excellence, patience and kindness when you apply it. Let's work through this by considering an example that is possibly the most common to all of us: the practice of close communion.

God's running joke with me is to give me the most new guests to our church on the fourth Sunday of every month--communion Sunday. My mouth used to get dry while I half expected someone to rant and walk out in the middle of the communion announcement and generate bad press about my church as soon as they did. Over the years I've written and rewritten the bulletin version of this Scriptural principle in an effort to make the perfect, foolproof explanation that every guest will embrace with joy. There is no such announcement. If they never came back, I figured it wasn't my fault. I comforted myself with the knowledge that they were probably disgruntled and sooner or later they would have gotten mad at me about something else and left anyway.

Here's what I do now. I'm proactive in my approach. When I see someone new on communion Sunday, I introduce myself, sit down next to them in the pew, and point out our communion announcement. I empathetically recognize the possibility of negative feelings and express my desire to do what is most beneficial for us, them, and the Lord's command. I've put a lot of thought into that heartfelt speech, but here's what wins them over: I care very much that they might be upset and I acknowledge it. They do not agree with me, but I care that they are hurt. I recognize that their faith in Christ is "just as good" as mine. I take my role as spiritual caregiver very seriously. I smile with genuine concern and confidence, not arrogance, knowing that I am doing what Jesus asks me to do and have every intention of building relationships between them, God and me. I know that, when I do those things, their future participation in the sacrament with our church family will be a tremendous blessing. In the end, all of our communion announcements are probably very similar, each one catered to our personality to some degree. Whatever approach you take, please understand that "We're not in fellowship" means absolutely nothing to a guest if not accompanied by a loving explanation, particularly a personal and carefully spoken one.

The same principles apply to Boy Scouts and couples living together before marriage. In a world with a 65% divorce rate and families that have their kids in every single sport and childhood experience that the parents never had, what are the odds that we might have guests in our church who live together before they are married or have children involved in Boy Scouts? Perhaps we should be asking, "What are the odds that we won't?" Living together before marriage is the norm. I am not at all suggesting that we ignore it. It's still a sin. It's still every bit as dangerous. I am suggesting that we reevaluate our approach. The more the world accepts it as the norm, the harder it will be to convince them otherwise. As Professor Bivens once said on this very topic, *"Fellas, when you're looking for fruits of faith, you're not always going to get a Granny Smith. You've got to praise the Lord for the crabapples."* Couple that advice with the understanding that they may not have your knowledge. Begin by building relationships. You will get the opportunity to discuss these issues with them, but it doesn't have to be today. We will spend some more time with these specific issues later. First, let's evaluate a couple more of our default approaches.

Approaches with an Attitude #2: The BFF

For you non-texters, BFF is *text* for “Best Friends Forever.” The motto of the BFF is simple. “I need everyone to love me.” This “best friend” style of parenting wreaks havoc on our society. It also has its ramifications for Gospel ministry. I really don't think this tendency is rampant in our churches, but gains its strength in tough situations and is a temptation for all of us. It also creeps its way into new congregations where every person matters. Of course, every person always matters, right? Yes, but when your attendance tells the story of whether your congregation will be there or not in the next couple of years, every person *really* matters. You cannot program the Holy Spirit. Numbers are not everything. I get that. But there comes a time for a young mission where you just need to get some warm bodies in those folding chairs. When that happens, introduce your “beloved friend”, but don't let him water down the truth when applying Law and Gospel to wayward souls. A simple example of this is when you are winding down with a friend from church over a beer. The more comfortable he gets with you, the more he trash-talks his wife and expects you to join in his laughter. He wants you to share a few of your own stories. You don't want him to think you're uncool. You want to be relatable. When the BFF takes over, you forget the bigger picture. Sure, you want to be relatable, but do you want to leave him with the impression that it's okay to talk about your spouse that way? You don't have to preach a sermon, but it's not really that hard to tactfully lead him away from that kind of talk. Build a relationship for sure. At the same time, be aware of what building materials you are using

Approaches with an Attitude #3: The Sem Grad Idealist

Somewhere between the legalist and the best friend lies the Sem Grad Idealist. With great excitement and enthusiasm, this well-trained young man is ready to conquer the world with the Word of God. What a tremendous blessing! I admire and encourage the teaching and working with people outside of your classroom setting and our “the buck stops somewhere else” experiences of vicar year. Let's get straight to the point. Good people sin and sin big. Seemingly well-adjusted people have hurt and been hurt in ways that will sicken you if and when they confide in you. There is a learned balance between overconfidence and lack of confidence. The overconfident Sem Grad Idealist sees the world as his own personal project. He needs to enlighten the world and purge them of their false ideas. One such young man confidently spoke to a recovering drug addict: “You know, when it comes to drugs, you can't regulate sin with laws. The only thing that changes hearts is the Gospel.” The recovering addict, annoyed as he was, replied with the wisdom of experience. “If it weren't for the laws and the police who enforced them, I'd be dead right now.” The Gospel IS the only thing that changes hearts, but when we use it superstitiously, that is, without taking into account all the facets of communication and circumstances, we miss the challenges and opportunities of shepherding God's flock. The drug addict isn't really looking for your BIC at the moment, and the country's laws are keeping him alive. Until you build a relationship and have an opportunity to teach the Gospel, it's immature and foolish to discount the purposes of the laws of the land. It's also naive and arrogant to callously trample on the kind of pain and trauma which you couldn't begin to understand. Smugly talking down to the hurting is a rookie mistake from which it is difficult to recover. Learn to listen well before you attempt to speak at all, especially on heavy topics like that. Keep your “I Would Never” persona tucked deeply away. If you think you're better than those to whom you minister, they know you think that.

Something that spoils the Sem Grad's ideal of life very quickly is the reality of reality. The Sem Grad Idealist with a lack of confidence will be hit hard by this. “Days of Our Lives” lifestyles are not that far removed from the cul-de-sacs of our communities. Alcoholism is prominent and painful. Christian women have had abortions, and Christian men think of divorce as a viable option for a dissatisfying marriage. When Mr. Rogers leaves the comfort of The Hill in Mequon, he is sometimes overwhelmed by life outside. A shell-shocked crybaby is little more help than an arrogant know-it-all. Learn to listen and listen to learn. The Lord will help you grow through the process with His Word as your guide.

Now, before I move on, let me share with you that I am aware that mission guys sometimes come across as though we have this “real world” chip on our shoulders, as if no one has seen the trouble we've seen. That is not my intention in the least. I don't even believe we have any reason to feel or act that way. The real world exists in small mission congregations and large established congregations. I do think mission they have not yet

learned the art of burying their problems deeply or masterfully masking their issues like lifelong Christians have. So, let's allow a candid discussion of "the world out there" to lead us to explore some realities about Scripture. I think we can be confident that our worker training system has prepared us to be doctrinally sound. That being said, the practice of applying Law and Gospel in a mission setting is not about methodology. It's about attitude--the pastoral heart.

An Attitude with an Approach 1) The Law and Gospel Apply to Me First

Have you figured out the best part of this job yet? As a professional, you spend hours every week in the Word of God. Whether it is in personal devotion or just weekly preparation, you're in the Word a great deal. Maybe you can't "just listen" without trying to take your newfound revelation and squeeze it into your next sermon or Bible study. But what's wrong with that? Like anything you read or enjoy, you want to share something important to you. When you are excited to share something, that means it resonated with you and you hope it resonates with someone else as well. By all means, make the time for personal Bible study. And yet, even when we are lax in that area, we are still in the Word. It's a professional bonus.

Are We Still Shocked By Sin?

I am counseling my third of three divorcing couples within three years who fit these two specific criteria:

- 1) All three of these couples include men who were on our church council.
- 2) All three of these couples were in my "top 5 great families that are immune to divorce" list.

Don't you have certain wonderful families that you consider to be a joy in your ministry? They are in the Word regularly. They are servant-minded. They are enjoyable to be around, they volunteer regularly. Their kids are well-behaved. Surely THESE people are never going to deal with divorce in their families! To this day, I have the nerve to be shocked by sin. Do you know the quickest way to get over that? Think of how many people think of you that way. People think of you as being the perfect pastor, father, husband. If someone expresses that sentiment to you, don't you walk away thinking, "Well, I guess they don't really know me, do they?" Ah, yes, but even so, WE would never get divorced. Get over yourself. By God's grace, you won't experience divorce, but you are not immune to even the worst of sins and neither are the people you serve. Paul gives us a candid look at sin in Romans chapter 7. We know this tongue twister by heart, "***The good that I want to do I don't do, and the evil that I hate, I do.***" Those words are shocking, not because we don't experience it, but because Paul did. Paul was the greatest missionary that ever lived. He personally learned from the Son of God. He was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write some of the most poignant truths God ever put on paper. If Paul deals with that level of sin, then where does that leave me? Never accept sin as just normal, and therefore, okay. However, it is normal in the sense that you may stop being surprised by it. Your "best" members have a willing spirit and a weak flesh, just like you do. Yes, I said, "just like you do." The solution is not to trace their behavior to some psychologically-altering childhood experience and blame that for the cause. Remember, we were born with sin. Traumatic experiences and baggage may be the occasion for sin, but they are not the cause. If you want a ministry where everyone joyfully receives the Word and lives out their sanctification in heavenly bliss, then you will have to go to another planet...one where the first man didn't eat the fruit. Whenever we are shocked by someone else's sin, I think there is a bigger problem driving us. We don't think OUR sin is that bad. Perhaps it would be helpful to liken their current spiritual maturity to your spiritual maturity in high school or college. For those of you who didn't even flinch at that, it may be time to find a new job. Jesus said that the sick need a doctor. They don't need a condescending schoolmaster who thinks he's healthy. Even worse than being shocked by the sins of others is being numb to your own. These two problems often go hand in hand.

Are we still moved by Grace?

In Washington D.C., there are several bridges that cross the Potomac river at 14th Street. One of them is named the Arlen D. Williams bridge. In January 1982, Air Florida Flight 90 took off from Washington National with ice on its wings. As the plane lost altitude, it hit the 14th Street Bridges and plunged into the river. When the helicopters arrived, the plane was sinking into the freezing Potomac with only its tail sticking out. By this time, nearly everyone had drowned, except a few passengers in the tail, the most visible of whom was Arlen D. Williams. The people in the rescue helicopter lowered the life line to him and when they pulled it up, there was someone else in it. This happened the second time, the third...five times. Every time, he gave up his place of salvation for somebody else. The last time they sent the line down, no one came up. Everyone who was ever saved from that wreck was saved through him...and he died giving up his place for them while he took their place in the wreckage.

Why does that story move you? First of all, it's true. Secondly, it is because that is the most morally beautiful thing we know on earth. In every story like that, whether fiction or nonfiction, the story just takes you. This is what makes the Gospel so profound. Other religions give you information; God gives you a story that resonates with you...a true story about you and God. Other religions may throw around, "God loves you," but only Jesus proves it on the cross. The objective ramifications are undeniable. He gave his life for yours. Does that still move you? Do you regularly absorb the love and acceptance that only God can give? Please do. Don't let your validation in life become the number of souls God uses you to bring to him. Your validation is that Jesus died for you. That truth is your motivation for fishing for more souls.

In every application of Law and Gospel, sin is the cause of the problem and the Gospel is the solution. It's getting from A to B that's the tricky part. The hard part about application is that it is always morphing. While the Word stays the same, the applications are always changing. I won't be able to give you methodology. What I can suggest is an attitude to assist in marrying your pastoral heart to your doctrinal integrity.

An Attitude with an Approach 2) What We Have

We Have Conviction, Clarity, Unity

We are the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. No unchurched person in Colorado cares that our church body originated in Wisconsin, other than the fact that the preacher says his "O"s nasally and, more often than not, likes the Packers. The term "evangelical" is too hard to distinguish from the watered down way that mainstream churches use the term today. Even Lutheran is too quickly associated with the largest Lutheran church body in America, and that is not helping us any. And finally, synod...usually pronounced "sigh-nod," means nothing to the average family on the street looking for a new church. The name of our church body itself may not resonate with anyone who comes to our church, but what we have and what we stand for does. How many times has someone come to your church and told you in joy and honest surprise that they like how you actually preach from the Bible? Maybe you don't even consider yourself to be that great of a preacher compared to some of your peers. Do you know how great of a preacher you are compared to many pastors in your community, simply because you expound a text and believe and teach the Gospel? What you have is thorough training in the Word of God. What you have is conviction that God's Word is the truth and it will accomplish what God desires. In a world where unity in a church is based on how much its participants are willing to ignore, conviction, clarity, and unity in the Word of God are spectacular blessings. That's what we focus on. A discussion on whether we include WELS on our church sign or remove "Lutheran" from our church name can become a bit of a distraction. Know what we stand for. Speak the truth in love. The unchurched do not obsess over church names like we do. In fact, they hardly even notice.

We Have BIC

Conviction, clarity, and unity in the true Word of God have given birth to one of our church body's greatest strengths: the Bible Information Class. Rookie mistake #27: apologizing for your membership class. Don't be sorry about what makes us great. With joyful conviction, let everyone who is interested in your church see your greatest strength. You want to build a unified family around the Word of God. You want to build their relationships with both God and with you as their pastor. In a matter of weeks, they will have more a more in-depth understanding about what they believe in Scripture than they have ever had before. They will have some new friends that they would have never met otherwise. They will have a pastor that they know at least well enough to call when they need comfort from Scripture. What is the purpose of our church? How is BIC not the greatest thing ever? Do you believe that? Then so will the people you invite, because they see that you believe it. Don't apologize for it as though it were a burden. Don't give them any reason to pass it off as an arbitrary requirement for membership. This is the foundation in your relationship with them and becomes the foundation in your application of Law and Gospel in their lives. Embrace it. Be excited about it.

We Have Brothers

It's the second Monday of the month. Oh man, I have to read that chapter for study club! I just don't have time for those meetings. Conference? Out of town for three days? I hope my sermon on Sunday isn't too terrible. Here's the deal. Even if every study club and every conference is not the most intellectually challenging, spiritually moving event on the planet, you need it. I would be interested to see the statistics behind the men who resign in our church body as it relates to their attendance at study groups and conferences. Your brothers in the ministry are the only guys who go through what you go through to this degree. Bounce ideas off of them. Learn from them. Help them. This isn't just about you. When you feel like you are alone on an island of insane schedules and nasty counseling situations, come and soak in the affirmation and reassurance of your brothers. You don't have to be best friends to know that these guys have your back. Worship with them. Commune with them. Study with them. Laugh with them. Don't isolate yourselves from this support system. You would be shocked at the lack of unity and camaraderie in other church bodies. You don't always have all the answers. Ask a brother for help. They have been where you are. They will humble you when it's appropriate. They will build you up when you need it.

An Attitude with an Approach 3) Who We Are - Shepherds

From *Shepherd Under Christ* to *Shepherd Under Water*, we have the responsibility to apply Law and Gospel to God's people. Here are some friendly tips when you encounter these common shepherding tasks.

When you teach the BIC

Preparation

Don't let the class become the class you teach in your sleep. They will see that, too. Study and prepare. At the very least review it. Maybe the new twenty-somethings don't understand your Raiders of the Lost Ark analogies. Keep it fresh for yourself and them.

Methodology

Embrace our systematic approach to theology. You have an audience of people who want to be there. You will never again get the opportunity to teach them this vast a range of doctrine this thoroughly again. The precursor to applying Law and Gospel is teaching it well. I don't truly believe that people finish my BIC with a complete understanding of ALL of Scripture, but I teach as though that were possible.

Patience

Please resist the temptation to correct every hint of false doctrine that comes out of the mouths of these children of God. They'll get there. Don't expect them to have the semantic clarity of a seasoned pastor after only

60 minutes in a class with you. “We don’t ACCEPT the gospel, we RECEIVE it!” I think you know what I mean. Zip it for a while. Give them a break. You will notice their language change as you tactfully teach them over time by using the language yourself and instilling the concepts. God is REALLY good at nurturing His truths in people as they study His Word.

When you get the phone call

The DP Shuffle

Do you have to have the perfect answer two minutes after you get "the phone call" about something bad happening in someone's life or an issue that clearly needs to be dealt with soon? No. You sure don't. A former WELS District President shared with me a little method he called, "The DP Shuffle". In short, when someone called in a panic and demanded, "What do I do?", he calmly said, "Let me get back to you on that." Although it is not always possible to sneak extra time, when we are helping people who are in a panic, the worst thing we can do is join the panic. Lovingly listen. Assure them of your concern and support. Tell them exactly when you plan to call them back. Then Make the time to evaluate, pray, and phone a friend while keeping confidentiality intact, of course. By the way, if you don't go to study club and conferences, you won't have anyone to call. And your wife will surely have an opinion on the matter, but are you able to maintain confidentiality while sharing it with her? I doubt it. I really really really doubt it. Okay, I'll just say it. Don't talk about these things with your wife. It's uncool to your members. It's an unnecessary burden on her. Have I mentioned your brothers in the ministry? Good.

Evaluation of the Problem at Hand

Ask these questions while you make an evaluation:

- 1) ***What's true?*** Remember that there are three sides to every story: His side, her side, and the truth. One person's side may be very captivating and moving. It will also be very biased and incomplete. To the best of your ability, get the bigger picture, gathering as many facts as possible before making a move.
- 2) ***What's my motive?*** Some evaluations are easy and obvious. Most are not. Be clear on which of your personas is sitting in on this meeting. Is the Old School Legalist trying to invoke a policy and get home in time for dinner for the first time this week? Are you the BFF who doesn't want to be the bad guy and further burden the already hurting soul with the details of God's law? Does the person you are counseling contribute service or money that you don't want to lose? ("I would NEVER"...yeah, okay. You have the ability to be way more shallow than you think.) Are you afraid of your over-zealous former elder from the LCMS? Is your perceived reputation becoming more important than the truth of God's Word? You get the idea. Don't hide your quick and unprepared “NO” behind the classic "so as not to cause confusion" in an attempt to cover your back side. Let me translate that. You are afraid that your congregation will be upset, so you're not even going to think about this.
- 3) ***What does God's Word say?*** This one is listed last, but is certainly not last in importance. You can only properly apply Law and Gospel when you better know the situation to which you are applying them. As an aid to our discussion of practically *Applying Law and Gospel in a Mission Setting*, I have provided a few case studies for you to consider.

An Attitude with an Approach 4) What Have I Done? - Case Studies

Please allow me to repeat my disclaimer from the introduction. I have made a lot of mistakes as a pastor. I have not always dealt with a proper distinction between Law and Gospel or an appropriate balance of doctrinal integrity and a pastoral heart. I am sharing some of the more difficult decisions I've had to make in order to illustrate the evaluation process and decision-making in applying Law and Gospel to God's people. You may

not agree with my approach. My approach may have been right for my people in my community and my background but not yours. You are familiar enough with Paul's unique approaches to Titus and Timothy in regards to circumcision. The same application doesn't work with every crowd. Sometimes I have been just plain wrong. That being said, let's talk.

The Attack of the Sem Grad Idealist

Tom visited our church in the early years and was in terrible shape emotionally. His wife, Helen, was cheating on him with a younger guy and, at the time, had just moved in with him. I found this out when I made a follow-up call on Tom after his first visit to our church. He shared his sad story and asked if I could help. He asked me if I would call his wayward wife and "talk to her for him." Well, Helen was obviously in need of the law. It was my duty to this poor, sad man to apply it. The Commissioner had sent the spotlight signal against the clouds, and I was off to save this marriage. I would just go and tell her of her sin and make plans to help her amend her sinful ways. Under a sense of Biblical duty, I called her and made an appointment to talk to her and her new boyfriend. I know you're all just dying right about now. Yes, I actually made and kept this appointment. I was blown away by the contempt she had for her controlling and abusive husband and learned how truly happy she was now. I received my own dose of her contempt when I suggested that it was not okay they were living in sin right now. Do people really act like this? There must not be a Lutheran Elementary School in Pueblo West! In a panic, I finally used my default mechanism with any situation...I invited them to a BIC. Shockingly they didn't show up. They never came back to church. To this day, nearly 12 years later, if I ever do see them in passing they still are massively uncomfortable around me even though the husband has long since moved away, and their new live-in relationship ended on its own six months after I visited them.

The BFF Sinks the Ship

John and Susan were good friends of my wife and me and were some of the first people in our budding congregation. It became clear that they didn't get along all that well, but they masked it with humor and everybody thought it was ultimately fine, especially Susan. Then one day she informed me that John had left and was not coming home. She was just as shocked as I was. John had a detailed plan that he had been working on for years. He was just waiting for the boys to be out of the house before he put the plan into action. His cover-up for guilt was to accuse Susan of an affair years earlier. Although I will never know for sure, my gut says it was a lie. To complicate matters, they both planned to stick around in the same town and stay at the same church. The BFF in me met with each of them individually while one accused the other, and the other vehemently denied the accusation. Not wanting to take sides, I felt justified to accept each story and let it be between them and God. John's unwillingness to meet together with Susan was my red flag that he was hiding something. That's where the BFF missed the boat—or sank it. No, you can't always act on gut instinct, but at the very least I could have pushed for the meeting. They both couldn't have been right, and they both couldn't have been telling the truth. As it turned out, John stayed at the church, cleared for his divorce by yours truly. Susan left the church, very hurt and let down. There's really no happy ending hiding in this story. Susan hates me now. I'm sorry, I shouldn't say "hate." Susan loathes me now.

The BFF's motive was misguided. "I want them both to stay here and be happy and continue to like me." After all, they were some of the first friends we had here. They were some of the founding members. What they needed me to do was confront the sin. That's what the congregation needed me to do, too. The truth is, I still have visions of getting to heaven and hearing Jesus tell me I did the right thing because Susan really did have that affair. But what will really happen is much better. Jesus will welcome me into heaven, purified by his blood and deeply loved in spite of my failings as a pastor. This is how we cope with our bad days, especially when our bad days affect others so deeply. This is also what motivates us to learn from our mistakes and continue to serve God and His people--hopefully better the next time around.

In each of the previous scenarios, I acted with an imbalance in Law and Gospel. In the first case, I had never built a relationship with the couple before I went to talk with them. I barely knew Tom, who sent me

there. I knew nothing of the situation. I came storming in with the law like a sheriff running the gangsters out of town. I felt compelled and obligated to “do what God wanted me to do,” and without building a relationship, they replied the way I would expect them to. “You’re not my dad.” They were right. In the second scenario, I kept the law locked in the cabinet for the sake of loving neutrality. I did that so as not to risk damaging a friendship, which, what a surprise, happened anyway.

At this point, I would like to spend more time with an important perspective which I find very helpful in applying Law and Gospel in a mission setting, one which I have been referencing throughout the paper. Applying Law and Gospel in a mission setting is about building relationships:

- 1) It is important to build the relationship between God and the people to whom you are ministering.
- 2) It is important to build the relationship between you and the people to whom you are ministering. The first is more important than the second, but the second is essential to accomplishing the first.

Let's be clear. The Word of God works as God wills it. I do not "assist" the power of the Word. However, does it strike you that the prophetic message wasn't enough for God? A mere declaration of how we are saved was too little for God? He found it essential to reveal the Word to us in flesh. (John 1:14) God chose to communicate His message to us in a personal, relational way in Jesus. Jesus not only fulfilled the law and became the Gospel, he lived them, taught them, and built relationships around them. That has implications for how we communicate his Word today. We are human beings. That's how we communicate. We build relationships. We build trust. A person tends to learn something from you more easily and effectively if they know you and trust you first, but it takes time to build that trust. That is why I am not trying all that hard to shorten my BIC. That is also why it is no surprise to me that so many people choose a church by whether or not they can relate to the pastor. If they don't relate to the communicator, they likely will put a wall up to the communication, too. We want nothing more than for the pure Word of God to reach the ears of those whom we are blessed to serve. Our job is to do the best we can to create relational bridges and remove barriers to the communication. That means being loving and empathetic. That means being aware of social norms and **“becoming all things to all men”** (1 Corinthians 9:22) as long as it is within the bounds of Scripture. As Seinfeld’s George Costanza so eloquently put it, “We’re in a society here!” **“All things are free, but not all things are beneficial”** (1 Corinthians 10:23). Be yourself, but the further you stray from how the community interacts, the more difficult it is to relate to them. As long as it is within the bounds of Scripture, “When in Rome” is not a bad motto.

An Attitude with an Approach 5) Jesus applies Law and Gospel

The Woman at the Well (John 4)

God invented us, so we are wise to take counsel from him when it comes to applying Law and Gospel. I love this story for the insights Jesus provides regarding acting in love in an uncomfortable situation. The fact that he speaks to a Samaritan in a time of such racial conflict between Jews and Samaritans was notable. The fact that she was a woman provided another level of discomfort. Finally, this woman’s lifestyle, which she later discussed with Jesus, likely impacted her social status with the other women in town. She was not welcome. She was not accepted. So what does Jesus do? He says something to get her attention. He alludes to the Gospel in figurative language. He offers her living water, so that she won't have to come back to the well for water anymore. Sounds like a great deal. Then he begins to teach her what kind of water it is by clueing her in to why she needs it. He says, **“Go and get your husband.”** She replies that she doesn't have any. Then Jesus concurs and elaborates on her personal sins and her poor choices in living arrangements. This sounds a lot like the Sem Grad Idealist. Condemn her for her sins, and invite her to a Living Water BIC. Maybe I wasn't so far off after all. Yes, I was. Look at what Jesus is really doing. He uses the Law to help her see her sin, then offers her the Gospel alternative. “I know what you're looking for. Right now you are trying to find fulfillment in your

relationships with men. It is not working, is it? Let me give you something better. It's the living water of the Gospel. The Gospel is not about your lifestyle or the Jews vs. Samaritans battle on where to worship. It is about feeding your soul with the kind of acceptance you can't get anywhere else. I am the Messiah who brings it." Immediately she goes to tell her friends, "Come meet a man who told me everything I ever did." Does it surprise you that she is excited about that rather than angry? It's as if she is saying, "Come meet a man who told me everything I ever did...and it was okay. He still valued me and cared about me in spite of my sin." Jesus had built a relationship. Jesus showed genuine concern. Jesus' motive was deeper than building a following or making a friend. He was leading this woman to see her sin so that she could also see her Savior. He was able to get to know her spectacularly more quickly than we ever could. Ahhh, the benefits of being the Son of the Most High. It will obviously take us more time to get to know where people need their spiritual oil, but you are wise not to stain their carpet with oil before you get to that point.

The Woman Caught In Adultery (John 8)

This story of Jesus adds another level of difficulty--the intimidation of judgmental bystanders. In this case, Jesus' enemies were looking to trap Jesus. Their plan was simple. If Jesus said they should stone the woman, he would be accused of being unloving. If He said they should let her go, he would be accused of despising the law. In this case it was the accusers who needed the law, not the woman. She knew her sin. When he turns the law back on the accusers, they walk away in shame and she remained uncondemned. Jesus asked her, "*Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?*" "*No one Sir,*" she replied. "*Then neither do I condemn you,*" Jesus declared. "*Go now and leave your life of sin.*" Jesus lovingly applied the Gospel to a hurting heart. He was not intimidated by the judges who wanted to see her condemned. At the same time, he loved her enough to make her aware that it was still an issue that harmed her soul. His motive was love for her. In love, He made the judges aware of their sins as well. Our primary motive with those who look with a judging eye upon the decisions we make is not to keep everyone happy or do what everyone expects us to do. Keeping our track record clean, in the sense that we maintain doctrinal integrity with the truth of the Scripture, is a must. Keeping our track record clean so that we do everything we are "supposed to do" and keep everyone happy and all of the church's traditions intact is not.

An Attitude with an Approach 6) Lessons Learned

My Controversy-Driven Break Through

Let me attempt to apply the above principles to a controversial church matter that came up in our church. This was a time when it was impossible to keep everyone happy. It was impossible to keep everyone as friends. It was impossible to avoid the scrutiny of the judgmental onlookers. Heather was my son's teacher at the elementary school a few years ago. We were placed on a committee together for a school-related purpose and got to know each other fairly well. Her husband was angry and violent and for safety, it became necessary for him to leave the home. She was definitely searching spiritually, and as our relationship grew, she began to feel more comfortable asking for help and guidance. She started attending worship regularly. One night I received a phone call from her best friend, asking if I could come right away. Her estranged husband, and father of her fifth-grade daughter and ninth-grade son, had committed suicide. You know the question I was left with. "Will you do the funeral?" I'd be surprised if you didn't know my gut reaction. My gut reaction, which I kept in my gut was..."WE DON'T DO FUNERALS FOR SUICIDES!" Heather's husband had fallen into a deep depression and had been asked to leave his own home. I have some judges in my church that would all but walk out of the church if I agreed to this. But I knew the family well enough to know a few things. He was raised in a solid Christian home. His parents never tried to coerce me or suggest that I "owed" anyone a funeral. He had also been professionally diagnosed with bipolar disorder and had not been taking his medication for some time. His parents knew what they had taught him, and prayed that however dark his mind had become, that the faith in his heart was still there. Some of the texts that he sent in those last hours suggested strongly that he did.

Finally, I pondered my relationship with Heather. If I carelessly quoted my rule on suicide funerals, I would have turned my back on her when she needed the Gospel most.

Here's what I did, with her family's and our elders' support. I recognized that the general audience of this funeral would not assume that me presiding at a funeral implied a sure ticket to Heaven. I also knew that I couldn't judge that the suicide necessarily meant a sure ticket to Hell. Ultimately, we left the final judgment to Him who judges justly. I was able to apply Law and Gospel to attendees of the funeral, especially the family, who knew there were questions, and were okay with me leaving them as questions. No false hope. No complete lack of hope. Simply, pure Law and Gospel. I also had a privilege and obligation to teach the unhappy judges in our church. I explained the doctrinal and pastoral implications of what happened and why I did what I did. I am not a proponent of "the end justifies the means," and that is certainly not the point of this story. However, Heather needed God's nurturing and got it. She came to BIC and became a member. She also is one my biggest recruiters for weekend services and BICs. Her motive? She isn't trying to "pay me back" for helping her out with the funeral. She has come to understand the Gospel so deeply as a result of this difficult time and she is moved by the cross to bring others to it. Let me also point out that I have had to sadly turn down other funeral requests because the family was not in agreement with the preaching of clear Law and Gospel and/or the circumstances of the suicide were much different. The point is, you know the people, the circumstances, and the Word well enough to think. Don't just invoke a rule; think about all of the implications. Don't just be a friend; think about all of the implications. There is no "one-size-fits-all" application of Law and Gospel in any setting. Do we do suicide funerals? No, we don't. AND...yes, we do. When you find yourself in that situation, evaluate carefully, pray fervently, and please think.

Here is why this incident was such a breakthrough with me. Early in my ministry, I would have brainlessly defaulted to the Old School Legalist and just apologetically said no. Later, I would have flippantly said yes to this wonderful mission opportunity. This particular time I thought carefully, solicited advice, and acted with a combination of doctrinal integrity and a pastoral heart. My motive was not covering my tail. My motive was not keeping a friendship. My motive was love for the soul of this young lady and honor to Jesus who loved her more than I ever could. You may have noticed that I snuck "with our elders' support" in the paragraph above when I explained what I did with the funeral request. It's one of a couple last bits of advice I'd like to share as we wrap things up. Like brothers in the ministry, you have elders, hopefully ones that know the Word of God and wish to assist you and the congregation. Make use of them. Don't be a one-man show. Call them up. Ask questions. Ask for advice. Listen to their encouragement.

Comes a Time

There are times when, with a pastoral heart, I still need to drown the BFF:

- 1) I need to tell old Wilber that he cannot make a discipline case out of a 6th grade girl who helps her mother decorate the altar because "she hasn't been confirmed and has no business touching the Lord's altar."
- 2) I cannot just pretend I did not hear Loretta say, "I guess we just let anything go in this church," when an unwed pregnant teen walked by her after this distraught girl had spent weeks in counseling with me and her family and finally had the courage to come back to church.
- 3) It is certainly no fun walking a kind and patient woman through the mistaken notion that "God would want me to be happy" does not substantiate Biblical grounds for divorce. Emotionally, I understand where she is coming from. But, in love, she needs to know the truth. What God wants is for you to be saved. That often doesn't translate into happiness while we are here on earth. Ask Jesus about that.

Boy Scouts and Live-Ins Revisited

Now that I understand the importance of building relationships, I can very lovingly, yet pointedly, apply Law and Gospel to these common, but uncomfortable, situations. I do so in the BIC. These issues come up in the second half of the lessons, so they have built relationships with both God and me by this point. They have thoroughly studied both the demands and love of God. They have begun to trust me as someone who cares very much about what God's Word teaches and also has their best interest in mind. If, when addressing the issue of Boy Scouts, you begin by saying that our practice is to not allow joint fellowship with an opposing faith, they will look at you like you're from Mars and have just told them you would like to harvest their souls...or at least their organs. I have on file some quotations from the Boy Scout manual which make clear their position on work-righteousness and the anonymous nature by which they refer to God. When you share the information with them, sharing your concern for their faith, and recognizing that this information may be new to them, they are often willing to listen. Take your time, be humble and caring, and tell the truth. Be slow to make it an issue of membership.

When I encounter a couple that has been living together, the Sixth Commandment is the obvious place to teach the principles with love and conviction. Again, this very well may be the first time that this has come to their attention as anything other than an ancient church rule or their aging parents' even older tradition. It may even be the first time it has come to their attention at all. For you to be uncomfortable, even upset, with their sinful and clueless lifestyle, is okay. You should be uncomfortable. You know Scripture. You care what God thinks. It's your job to teach them the truth. Here's the hard part--how to teach them. Learn to be "comfortable" with being uncomfortable. If you lecture them too soon, they will tune you out. You are not, after all, their dad. I ask them for the opportunity to teach the class to them privately, or at least have a discussion with them privately after the class. I do not mask what I want to talk to them about, although I am kind in how I present it. Sometimes it's brand new and they are glad to have the opportunity to do the right thing. Sometimes they already knew, but they respect God now in a way they hadn't before and realize that something needs to be addressed.

In both of the two previous cases, let me repeat one of my favorite Professor Bivens quotes from earlier: *"Fellas, when you're looking for fruits of faith, you're not always going to get a Granny Smith. You've got to praise the Lord for the crabapples."* That means that they may not jump at the chance to live apart for your predetermined amount of time before you marry them. They may just set a wedding date, hopefully in the very near future. That's not terrible. The Boy Scout family may not yank their kid out of scouting the next day after their class with you, but they may attend meetings as parents and find out how many of the religious aspects of scouting are being taught to their kids. Hallelujah. To rephrase another memorable Bivens sentiment, patience and love trump swiftness and efficiency any day when dealing with real souls and real issues.

Concluding Remarks

This is the point when you realize that you just sat through more than 18 pages of this stuff and still don't have a list of what to do in every difficult situation. Excellent observation. The key to application of Law and Gospel is preparation and careful study of Law and Gospel. Know and love the principles of God's Word. Know your sheep, love them, and empathize with them. Use the tools God has provided. 2 Timothy 4:2 - ***"Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction."*** Make use of the support God provides. Be self aware of your attitudes and motives. But here's the thing. You still have to think. I have not done here what I have learned to never do when counseling others. Never tell them what to do. Let them answer that question. And so it is with you.

May God richly bless you as you sharpen your doctrinal integrity and join it with your pastoral heart, which you continually hone. After all, we are not looking to write theological masterpieces as much as we are striving to relate to and care for God's people. Do so kindly and confidently with the pure Word of God and a pastoral heart. May you be a blessing to the sheep you are privileged to shepherd.