

“OF THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL”
FORMULA OF CONCORD, ARTICLE V
With Practical Applications to our Ministry
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[Presented to the Hudson-Delaware, New England & Seaway Circuit Conference,
Frost Valley, New York, January 23, 2007]

Introduction

A number of years ago, it was necessary for me to pay a visit to a member of my congregation who needed the law proclaimed to him. This young man had begun to share an apartment with his girlfriend. When I arrived I was welcomed to speak with him, while the young woman remained behind closed doors. In the course of the conversation this man heard the law and how it condemned him for his lifestyle. He needed to hear that message of law to lead him to repentance before he could hear the comforting message of forgiveness in Christ. I had only been back to my office for half an hour when I received a phone call from “Pastor Shirley” wanting to discuss my visit with one of her members (the young lady involved). She was angry that I had “imposed my morality” on her member, who had apparently been listening through the door to our conversation. I will probably never know for sure whether Pastor Shirley was angry because *I was the one doing the imposing* or because *she had few morals* when it came to the 6th commandment. (I suspect it was some of each.) This young lady was presently sitting in the pastor’s office in tears because of my visit. I tried to explain that my conversation was with a member of my congregation for whom I was responsible, but that what her member had heard was also for her good. I don’t think the pastor was convinced.

I have thought since then how easy it would have been for me to dispense with the law as I spoke with my member. I could have simply reminded him, with a smile on my face, that he was a Christian, reminded him how that Jesus loved him and died for him, and then pleaded with him to repent of what he had done against Jesus and do the right thing. And I suppose that if I had been the one counseling a weeping woman who didn’t want to hear about her boyfriend moving out, I might have been tempted to soften the law and remind her that Jesus loved her too and that she would be more happy if she married rather than cohabited.

In other words, in dealing with either of those two people, a pastor could have ambled down the path of antinomianism and followed in the footsteps of Agricola and the Philippists. The problem however, in failing to proclaim the law, is that the law and gospel become confused, and ultimately the gospel is lost, to the spiritual and potentially eternal detriment of blood-bought souls. To put it as Bente does in his history, “The cocoon of antinomianism always bursts into antigospelism.”¹

The Formula of Concord, in Article V reminds us that we must exercise great care in applying God’s word. To state it as Paul did, a pastor is to be a workman “who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15). To do that we need to properly distinguish between law and gospel. Article V teaches this as it responds to the errors of the Antinomians. In this study we want to review the errors that were dividing the Lutherans and see how Article V dealt with them. And since the devil’s war on the gospel continues, we want to consider how we might apply the truths of this Article to our ministry in today’s world. We want the gospel to shine forth brightly in our preaching and teaching.

¹ F. Bente, “Historical Introductions to the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church,” *Concordia Triglotta*, ed. F. Bente, (St. Louis: CPH, 1921) 161 (Sec. 183)

Background for Article V – The Antinomian Controversy

There were two ways in which antinomianism appeared among the Lutherans in the 16th century, both of which led to a confusion of law and gospel and the corruption of the doctrine of justification. Before Luther died the teachings of Agricola were chiefly to blame. In brief he taught that contrition comes not through the law but only through the gospel. After the death of Luther the errors continued in the teachings of the Philippists (followers of Melancthon). They taught that the sin of unbelief is to be rebuked not by the law but by the gospel.² (A further error of the Antinomians, the rejection of the “third use” of the Law, is taken up in Article VI of the Formula.)

John Agricola (1492 – 1566) studied at Wittenberg where he became a close friend of Luther. He accompanied Luther and Melancthon to the Leipzig debate in 1519. Following that he became a teacher in the Latin school and pastor of the church in Eisleben. He was highly regarded as a gifted speaker.

As early as 1525 one can hear antinomian statements in Agricola’s *Annotations to the Gospel of St. Luke* where he wrote, “The Decalog belongs in the courthouse, not in the pulpit.”³ Pride seemed to play a role as well. When Melancthon was given a professor’s chair at Wittenberg in 1526, Agricola took it as a personal slight. In the following year he criticized Melancthon’s “Articles of Visitation” (“Instructions to the Visitors of the Churches of Saxony”). While Melancthon urged the pastors to boldly proclaim the law to lead uncaring people to repentance and to prepare them for the gospel, Agricola considered such teaching to be corrupt and supportive of the errors of Rome. His writings displayed contempt for the Old Testament and the Law.

It appeared that Luther settled the dispute. However, Agricola’s antinomian errors appeared again. After receiving an appointment at the University with the help of Luther, Agricola repaid his friend by secretly publishing statements against both Luther and Melancthon, accusing them of ruining pure doctrine. Agricola’s erroneous teachings about the law and the gospel are illustrated in the first thesis of his “Positions” of 1537, which states, “Repentance is to be taught not from the Decalog or from any law of Moses but from the violation of the Son through the Gospel.”⁴

Luther answered these attacks by a series of disputations against the Antinomians. The First Disputation was held December 18, 1537. Agricola vacillated back and forth, appearing to recant then return to his antinomian teachings, prompting a Second and Third Disputation. Following the Third Disputation, Agricola agreed to retract his position and even asked Luther to write the retraction. Luther did and published it in his letter, “Against the Antinomians”, in 1539.

In this letter, Luther acknowledged teaching that sinners are brought to repentance through the proclamation of the suffering of Christ, but showed that such a proclamation functions as law when it leads the sinner to “see the enormity of God’s wrath over sin and learn that there is no other remedy for this than the death of God’s Son.”⁵ Luther argues convincingly that antinomianism is, in the final analysis, an attack on Christ: “Whoever abolishes the law must simultaneously abolish sin...And if there is no sin, then Christ is nothing. Why should he die if there were no sin or law for which he must die? It is apparent from this that the devil’s purpose in this fanaticism is not to remove the law but to remove Christ, the fulfiller of the law.”⁶ After Agricola renewed his false teachings, Luther held a Fourth (and final) Disputation against the Antinomians. (It is no wonder Luther eventually went on to write six series of theses against the Antinomians.)

Following Luther’s death, Agricola attended the Diet at Augsburg in 1547. This diet was called following the defeat of the Smalcald league and with the aim of returning the Lutherans to obedience to the Pope. There Agricola collaborated with papal bishops Julius Pflug and Michael Helding in preparing the Augsburg Interim. The Interim was a capitulation to Rome and among other errors failed to proclaim

² The brief history of the controversy which follows is largely a condensation of the detailed account given by F. Bente on pages 161 through 172 of the Concordia Triglotta.

³ Bente 163 (Sec. 185)

⁴ Bente 169 (Sec. 193)

⁵ Martin Luther, “Against The Antinomians.” Luther’s Works, Vol. 47, ed. Franklin Sherman. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 110. This thought is also expressed in Article V of the Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, Triglotta 955.

⁶ *Ibid.*

justification *sola fide*. Thankfully it was rejected by faithful Lutherans, some of whom paid with their lives. But it is little wonder that Agricola was involved in its writing, given his confusion of law and gospel. Bente observes: “Essentially, his was the Roman doctrine,... Viewed from this angle, it occasions little surprise that Agricola consented to help formulate and introduce the Augsburg Interim, in which the essentials of Lutheranism were denied.”⁷

We can summarize: Agricola’s teaching destroyed the gospel by turning it into a preaching of repentance. His “gospel” became a teaching what man does, not what God does. Ironically, Agricola the Antinomian became in effect Agricola the Legalist!

Leaving Agricola, we turn briefly to the second form in which antinomianism appeared, in the teachings of the Philippists. Similar to Agricola’s error was their belief that the gospel (in the narrow sense as opposed to law) is a call to repentance. But the Philippists took their false stand by defending and perpetuating certain statements of Melancthon which were at best ambiguous and at worst actually reiterated, in part, the errors of Agricola.

In the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Melancthon had correctly taught that the gospel in the broad sense includes both repentance and forgiveness of sin. As the Formula of Concord later stated, this is a proper understanding. But following Luther’s death, Melancthon’s language was sufficiently unclear so as to draw fire from the “Gnesio-Lutheran” camp, led by Flacius. Bente cites one example: “When Melancthon, during another disputation, 1556, declared: The ministry of the Gospel ‘rebukes the other sins which the Law shows, as well as the saddest of sins which is revealed by the Gospel, viz., that the world ignores and despises the Son of God,’ Flacius considered it his plain duty to register a public protest.”⁸

This statement of Christopher Pezel captures the later antinomianism of the Philippists: “The Gospel in the strict sense contains the sternest threatening and reproves sin, namely, the sin of unbelief, of refusing to know the Son, of despising the anger of God, and finally, of despair.”⁹ Yet another of the Philippist party, Paul Crell, expressed the same thought, “Since the greatest and chief sin is revealed, reproved, and condemned only by the Gospel, it is strictly speaking, the Gospel *alone* which is really and truly the preaching that calls for repentance or conversion in the true and proper sense.”¹⁰

The Philippists tried to make the gospel, in its narrow sense, do what the law must do, that is, condemn sin and threaten. Article V of the Formula of Concord will address this error and speak of how the sin of unbelief is condemned.

Having reviewed the errors of the Antinomians, we will now look at the theology of the Formula of Concord, Article V to see how the Concordists dealt with those errors and defended the correct teaching of the Holy Scriptures.

The Scriptural Teaching of the Formula of Concord, Article V

Paragraphs 1 and 2 form an introduction to the article.¹¹ The Concordists begin on a positive note in paragraph 1, declaring that proper distinction between the law and gospel will serve the purpose of rightly dividing the word of God. “The distinction between the Law and the Gospel is a special brilliant light, which serves to the end that God’s Word may be rightly divided, and the Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles may be properly explained and understood,...”¹² At the same time they continue, “... we must guard it with especial care, in order that these two doctrines may not be mingled with one another, or a law be made out of the Gospel...”¹³ When the law and the gospel are not properly distinguished, the gospel is turned into law. In

⁷ Bente 169 (Sec. 193).

⁸ Bente 172 (Sec. 195).

⁹ *Adversus Wigandum* (Against Wigand), quoted in C. F. W. Walther, *Twenty-Sixth Evening Lecture, The Proper Distinction Between Law And Gospel* (St. Louis: CPH, 1928) 282.

¹⁰ Quoted in Walther 283.

¹¹ References to the paragraphs in Article V are to the Thorough Declaration unless otherwise indicated.

¹² *Concordia Triglotta*, ed. F. Bente, (St. Louis: CPH, 1921) 951.1.

¹³ *Ibid.*

other words, the gospel loses and the law wins. The result is that precious souls are then robbed of the gospel comfort they need. This is what was happening in the antinomian errors.

Paragraph 2 shows us how the writers understood the controversy which had been troubling the church of the Reformation. Without yet using the name “antinomian”, they identify the error: “One side asserted that the Gospel is properly not only a preaching of grace, but at the same time also a preaching of repentance, which rebukes the greatest sin, namely, unbelief.”¹⁴

Having stated the problem, the article will go on to address it, first using the word of God and then adding support from the earlier Confessions.

In paragraphs 3 through 9, the Formula takes up a discussion of the words which were under consideration in the controversy. These words must be understood correctly, according to their usage in Scripture, or the law and gospel will be confused.

The authors show first that the word “gospel” is used two ways in the Scriptures. In its broad sense, it includes the entire teaching of Christ, both the preaching of law and God’s grace, both repentance and forgiveness. It is so used in Mark 1:1, “The beginning of the Gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” “And shortly afterwards the chief heads are stated: Repentance and forgiveness of sins.”¹⁵ So the Formula concludes, in paragraph 5, “And in this sense the *generalis definitio*, that is, the description of the word *Gospel*, when employed in a wide sense and without the proper distinction between the Law and the Gospel is correct, when it is said that the Gospel is a preaching of repentance and the remission of sins.”¹⁶

But the word “gospel” is also used in a narrow sense in the Holy Scriptures. Cited as an example is Mark 1:15, “‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!’” Here the gospel is used in its narrow sense, only the sweet, joyful message which brings comfort to the penitent sinner.¹⁷

Similarly, the authors point out, the word “repent” has both a broad and narrow use in the Bible. Luke 15:7 gives an example of the broad use: “I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents...” And the authors point us back to Mark 1:15 to see how the word “repent” is used in its narrow sense. So the Concordists conclude, “...where repentance and faith in Christ,... or repentance and remission of sins, ...are mentioned as distinct, to repent means nothing else than truly to acknowledge sins, to be heartily sorry for them, and to desist from them. This knowledge comes from the Law.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Triglotta 952.2. It could be noted that this definition reflects more closely the terminology of the Philippists – while as a whole, Article V deals with the errors of Agricola as well.

¹⁵ Triglotta 953.4. This is apparently a reference to Mark 1:4, “And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

¹⁶ Triglotta 953.5.

¹⁷ A Questionable Scripture Reference? This discussion of the Scripture’s use of “gospel” in its broad and narrow sense is summarized in the Epitome, paragraph 5. There the German original cites “Mark.1” as a place where the term “gospel” is to be understood as “the entire doctrine of Christ”: “... (in welchem verstande es denn Mark.1, Act. 20 gebraucht),...”. Both the English and Latin translations in the Triglotta add verse references to the chapters, Mark 1:15 and Acts 20:21. These, however, don’t seem to be the best verses to cite. Acts 20:21 does not use *εὐαγγέλιον* and Mark 1:15, “repent and believe the good news (*εὐαγγέλιον*)” is actually cited by the Thorough Declaration, paragraph 6, to illustrate the narrow use of “gospel”. (In this last reference, the specific verse is not in doubt even in the German, since the verse is actually quoted.) A better passage to cite for the broad sense of “gospel” would be Mark 1:1. Furthermore, in addition to adding specific verse references, the English texts of the Formula contain some variations in the verses cited. A study of textual variations in the translation and transmission of the Confessions cannot be taken up here. But an observation may be in place concerning the nature and scope of our subscription to the Confessions. Every candidate for the public ministry in our church is taught that he is to subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions not *insofar as* (quatenus), but *because* (quia) they are a correct exposition of the Bible’s doctrine. We understand this to mean that we are accepting, in an unqualified fashion, the doctrine of the Confessions. We are not pledging ourselves, however, to every statement in the realm of history or science, or to every exegetical comment or the choice of proof passages. The Formula’s doctrine regarding the law and gospel, their meaning, their use and the distinction between them is unquestionably the Bible’s doctrine, and therefore is our confession. (For a fuller treatment of the subject of subscription to the Confessions, refer to Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. III, 354-358)

¹⁸ Triglotta 953-954.8-9.

It should be noted that in speaking of the gospel in its broad and narrow meanings, the Formula was repeating what Melancthon had some years earlier written in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XII: “The sum of the preaching of the Gospel is this, namely, to convict of sin, and to offer for Christ’s sake the remission of sins and righteousness,...”¹⁹ But in the same Article XII, Melancthon distinguished the gospel in the narrow sense from the law in its narrow sense: “Into these two works all Scripture has been distributed. The one part is the Law, which shows, reproves, and condemns sins. The other part is the Gospel, the promise of grace bestowed in Christ.”²⁰ The point the authors want to drive home is this: when the word “**gospel**” is being used in its **broad sense** and not in distinction from the law, it is correct to speak of it as the proclamation of **repentance and forgiveness**. The Lutheran Confessions before the Formula of Concord had done so. But this is entirely different from the **Antinomian** position which said that the gospel, even in its **narrow sense**, is not only a **preaching** of grace, but also of reproof and **repentance** (narrow sense) and that repentance is produced not by the law but by the gospel only.

After showing how far apart the law and gospel are from each other in their narrow sense, Article V of the Formula continues in paragraphs 9 through 11 to explain that they nevertheless cannot be properly taught alone (*nuda*), one without the other. If the law is taught to show a person his sins, but is never followed by the gospel, one of two problems will result. Either he will become proud because he believes he is keeping the law, or he will fall into despair because he knows he can’t fulfill its demands. On the other hand, the gospel has its desired effect only when it is proclaimed to hearts which have first been convicted of their guilt by the law. “For the Gospel proclaims the forgiveness of sins, not to coarse and secure hearts, but to the bruised or penitent.”²¹ Therefore it is necessary that the Holy Spirit convict the world of sin “through the office of the law”²² before he does his work of comforting.

Next the authors quote Luther, from his exposition of the Gospel for the Fifth Sunday after Trinity. Here Dr. Luther offers a superb and simple way of determining when the Scriptures are speaking the law or the gospel to us: “Anything that preaches concerning our sins and God’s wrath, let it be done how or when it will, that is all a preaching of the Law. Again, the Gospel is such a preaching as shows and gives nothing else than grace and forgiveness in Christ.”²³ What a wonderful and practical definition this is! Whether a word of God is law or gospel is determined by what is actually being said and the purpose it has in the hearer’s soul. When the sinner before us is secure and full of pride he must be warned by the demands of God which say “Do!!!”, expose his failure to do, and threaten God’s wrath. When the sinner before us is convicted of his errors, filled with sorrow and distress over them and worried about his place with God, the law becomes silent and the gospel proclaims “Done!!!”, and delivers nothing but grace and forgiveness.

And what about the proclamation of Jesus’ suffering and death for our sins? Usually we would speak of this as a statement of the gospel. Yet Luther says it may take on the function of the law in a powerful way. “Yea, what more forcible, more terrible declaration and preaching of God’s wrath against sin is there than just the suffering and death of Christ, His Son? But as long as all this preaches God’s wrath and terrifies men, it is not yet the preaching of the Gospel nor Christ’s own preaching, but that of Moses and the Law against the impenitent.”²⁴ We can proclaim the cross in such a way as to show our congregation or Bible class students what a terrible thing their sin is. “Look at the terror, the blood, the agony and all that was suffered by Christ because you sinned! Surely God is angry with sin!” But if we stop there, we have really only led them to Moses, not to Jesus.

The authors want us to understand that once sin and the wrath of God are revealed and there is repentance on the part of the sinner, the gospel must be added. In paragraphs 14 and 15, they quote the Smalcald Articles and the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, to reinforce the principle that “To a true and

¹⁹ Triglotta 259.29.

²⁰ Triglotta 265.55.

²¹ Triglotta 955.9.

²² Triglotta 955.11.

²³ Triglotta 955.12.

²⁴ Triglotta 955-957,12.

salutary repentance the preaching of the Law alone is not sufficient, but the Gospel should be added thereto. Therefore the two doctrines belong together, and should also be urged by the side of each other.”²⁵

“But”, the authors continue, when they are taught alongside each other this must be done, “*in a definite order and with a proper distinction;...*”²⁶ This Agricola and the Philippists did not do. So it is here that the Formula condemns the Antinomians by name. “And the Antinomians or assailants of the Law are justly condemned, who abolish the preaching of the Law from the Church, and wish sins to be reprovved, and repentance and sorrow to be taught, not from the Law, but from the Gospel.”²⁷

Paragraphs 17-22 restate and elaborate on what is to be understood by the words “law” and “gospel”, in their narrow sense.

In paragraphs 17 and 19 the writers again specifically address the error of the Philippists who said that the greatest sin of unbelief is to be rebuked only by the gospel. “Everything that reproves sin is and belongs to the law, whose peculiar office it is to reprove sins and to lead to the knowledge of sins,... and as unbelief is the root and well-spring of all reprehensible sins...the law reproves unbelief also.”²⁸ To this same point Walther comments, “No; it is the Law that reproves unbelief. Where? In the First Commandment, which signifies that ‘we are to fear, love and trust in God above all things.’ Unbelief, no matter in what relation it is viewed, is forbidden in the first Commandment.”²⁹

Note how the authors “pull no punches” in this section when speaking of man’s sins and the threats of the law. This was a robust and unflinching rebuttal of those who didn’t want to teach it. “...it threatens its transgressors with God’s wrath and temporal and eternal punishments³⁰ ... man has not kept the Law of God, but transgressed it, his corrupt nature, thoughts, words, and works fighting against it, for which reason he is under God’s wrath, death, all temporal calamities, and the punishment of hell-fire,...”^{31,32}

In explaining the content of the Gospel the writers point us to Christ alone as the one who can bring us the comfort of forgiveness. They cite Scriptures which teach us how we are justified in God’s sight: “[Christ] was delivered for our offenses, and was raised again for our justification. Whose obedience is counted to us for righteousness before God’s strict tribunal.”³³ In this way we are reminded that at the very center of the distinction between law and gospel is the doctrine of justification. If the Gospel is turned into law the true teaching of the Gospel is lost. And if the teaching of the Gospel is lost, so is the doctrine of justification. We recall that this is what happened in the case of Agricola.

As the article nears its close, the authors draw conclusions about the way messengers of God need to proceed in proclaiming God’s law and gospel. “These two doctrines, we believe and confess, should ever and ever be diligently inculcated in the Church of God even to the end of the world, although with the proper distinction.”³⁴ The writers point out that this is nothing new, for the patriarchs and their descendants reminded themselves of how man transgressed God’s laws and was plunged into death and eternal damnation, but then comforted themselves with the promise of the woman’s seed who would bring salvation. So also the apostle Paul “thoroughly and forcibly”³⁵ upheld the distinction between the law and the gospel in 2 Corinthians 3:7 ff.

²⁵ Triglotta 957.15

²⁶ *Ibid.* emphasis mine.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Triglotta 957.17.

²⁹ Walther 282.

³⁰ Triglotta 957.17.

³¹ Triglotta 957-959.20.

³² Here the Formula is stressing the chief function of the law which earlier Confessions taught, namely to lead the sinner to contrition (repentance in the narrow sense). Recall the statement of the Augsburg Confession. XII, “Repentance consists properly of these two parts: One is contrition, that is, *terrors smiting the conscience through the knowledge of sin;...*” In the Smalcald Articles Luther writes, “And in Christians this repentance continues until death, because, through the entire life it contends with sin remaining in the flesh, as Paul, Rom. 7, 14-25, [shows] testifies that he *wars with the law in his members*, etc. (Triglotta. 489.40)” Luther’s statement emphasizes that even the Christian still needs to hear the warnings and threats of the law.

³³ Triglotta 959.22.

³⁴ Triglotta 961.24.

³⁵ Triglotta 261.26.

This we must continue to do. In our generation, Dr. Siegbert Becker put it succinctly and memorably, “We will teach both Law and Gospel side by side and yet keep them as far apart as heaven and earth.”³⁶

Article V of the Formula closes with both an encouragement to maintain the distinction between the law and gospel and a warning to avoid anything that would confuse them. Such confusion it says would obscure Christ and his comfort, would turn the gospel into a law and reopen the door to the Papacy. The Epitome in its *Negativa* also warns specifically against opening the door to the Papacy. This warning not to subvert the gospel by transforming it into a moral norm was very appropriate considering the decrees issued by Rome at the Council of Trent shortly after Luther’s death:

If any one saith, that Christ Jesus was given of God to men, as a redeemer in whom to trust, and not also as a *legislator* whom to obey; let him be anathema.³⁷ “The sacred and holy, ecumenical, and general Synod of Trent ...keeping this always in view, that, errors being removed, the purity itself of the Gospel be preserved in the Church; which (Gospel), before promised through the prophets in the holy Scriptures, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, first promulgated with His own mouth, and then commanded to be preached by His Apostles to every creature, as the fountain of all, both saving truth, and *moral discipline*;³⁸ ...

The authors finally leave us with the statement: “It is, therefore, dangerous and wrong to convert the Gospel, properly so called, as distinguished from the Law, into a preaching of repentance or reproof [a preaching of repentance, reproofing sin].”³⁹

Practical Applications

Article V of the Formula of Concord, Of the Law and the Gospel, is a great help not only in understanding the errors of the past but also in seeing and guarding against their modern manifestations. Let’s consider some ways the law and gospel are still confused and antinomian errors continue. Let’s strive to avoid them as we carefully handle the law and gospel in our preaching and teaching.⁴⁰

The Roman Catholic Church continues the errors warned against in Article V, by confusing the law and gospel. It still teaches (as it did at Trent) that Christ is the new Moses, a lawgiver, and teaches a gospel that has been turned into law. The following statements come from the glossary to the Catechism of the Catholic Church: “The Gospel is handed on in the apostolic tradition of the Church as the source of all-saving truth and *moral discipline*. As lawgiver, Moses was a type of Christ, the lawgiver of the New Law.”⁴¹

The Catechism of the Catholic Church itself contains ten paragraphs under the subject heading: “The New Law or the Law of the Gospel.” It begins:

The New Law or the Law of the Gospel is the perfection here on earth of the divine law, natural and revealed. It is the work of Christ and is expressed particularly in the Sermon on the Mount. It is also the work of the Holy Spirit and through him it becomes the interior law of charity: "I will establish a New Covenant with the house of Israel. . . . I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people."⁴²

What was Jesus expressing in the Sermon on the Mount according to Rome?

³⁶ Siegbert Becker, , *The Use of Law and Gospel in Motivation for Christian Living*, A paper presented to the Arizona-California Teachers’ Conference, 8 Nov, 1974, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File.

³⁷ Sixth Session, Decree on Justification, Canon XXI, January 13, 1547, The Canons And Decrees Of The Sacred And Oecumenical Council Of Trent, ed. and trans. J. Waterworth (London: Dolman, 1848) emphasis mine.

³⁸ , Fourth Session, Decree Concerning the Canonical Scriptures, April 8, 1546, The Canons And Decrees Of Trent,

³⁹ Triglotta 961.27.

⁴⁰ For the sake of clarity, the rest of this paper will employ the terms “law” and “gospel” in their narrow sense unless otherwise indicated.

⁴¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops – *Office of the Catechism*: <<http://www.usccb.org/catechism/text/glossary.htm#g>>

⁴² Catechism of the Catholic Church, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, (Ligiori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1994) 477 (Sec. 1965)

We are gathered here on this Scottish hillside to celebrate Mass. Are we not like those first disciples and followers who sat at the feet of Jesus on the hillside near Capernaum? *What did Jesus teach them?* What does our divine Master wish to teach us, each and every one of us, today? With words simple and clear, Jesus outlined *the requirements for admission to his heavenly Kingdom*. . . . To aim for the Kingdom requires a radical change in outlook, in mentality, in behaviour, in relations with others. Just as the Law revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai, so, in this Sermon on the Mount, *Jesus, the new Lawgiver, offers to all mankind a new way of life, a charter of Christian life.*⁴³

It goes without saying that we confuse law and gospel if we fall into such gross moralizing. Preaching and teaching the full counsel of God means that we will instruct people about living a new life as followers of Christ. But the blatant errors of Rome are a reminder that encouragements to live a new life must be motivated by the gospel alone. That means there must be clear presentation of the gospel to begin with. It would not be wise to assume that our audience will “supply” that gospel on their own if it is left out of our teaching. Clearly presenting the gospel will help ensure that other motives than the gospel are not stated or implied. The motive for practicing good stewardship is not that we each do our duty to keep the church (or synod) out of red ink. The motive for being regular in attendance at church or Bible class is not so that we might be held up as a model of obedience to the third commandment or any other. Rather “Christ’s love compels us” (2 Corinthians 5:15) to do all things to thank and praise him who redeemed us. Furthermore, we don’t want to shortchange justification in a rush to get to sanctification and give the flesh an opportunity to think that sanctification is something we can accomplish by our own power. The gospel is not the guide or norm for the Christian living, but it must always be the motive and source of power.

In respect to proclaiming sanctification, Dr. Siegbert Becker makes an interesting observation:

The same Holy Spirit who works in our hearts that faith which knows what Jesus Christ has done for me, which knows that He loved me and gave Himself for me, will also waken in our hearts a responsive love for Him who first loved us. Those who have been down the Damascus road with the apostle Paul will also know what he meant when he wrote, “the love of Christ constraineth us.” And when we know and understand this, we will be done once and for all with the nonsense which says that we preach too much justification and not enough sanctification Those two can never be preached at each other’s expense They complement each other. Love for Christ is aroused through the contemplation of the love of Christ.”⁴⁴

Perhaps more subtle than Rome’s errors, but also dangerous, is the confusion of law and gospel that is present in today’s Evangelical/Reformed churches and writings. There we see the tendency to add human works to the gospel, which has the effect of turning it into a new law.

Consider this invitation issued by the very popular Promise Keeper’s movement: “Are You Sure You’re a Christian? You need to do five things to become a part of God’s family. 1. Admit your spiritual need.... 2. Repent.... 3. Believe that Jesus Christ died for you... 4. Receive, through prayer, Jesus Christ into your heart and life. Pray: ...Dear Lord Jesus, ...Right now, I turn from my sins and open the door of my heart and life. I receive You as my personal Lord and Savior. 5. Then tell a believing friend and a pastor about your commitment.”⁴⁵ We notice that even after you believe Jesus died for you (step 3), you must still do something before you can be in God’s family. You must add your commitment to what Jesus did.

In Evangelical/Reformed churches there is often such a pronounced emphasis on the sanctified life that justification is overshadowed. Craig Parton was involved for years in Campus Crusade for Christ and The

⁴³ John Paul II. “Pastoral Visit To Great Britain, Holy Mass In Bellahouston Park, *Homily*.” The Holy Father- Homilies. 1982. Vatican, The Holy See. 18 Jan. 2007. <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/homilies/1982/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19820601_glasgow_en.html> emphasis mine

⁴⁴ Siegbert W. Becker,(1974, November 8). The Use Of Law And Gospel, In Motivation For Christian Living, (Presented to the Arizona-California Teachers’ Conference) Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File.

⁴⁵ Randy Phillips, “Seize the Moment”. *Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper*. (Colorado Springs, CO: Focus On The Family Publishing, 1994) 10. “Are You Sure You’re a Christian?” is adapted from Greg Laurie, *New Believer’s Growth Book* (Riverside, Calif.: Harvest Ministries, 1985) 8

Navigators Christian Fellowship, but eventually left and became a Lutheran. He wrote about the lack of doctrinal clarity in the churches he attended and its effect on him:

I experienced what happens when Law and Gospel are not understood and thus not distinguished. My Christian life, truth begun in grace, was now being “perfected” on the treadmill of the Law. My pastors did not end their sermons by demanding that I recite the rosary or visit Lourdes that week in order to unleash God’s power; instead, I was told to yield more, pray more, care about unbelievers more, read the Bible more, get involved with the church more, and love my wife and kids more. ...My Christian life had some to center around my life, my obedience, my yielding, my Bible verse memorization, my prayers, my zeal, my witnessing, and my sermon application. I had advanced beyond the need to hear the cross preached to me anymore. Of course, we all knew Jesus had died for our sins, and none of us would ever argue that we were trying to “merit” salvation. But something had changed. God was a Father all right, but a painfully demanding one. I was supposed to show that I had cleaned up my life and was at least grateful for all the gifts that had been bestowed. What had my Evangelical training done to me? The Gospel was critical for me at the beginning, critical to now share with others, and still critical to get me to heaven, but it was of little other value. The “evangel” in Evangelicalism was missing. My Evangelical training had me on a treadmill of merit. My “solid Bible training” was killing me.⁴⁶ ... As soon as I believed the Gospel, however, I quickly heard the list of jobs for me to do... This rhythm of directing me immediately back to works after hearing the Gospel and the forgiveness of sins (i.e. a rhythm of Law-Gospel-Law) was my daily diet received from Evangelicalism’s best pulpits and conference centers. Ironically, I later learned that this is the same rhythm found in Roman Catholic theology.⁴⁷ ...For both Rome and Wesley the doctrine of sanctification had swallowed up the doctrine of justification.⁴⁸

It goes without saying that we would be confusing the law and gospel if we told people to trust in a decision they made rather than God’s grace which redeemed them and converted them, or if we dealt with members as if they didn’t need to hear much gospel anymore. Still the examples mentioned above teach us to be careful that we never add conditions to the gospel. Even sincere Christians, can be plagued by the worry that *if* their faith isn’t strong enough, or *if* they haven’t yet overcome certain sinful habits, or *if* they aren’t sorry enough for their transgressions, they cannot be sure God’s love will save them. We don’t want to “confirm their weakness” by making the gospel say, “God will forgive you *when* you first are sorry for your sins” or “God will save you *if* you believe”⁴⁹ or “God forgives you this time, but you’re on dangerous ground. You had better be sure you don’t fall back into that sin again.” This could leave our listeners with the impression that there is something they still must DO before they can be certain of God’s forgiveness. And since the gospel is all about and only about what Jesus has DONE for us, adding conditions to it means turning it into the Law, “and thus Christians are deprived of the true comfort which they have in the Gospel against the terrors of the Law.”⁵⁰

Rather than prompting troubled sheep to look at their own faith, feelings or personal record, we can instead point them to their Shepherd, his cross and empty tomb. We can remind them they are not saved because they have a great faith, but because they have a great Savior.

⁴⁶ Craig A. Parton, The Defense Never Rests. (St. Louis, Mo: Concordia Publishing House, 2003) 18

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 17.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 23.

⁴⁹ It is true that the apostles employ the conditional particle in verses which present Gospel promises. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom 10:9). Grammatically speaking, the sentences are conditional. But they are gospel invitations. And to properly understand their meaning we must remember the relation of the gospel to faith and faith to the gospel. The gospel has the power to create faith, but faith does not have the power to create the gospel, or to make the gospel true. It already is true, whether we believe it or not. It speaks of a forgiveness already purchased by Jesus and declared to the whole world. Again the gospel invitation has the power to create faith, but faith simply receives the blessing offered and given. And it receives it only because the Holy Spirit turns us from unbelief. All this makes it clear that the “if” in these passages is not demanding faith as a human contribution I must make before my forgiveness is a fact. It is simply describing the way the gift is received. Pieper speaks of the conditional statements in Scripture which are evangelism pronouncements and cites earlier dogmatists’ comments on “the particle if.” Christian Dogmatics. Vol. II. 35-36.

⁵⁰ Triglotta, 961.27.

One of the ironic things about the confusion of law and gospel is that those who add requirements to the gospel, or emphasize works to the point of obscuring it, are often the very ones who have not properly taught the law to begin with (Antinomians). Or, to view it from the other direction, those who don't want to proclaim the law "as law" end up adding it on to the gospel. Henry Hamann pictures it this way: "When the Law is thrown out of one window it comes back through another – by a wrong definition of the Gospel."⁵¹ Throwing the law out-- this is the antinomian side of the problem.

Where are the Antinomians today? I don't know if there are any who would claim to follow Agricola by name. But some certainly seem to have learned from him.

Joel Osteen is senior pastor of Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, identified by some as America's largest and fastest growing congregation. His messages are heard by a reported 30,000 weekly attendees, as well as national and international television network audiences. His book, Your Best Life Now - 7 Steps To Living At Your Full Potential, catapulted to the top of the bestseller lists. More than 3.7 million copies have been sold and related projects, including a calendar, study guide, and journal have sold hundreds of thousands of units. It is hard to deny his influence on the modern American religious scene. So, let's consider how Osteen addresses the matter of the Law of God and our sins against it. In Part 2 (the second "Step") of this bestseller we find a chapter titled: "Who Do You Think You Are?" Osteen tells us

God wants us to have healthy, positive self-images, to see ourselves as priceless treasures. He wants us to feel good about ourselves. God knows we're not perfect, that we have faults and weaknesses; that we all make mistakes. But the good news is, God loves us anyway. He created us in His image, and He is continually shaping us, confirming us to His character, helping us to become more like the person He is.His love for you is based on what you are, not on what you do....He regards you as a strong, courageous, successful, overcoming person.⁵²

This statement is typical of a book which speaks about man's mistakes, mediocrity, inadequacy, insecurity, weaknesses, wounds, disappointments, bitterness, resentment, shortcomings, poor self image, etc., but rarely if ever uses the word "sin." And what are the consequences if these problems remain in our lives? Osteen says, "God doesn't bless mediocrity. He blesses excellence."⁵³ "If you're having to stretch the truth, that is deceit, and God won't bless that.... God wants us to be people of excellence and integrity. If you don't have integrity, you will never reach your highest potential.You'll never have lasting prosperity if you don't first have integrity....You'll never see the fullness of God's favor."⁵⁴ To sum it up: sin isn't presented as your rebellion against God that damns and from which you need a Savior. Sin (we'll call it that even if Osteen doesn't.) merely puts roadblocks in your path to the success God wants you to enjoy – and it's usually success in earthly terms.

What lies behind this failure to present the law and its consequences as the Bible does? In an interview conducted in 2004, Osteen stated " My thing is this: the Bible says it's the goodness of God that leads people to repentance. That's right out of the Bible. I just don't believe in condemning people and being judgmental. That maybe can turn some people around, but I believe in just speaking the truth and letting them know they have good things in store."⁵⁵ Since Osteen uses the phrase "goodness of God" in contrast with "condemning people," we can understand him to mean the same thing as "gospel" in the narrow sense. According to Osteen, the gospel leads people to repentance.

⁵¹ Henry Hamann, "Law and Gospel". In *A Contemporary Look At The Formula Of Concord*. Ed. Robert Preus, Wilbert Rosin (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1978) 186.

Becker makes much the same point in the paper previously cited. So does Professor John Brug in his Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly article, "Scylla And Charybdis, Forward to Volume 103". (Winter 2006) 9: "The antinomian nullifies the gospel by converting it into a law."

⁵² Joel Osteen, Your Best Life Now – 7 Steps To Living At Your Full Potential. (New York: Warner Faith, 2004) 57-58

⁵³ *Ibid.* 282

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 287-288

⁵⁵ Joel Osteen. Interview. 15 Dec. 2004. FaithfulReader. 19 Jan. 2007. <<http://www.faithfulreader.com/authors/au-osteen-joel.asp>>

But, as history has shown us, when the gospel is asked to do what the law was intended for, it doesn't remain the Gospel for long. According to Osteen, how can we be sure we have those "good things in store" with God?

God is keeping a record of every good deed you've ever done. He is keeping a record of every seed you've ever sown. You may think it went unnoticed, but God saw it. And....Your generous gifts will come back to you. ... God is keeping those records. ... In your time of need, *because of your generosity*, God will move heaven and earth to make sure you are taken care of."⁵⁶ ... Remember, *if you obey God* and are willing to trust Him, you will have the best this life has to offer—and more!⁵⁷

As another example, of failing to proclaim the Law and its consequences clearly, consider again the teaching of Promise Keepers. In the book cited above, The Seven Promises of A Promise Keeper, we find "law-type" statements presented in the form of seven commitments (promises) that a godly man is urged to make (to marriage, church, moral purity, etc.) because "There's no commitment to change when men have a comfortable Christianity that makes no demands....we must admit that promises have been broken....And we are out of step with God."⁵⁸ It sounds like the law might be allowed to do its work, but in the next paragraph we read: "These promises are not designed as a new list of commandments to remind us of how badly we're doing....Rather, they are meant to guide us toward the life of Christ and to transform us within."⁵⁹ To be fair, Seven Promises does contain some statements about man being lost in sin, and some about man being saved by God's love. I found these mostly in the last chapter and mostly where the author simply quoted the Bible. But overall, what passes for law and gospel is weak and confused. The dominant thought seems to be: "Commit yourself to Jesus, and in the power of your promise you can live free from the power of sin."

In each of these illustrations we see a modern version of what the antinomians taught. The law is not allowed to speak as it should – to proclaim God's wrath against those who rebel, to crush the sinful nature, to destroy all human paths to God's favor and prepare the sinner for the healing of the Gospel.

Once more we hear from Craig Parton, a person who lived under this lack of law and describes the effect it had upon him:

A good barometer of a church is what it does with Good Friday. The average American Evangelical is taught to ignore Good Friday and to get to Sunday and the joy of the resurrection and more important, to victory and living the Christian life. I was yearning for an honest Good Friday. My soul needed talk of sin, denial, man's hatred of God, the cross, suffering, judgment, wrath, blood and death – all very anti-California themes, And by definition, therefore, they are also very anti-Evangelicalism themes. For all the moralism in Evangelicalism, what I yearned for was a proclamation of real Law, that I might then hear the real Gospel.⁶⁰

Who can miss seeing why this man needed to hear the Law? When there is no real law, there is no real gospel either.

It goes without saying that to omit the law completely, or to expect repentance to come from the gospel confuses the law and gospel. We aren't likely to become overtly antinomian. But could we be in danger of practicing what Professor John Brug called a "practical or virtual antinomianism"?⁶¹ Are we subtly influenced by our world to be satisfied with our handling of God's word even when the law is minimized or given scant mention in our preaching and teaching? Are we tempted to talk *about* the law but not let the law talk *about us* and where we would stand with God if he kept score? Or, will we proclaim the law so that we and our hearers

⁵⁶ Osteen. 262.

⁵⁷ Osteen. 306. emphasis mine.

⁵⁸ Philipps 8.

⁵⁹ Philipps 9.

⁶⁰ Parton 33.

⁶¹ John Brug. "Scylla and Charybdis." Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly. Vol. 103:1. (2006): 6

recognize our rebellion and then, reeling from its threats, are prepared to hear of our Redeemer? That is the purpose of the law about which Article V was chiefly concerned, and the concern continues.⁶²

Consider the following Bible passages and what God says in them about us and our sin. Each pair suggests something about what it means to proclaim the law properly to lead people to repentance. This is the “mirror” function of the law. Conversely, each pair suggests how we might fail to use the law as God intends. When we handle it properly, “This law threatens its transgressors with God’s wrath and temporal and eternal punishments”⁶³ so that they may be “brought to a knowledge of their sins and to repentance.”⁶⁴ As you hear God’s voice speak to you, imagine how you will speak his law for him to the youth who sit in your Bible class or the worshippers in front of your pulpit.

Mark 7:21-22, For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'

Romans 7:18, I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.

- *We use the law properly when we show how sin has corrupted our **hearts**.*
- *We don't use the law properly if we talk of sin **only** as **outward sinful actions**.*

Genesis 39:9, My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?"

Exodus 16:2,8, In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron...he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we? You are not grumbling against us, but against the LORD."

- *We use the law properly when we show that our sin is **against God**.*
- *We don't use the law properly if we **only** talk about sin as **breaking commandments**.*

Psalms 5:5, The arrogant cannot stand in your presence; you hate all who do wrong.

Romans 1:18, The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.

- *We use the law properly when we say that sin arouses **God's anger against sin and the sinner**.*
- *We don't use the law properly if we talk **only** about **the trouble it causes in human relationships**.*

Galatians 3:10, All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law."

Isaiah 64:6, All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.

- *We use the law properly when we show that there is no way for even the "**best**" **Christian** to justify himself.*
- *We don't use the law properly if we speak **only** about the "**terrible sinners out there in the world**."*

2 Thessalonians 1:9, They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.

Matthew 13:49-50, This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

⁶² Spend just five minutes surfing our WELS.net Q & A web posts under “Law and Gospel” and you will see that the question of how and to what extent the law applies also to the Christian is still very much alive.

⁶³ Triglotta. 957.17

⁶⁴ Triglotta.961.24

- *We use the law properly when we show that every sinner deserves **eternal punishment**.*
- *We don't use the law properly if we refer to **only earthly consequences** for sin.*

Psalm 119:120, You reject all who stray from your decrees, for their deceitfulness is in vain. My flesh trembles in fear of you; I stand in awe of your laws.

Jeremiah 1:9-10, Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "Now, I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant."

- *We use the law properly when we allow its threats to bring **an admission of guilt and fear** from the sinner.*
- *We don't use the law properly if we speak of it **only as a guide to follow or a power to transform our life on earth**.*

1 Timothy 1:15, Here is a trustworthy saying...Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—**of whom I am the worst**.

Isaiah 6:5, "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.

- *We use the law most effectively when we have **first let it speak to us**.*
- *We find it harder to apply to others if we **don't let it first speak to us**.*

We live in world which doesn't want to hear of sin and its accountability to God. The law is offensive. To the extent that we and our members still have the sinful flesh clinging to us, there is a part of us that doesn't want to hear the law even though it needs to. Like Agricola there is the temptation to think that we might be more effective in our preaching and teaching if we would be "positive" preachers and teachers, using only the gospel. ("The law belongs in the courthouse but not in the church.") Yet the presence of the old Adam in us means that the law must still be heard. Dr. Becker's words say this well:

It would be well for all of us, as teachers of the Lutheran Church, to read again and again the fifth and sixth articles of the *Formula of Concord*, which repeatedly stress the fact that also Christians, because of their old Adam, still need the warnings and the threatenings of the Law, and, as Luther says, we ought not to treat this whole matter as though it were a joke. We are to declare the full counsel of the Word, and no one who knows his Bible can say that the Bible does not speak in the most horrifying way about sin and its consequences. The saddest aspect of this whole matter is that men actually set the Word of God against itself and use the Gospel to overthrow the Law. They will say that such a stern and harsh approach to sin is a denial of the Gospel. "We are Gospel teachers," they say, "and therefore those harsh truths have no place in our teaching." But the apostle Paul asked, "Do we make void the Law through faith? Nay, we establish the Law "You don't solve the problem presented to the human soul by the doctrine of hell by ignoring that place of eternal punishment."⁶⁵

Of course, we remember that the law is never an end in itself. In terms of solving man's dilemma, the law must be proclaimed so that hearts are prepared to hear the gospel. And only when the law is the message that sinners are condemned, is the gospel heard for what it is, the good news that that sinners are saved for Jesus' sake. And that is our goal, to let the gospel be heard in all its sweetness and to let the gospel have the last word.. Walther says, "But the moment you begin to speak of the Gospel, the Law must be hushed. Adopt this as a principle for your activity in your congregation, always to proclaim this glad message in your pulpit, so that your congregation will rejoice at having a pastor who is a true evangelist."⁶⁶

It seems good to briefly mention one other area in addition to preaching and teaching where proper use of law and gospel is important. That is in the work of individual counseling.

⁶⁵ Becker. The Use Of Law And Gospel, In Motivation For Christian Living

⁶⁶ Walther 291-292

There may be times when our counseling of a member is mostly pedagogical; we are teaching and informing the member of something beneficial in God's word. But usually the reason for a counseling session is some troubling issue in a person's life, such as marital or family conflict. Especially when lives are in turmoil, filled with emotional strain and stress, there can be a temptation to deal with the outward symptoms of this person's problem while failing to get to the deeper "disease." The deeper problem that needs to be addressed lies in that person's relationship with God. The tools we have for dealing with it are the law and gospel. While there may be situations which require expertise beyond the training of the pastor or Christian counselor (e.g. mental illness, drug dependency issues) we don't want to forget that we possess the tools that are both necessary and effective for healing the disease of sin.

It may become clear to us that a person we are counseling is guilty of a sin that is causing trouble in his life and equally clear he hasn't yet acknowledged or repented of that sin. So, the greater unresolved problem is with God. What we learn from the Bible about the purpose of the law tells us it needs to be applied to lead the sinner to repentance. Then we can apply the gospel's promise of forgiveness that gives him real peace. .

If we were to simply use the Law as a manual for life, a way to "fix" the outward problems, there would be no preparation for the sinner to hear or appreciate the healing Gospel. And then there would be no power for living a new life either (sanctification). If we were to speak the Gospel to this man before the law has worked repentance and sorrow we could even slip into the error of making Jesus into a lawgiver. "Think of how much Jesus loved you. You don't want to continue to offend him. You should feel sorry. Ask yourself "What would Jesus do?" to fix this problem in your life / home / marriage, etc. Then go and follow his example. That's what a committed disciple would do." In this approach the law hasn't been used to bring a person to repentance. As a result the true gospel message of forgiveness hasn't been spoken either. The person leaves hoping that he can be committed enough to do the right thing. But he remains undefended against despair if he fails. This is what the church's experience with antinomianism warns against.

It is one of the tasks of the Christian counselor to patiently listen and determine whether a he is dealing with a secure sinner or a repentant sinner. Many times, if not most times, the person seeking counseling has already been carrying around a sense of guilt and sorrow over his sins. He knows he has offended his Lord and he is unable to escape from the terrible weight of his offense. In this case too, there is an unresolved problem. He needs to hear what Jesus has done with his guilt so that he will rejoice in his Savior. When his sin has been confessed to us we are to let him hear the voice of his Savior who declared, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Regardless of how terrible (humanly speaking) his sin, he must know that the blood of Jesus has already covered it. There is no condition attached to the peace God has provided him. It is true that the forgiven child of God will seek and accept guidance in how to thank God. But this is not a payment to God. It is true precisely because the forgiveness is free.

Schuetze and Habeck describe the role of the pastor as counselor: "His task is that of a deliverer of troubled consciences. That is what it means to be evangelical. It is an attitude that grows in the heart of the pastor who through personal application of the law and gospel in his own life gains an ever deeper understanding of both as revealed in Scripture. ...The pastor who has an evangelical attitude...seeks to help troubled souls through Christ in their relationship to God."⁶⁷

I have personally found the order of private confession in Christian Worship, A Lutheran Hymnal to be a blessing in my counseling ministry.⁶⁸ On more than one occasion I have used it with members and would encourage it to be used in applying God's absolution from sin on an individual basis. "Private Confession" brings both minister and penitent in prayer before the Lord as servants needing his mercy. It provides the penitent with a confession that reflects the true nature and malady of sin. It proclaims clearly and unambiguously that Christ's death was for the whole world and the guilt of the whole world is already thereby paid. The penitent states his belief in this gospel promise, not as a condition of his redemption, but as a consequence of it. "God has forgiven me. And now I believe it." The absolving statement itself is concise,

⁶⁷ Armin Schuetze and Irwin Habeck. The Shepherd under Christ, A Textbook for Pastoral Theology. (Milwaukee, WI, Northwestern Publishing House, 1974.) 184.

⁶⁸ Christian Worship A Lutheran Hymnal. (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993) 154

comprehensive, comforting and unconditional. The closing prayer expresses the desire of minister and penitent to live a new life of love. And it properly confesses that the sanctification which follows justification is possible not because of man's promise but because of God's power.

Conclusion

The history of the Reformation and the controversies that followed teach us to distrust the wisdom of man and to be committed to God's Word as the light that leads us through error and confusion. When the legalism of Rome threatened the gospel from one side, the reaction of antinomianism attacked it from the other. And, as Allbeck puts it: "extremes approach each other."⁶⁹ So, whether the law is turned into gospel (used as the way to heaven) or the gospel is turned into law (used to preach repentance), the true gospel is lost. When the gospel is lost Christ is removed. And when Christ is removed justification is overturned.

It was for that reason that a group of men, guided by God's word and a zeal for unity in confessing it, wrote the Formula of Concord. It is no accident that paragraph 22 mentions the doctrine of justification. This Formula, as do the Confessions preceding it, upholds Christianity's central teaching; that we are justified by God's grace, apart from works, because of Jesus and through faith.

Today, no less than when it was first written, souls need to be convicted of their sins, so they can be comforted with Christ's forgiveness. To that end may we learn to distinguish law and gospel so that we correctly handle the word of truth, to God's glory and the salvation of souls.

Appended to this paper is a sermon preached by C.F.W. Walther for Good Friday. It is here for your further reading and edification. This sermon is based on Mark 15:39. "And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God!" This sermon is an example of preaching on the suffering and death of Christ to lead God's people first to repentance and then to a stronger faith. I think you will appreciate the clear, convicting law and the clear, consoling gospel.

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⁶⁹ Willard Allbeck. Studies in the Lutheran Confessions. (Philadelphia, Fortress Press: 1968) 279.

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