

Spiritual Renewal as Faithful Application of Law and Gospel in Today's Secular Society

[Written as a Spiritual Renewal mailing to all pastors and teachers of the WELS.

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By John C. Jeske

We're ten years from a new century. We're ten years from a new millennium. Along with the rest of the world, God's church wants to be ready. In your view, what is the most serious challenge facing the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints?

... to defend itself against attacks by an unbelieving world increasingly hostile to it?

... to maintain our work programs — family, congregation, synod — in an America which has grown increasingly materialistic?

... to keep an edge on our faith and confession in homes, schools, businesses indifferent to the crucified carpenter from Nazareth?

Opinions may vary, and you're surely entitled to your own.

Two years ago the synod convention ventured its own opinion. It resolved to undertake a program to encourage spiritual renewal of her people. The wording of the resolution makes it clear how the convention delegates saw the issue of the challenges facing the synod. Our grassroots membership sensed that the most serious enemy threatened not from the outside. Perhaps more frightening, he was already inside our house.

That is one assumption from which this essay is written. Another is that synodical efforts to foster spiritual renewal are not ecclesiastical "busy work" or empty synodical "rah-rah," but the very agenda of the powerful Holy Spirit of God.

It's not likely that this essay will startle you with something new. WELS members, and especially her pastors know

what kind of renewal the Spirit of God wants to produce in his sons and daughters, and *what kind of tools or tactics* the Spirit uses to bring about such renewal. Renewal God's way is not gimmickry but the proclamation of law and gospel.

Nonetheless a restatement of these bedrock principles is always in place, since the enemy of God and man is active among WELS called workers as well as among WELS laity. Should Satan confuse a teacher, the damage he wreaks is ever so much more ravaging. This essay will therefore attempt to "remind you of these things, even though you know them and have been firmly established in the truth you now have" (2 Pt 1:12). God's law and gospel still startle when - but only when - we let them speak.

The church's regimen of daily spiritual renewal wouldn't be necessary if you and I were the kind of people God originally had in mind when he formed the first human out of the dust of the ground. But no, we're more like Jesus' first disciples. For us it takes only minutes to drowse, to become spiritually cool, careless, lazy. And laziness in the arena of the God-Satan warfare is a good way to get killed. Unread Bibles can destroy fellowship with God. Ignoring his two messages will ruin your day, your family, your career, your life. Disregarding what the Bible calls "sin" has its own law of gravity that inexorably pulls a person into ruin.

Do you see evidence that even people who claim Christ's name are rationalizing their rebellion and excusing their lifestyles?

Consider some danger signals...

- ... On all sides we see disturbing evidence that the spiritual character of our congregations is declining. An unholy and unwholesome emphasis on merely maintaining the organization is becoming increasingly prominent;
- ... Individually we tend to be satisfied with our own level of loyalty to God and fail to notice our spiritual deficiencies. Even well-founded, faithful criticism draws the reaction of defensiveness and a hurt-pride circling of the wagons;
- ... Declining interest in group Bible study seems to say that many church “members” don’t regard it as extraordinary that God has miraculously invaded our world to speak to us;
- ... A disturbing evidence of how, like chameleons, we have blended in with our secular surroundings is our greed, our never-ending desire for more things. A Christian’s priorities invite hard questions when he is willing to squirrel away thousands of dollars in an IRA or to invest them in a car with every convenience, yet fails to dedicate an honorable and a growing proportion of his income to the Giver of those dollars.

The Scripture teaches us that Christian people and Christian congregations flourish only when certain characteristics are present, much as a flower will bloom only under specific conditions...

when...

faith in God’s promise of forgiveness is growing, knowledge of God’s will and way is increasing,

when...

fear of God rules the heart, piety is practiced,

when...

the image of God (lost in Eden) is more and more being restored, love for God and for God’s people is growing more fervent,

when...

humility that puts down self is conquering selfish pride.

Flowers won’t make it on the downtown freeway median. And much of what passes for the “church” today, once “the work of my hands, for the display of my splendor” (Is 60:21) is actually little more than religious busy-ness conducted along the lines of the business world, on church-owned property, by people who get along well with one another.

Why is this? American culture today is pragmatic; it’s more interested in action than in attitudes. The Christian, too, knows the siren song of a religion “that works.” We crave practical guidelines for life and the feeling of relief that comes from having conformed to some technicality. “Give us practical guidelines for family and congregational life, not complicated conversations about basic Christian doctrine, not theses on spiritual renewal, not scholarly-sounding explanations about the proper distinction between law and gospel. Affect my action, but leave my attitudes alone.” Is it any wonder that our decade has been called “the aimless eighties?”

If this summary of symptoms is accurate, then what’s the root cause? If the church were only an ecclesiastical business organization, we would attempt to solve its problems by a

business approach, first off, to the intellect and then to the emotions of its supporters. Got a problem with financial short fall? Clear, cold common sense suggests a fund-raising drive. Appeal to the loyalty church members have for dear old Zion. Worship attendance down? Beat the drums and urge people to change their church attendance habits.

What's wrong with those solutions? Ask yourself if they have diagnosed the malady correctly. Aren't they treating symptoms, instead of addressing root causes?

Take another look. Another solution to the spiritual issues facing Christians today— individuals as well as groups — is served up by the Reformed churches, and especially that segment usually referred to as the “Evangelicals.” It rightly recognizes that the problems confronting family and congregation are spiritual issues, but then directs a person back to himself to find the solution. Perhaps you've seen this in books from Reformed publishing houses. Sanctification is presented as change motivated by the Christian's strength of will, as opposed to behavior renewed by the tools of the Holy Spirit.

Additionally, in this process of motivating a Christian man or woman from point A to point B, from this habit to that changed lifestyle, the commandments of God are often given an assignment which according to the Scripture they do not have. The law is said to have power to bring about a positive change in my life, to influence my will to make God-pleasing decisions. Listen to Chuck Swindoll, well-known Evangelical pastor and radio preacher, exemplify this approach. As he sees it, the law is a friend to the Christian, a guide through the many complexities of modern life. ¹ The Scripture, however, does not describe God's law as a friend. “When the commandment came, I died,” St. Paul confessed (Ro 7:9).

This essay is addressed to teachers and pastors. You can practice Christianity without knowing much theology, just as you can drive a car without knowing a whole lot about the internal combustion engine. But when something goes wrong with the car, one goes humbly to the man who understands the works. Similarly, when the life of a Christian sputters and smokes — or for that matter, the life of a Christian church body — it's a good idea to go to the One who designed and built and operates spiritual life. He alone knows how it works, “what makes it go.” Let that be the aim of this essay to let the Master speak about spiritual renewal.

God's way of addressing the human predicament is disappointingly unspectacular. It's always been that way. When God visited our planet twenty centuries ago he disguised himself. He hid his majesty in baby's diapers, and the people to whom he came were disappointed. They refused to believe that the itinerant preacher was really God. It's no different today. People are still disappointed in the way God comes to meet us —in the message of law and gospel, proclaimed on the pages of a book and through the feeble words of a preacher, hidden in a handful of water or in pennies' worth of bread and wine.

Chronologically the Bible is divided into Old and New Testaments. Logically the Bible is divided into law and gospel, with both messages woven through both testaments. They are equally God's word, but they are not the same doctrine. Neither of these two messages is by itself able to save a damned human being. Rather God's message is the sword of the Spirit — one sword with two sharp edges, like this:

law and gospel
sin and grace
threat and promise
curse and blessing
imperative and indicative
war and peace

sentence and acquittal
death and life

The law was never designed by God to be an independent message. Command and threat are not God's last words to anyone. Rather they serve as bulldozer and earthmover to tear up the landscape of the human heart. Their work is not final but preliminary. Similarly the gospel may be shared only with a person in whom the law has accomplished its work.

Lutheran students of the Bible have been taught to keep law and gospel separate. Damn with the law; kill, don't wound or merely scare. Give life with the gospel; rescue, don't leave doubt. From the study of the scripture as well as of church history we have learned that when law and gospel are muddled and mixed, the effect on the hearer is every kind of theological mischief, which has spawned self-satisfied sinners like the Pharisees of Jesus' day and Rome's work-righteousness and depressed human wrecks like Judas. And yet, paradoxical as this may seem, careful Lutheran Bible study has always given equal but opposite emphasis to the truth that neither law nor gospel alone gets God's work program done. In the Spirit's hands, law and gospel must work together to produce repentance and faith and a new life of thankful living. Consider these old but trustworthy words:

“Repentance consists properly of these two parts: One is contrition, that is, terrors smiting the conscience through the knowledge of sin:” (Luther called contrition “faith in the law”);

the other is faith, which is born of the gospel, or of absolution, and believes that, for Christ's sake, sins are forgiven, comforts the conscience, and delivers it from terrors” (what Luther called “faith in the gospel”). “Then good works are bound to follow, which are the fruits of repentance.” Augsburg Confession, Article XII

You see at once the problem this raises. Distinguishing between the specific roles God has assigned to the law and conversely to the gospel and following through with a shepherding plan which conforms to God's intention in giving us these two messages requires a competence which does not come naturally.

And yet law-gospel competence is “square one” for spiritual renewal. It is not passed on from father to son like brown eyes, or from teacher to pupil like multiplication tables. Luther said he struggled to distinguish the roles of law and gospel.² A seminary professor of a former era described it this way: “There is not another area of Christian doctrine which is sinned against more than this area — both by those of us who occupy the pulpit and by those who occupy the pew.”³

Yet the difficulty of the task will not scare away the faithful teacher who firsthand has trembled at the law's fire but has also sat charmed by the unexpected song of the gospel. In our present situation God's called workers in WELS will use classroom and pulpit to proclaim the double message which alone can halt spiritual blight and dryrot, actually plant the spark of new life and call out God's own fruit.

THE ROLE OF GOD'S LAW IN SPIRITUAL RENEWAL

To suggest to a WELS pastor that he may be overlooking the primary function of the Ten Commandments in his preaching and practice would seem to be a good way to start an argument.

But first off, let's not be too proud to review the three tasks which our catechism identifies as the uses of God's law.

Use #1 (in the outward life of all people):

God's law helps to preserve order in the world by keeping the wicked actions of all people within bounds. Here the law functions as a curb.

Use #2 (in the hearts of all people):

God's law shows all people their sin and their need for a Savior. Here God's law functions as a mirror.

Use #3 (for Christians living in a sinful world):

God's law tells Christians, surrounded by an unbelieving world, the way of life which is pleasing to God. This is the law as a guide.

This distinction is so well known and so obviously in harmony with Bible teaching that one must wonder why religious teachers would give people a mistaken impression about the law's mission in God's plan to bring his lost children home. The Bible, as well as our history books, identify two factors which may be responsible for that.

The first of these, well known to every pastor, is the temptation to take too much spiritual knowledge on the part of our people for granted. "They understand the role of the commandments well enough without our beating them over the head each week." Perhaps because we professional handlers of the word are assaulted by Moses in our private devotions, we may in effect silence the demanding voice and the accusing voice of God's law. Is it possible that you have done this without meaning to?

The second mishandling is really the consequence of the first. Where the second function of the law is not proclaimed simply and straightforwardly, the law's third function will likely be distorted — its function as a guide for the Christian through the dark situations of our day. By so doing we elevate a subordinate function of the law into first place. Wherever and whenever that occurs, we ascribe to God's good law powers which it does not possess. The result is a mishandling of the sword of the Spirit and injury to the people of God.

Do you sense these factors at work when you prepare your sermon each week, and as you strive to make the meaning of God's Word clear in Bible instruction classes? How easy it is to take too much knowledge of the law for granted in those who hear us! Perhaps part of the reason for doing this is that we know the message of God's law has been written in everyone's heart by nature. We tell ourselves: "It isn't as though they'll never hear the message of the law if I don't make a big thing out of it in every class, every sermon. Those people have consciences which testify that we have withheld from God the obedience he has demanded and instead thrown in his face the disobedience he has forbidden. And in addition to the law written in their hearts, the people I serve have the law written in the Bible. I shouldn't have to spell it all out for them again and again." It's this mind-set of preachers that is responsible for the fact that week after week in many Protestant churches never is heard a discouraging word and the skies are not cloudy all Sunday. And bit by bit we muffle the ominous chords which tolled our greatest need.

But such an attitude on the part of pastors is a tragic misreading of the facts in the case, and there are going to be eternal repercussions of that tragedy. We simply dare not take for granted that since our hearers (unconverted or converted) have heard the law of God they have an *adequate* knowledge of their separateness from God. It is the straightedge of God's commandments that shows me how crooked I am. I am not ready to hear the gospel until the law has brought me the frightening news about the deep corruption of my nature. As God sees me, I am a person who not only *does* things I know are wrong but who *wants* things I know are wrong.

To see how dangerous it is to assume that people understand the message of God's law listen to Moses talk to God in Psalm 90:11: "*Who knows the power of your anger?*" The verb means "to know from experience, to acknowledge, to appreciate." The point of Moses' rhetorical question is that the truth about God's punitive justice is one that people just plain don't know; or knowing it, it's one they generally tend to ignore.

Back a few pages we noted a second specific mishandling of God's commandments. What further hinders our people from seeing straight in the matter of the law is the role Evangelicals commonly assign to God's law today. Check out any "Christian" bookstore. "How-to" books on the sanctified life commonly present the law of God as the motivating power for a sanctified life, not only guiding the human will but actually moving it to make God-pleasing decisions. That represents the viewpoint of John Calvin, but not of St. Paul or of Martin Luther. It was Calvin who emphasized: "By frequent meditation on the law the servant of Christ will be excited to obedience." Even for God's newborn, according to Calvin, the law is "a perpetual spur, which will not permit him to loiter."⁴

Do we see that that's attributing to the law a power which it does not have? The message of the law can convict and condemn and strike terror into a person's heart. But it cannot bring a sinner to repentance; it cannot create faith or even the desire to amend one's sinful life. "If a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law" (Ga 3:21).

It is not solid exegetical work but misguided zeal for any handler of God's word to give the impression that the primary role of the law is to show us the kind of life God has called us to lead. Toying with a car's RPM's at the carburetor cannot fix a sick engine. Tinkering with somebody's lifestyle isn't getting to the root of his problem. The holy God's problem with you is basically not your drinking or your lying or your stealing. Those are symptoms of sin, just as a boil is a symptom of an infection in the bloodstream. God's law helps us to see that sin is trying to live as though you had no Creator, no purpose, no one but yourself to be responsible to or for. The most serious of all our problems is our insensitivity toward sin, our unwillingness to agree with Dr. Law's diagnosis that the virus of sin is at work in all of our actions, our thoughts and desires, and that the end of that is perpetual divorce from God. If the sinner's real problem is not diagnosed competently and decisively, the theologian — whether teacher or preacher — will likely make the law and not the gospel the solution to the problem. And "the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them day and night before God" (Re 12) is served.

If God's people are to be renewed spiritually WELS classrooms and pulpits will have to let God's law do what it was designed to do. This is hardly a secret to anyone who has read the scriptures and the Lutheran confessions. "I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, 'Do not covet'" (Ro 7:7). By himself nobody can possibly recognize that a passive, inactive desire is sinful. Paul therefore explains that God's commandment serve to provoke that passive, inactive desire into deeds. "Apart from law, sin is dead ... but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life, and I died" (Ro 7:8f). God's law caused the evil desire to explode into violent behavior easily recognizable as sin which makes us guilty before God. Again, St. Paul: "In order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me ... so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful" (Ro 7:13).

Here, then, is the primary function of the law: to arouse in us an awareness of how far short we have fallen of the standards God has set for us and to convince us that we are consequently under God's curse. Dr. Walther once commented that when the apostles preached,

the people who heard them said: “If that man is right, I am lost.” The law helps us to recognize that it is not only our proud and selfish and loveless *actions* that make us guilty before God, but also the inborn *desires* which spawned those actions. The law is God’s instrument for convincing us of this. That’s part of the *skandalon* of the cross. It shocks and offends before it soothes. It throws us in with murderers before it lifts us into the elect and elite circle of God’s sons and daughters.

Orthodox preaching is bound to make more enemies than friends, simply because it always humbles a person before helping him; it shames him before it saves him; it accuses him before it acquits him. That’s really what makes it so very difficult to be a preacher. You enter the pulpit with a burden on your heart, every time. Before you even start you know what you have to say is going to hurt people, the very people you love and want to help — and that there’s no other way to help them.⁵

Right at this point it’s easy to blunt the message of the law by saying: “Now, to be sure, God hates sin, but remember that he loves the sinner.” Doesn’t that sound different from what the psalmist said?

“You are not a God who takes pleasure in evil;
with you the wicked cannot dwell.
The arrogant cannot stand in your presence;
You hate all who do wrong” (Ps 5: 4f)

No place to run, is there? Next question: do *Christians* need to hear that — that solid segment of our congregation that believes God’s promises, gladly hears his word and strives to live pious lives in word and deed? Love for the Savior and the Savior’s people removes the luxury of forgetting that there is another side to that solid segment. They brought more than their faith in Christ with them into the Christian Church. Each of them has a dark side, an evil nature which does not love the Lord Jesus and never will. As long as they have that old man, they will need to hear (from you!) the only message that old man understands—the message of God’s curse, of his punishment. Through his law God isn’t out to bruise the old sinner in us, to wound him. He’s out to kill him. The old Adam is an unreformable rebel. Has St. Paul not spoken clearly of putting to death whatever belongs to the earthly nature, of crucifying the sinful nature with its passions and desires?

The topic assigned for this essay specifies the frame of reference for applying the distinctive teachings of law and gospel as “our secular world.” And that toxic environment we live and move in has had a deadly influence both on those who handle God’s law and on those who hear it.

The man in the pulpit is not immune to the fear of man. He has regularly to speak to people already knocked around by life. He doesn’t want to add more hurt. He wants to be liked. It feels good to be told “You really helped me.” His Old Sinner is a coward, a whiner, a griper, a finger-pointer, a blame shifter. He is also not free from the desire to escape the cross, and those considerations could color his preaching of God’s law.

And the person on the other side of the pulpit seems to be disinclined to hear the seriousness of his sinfulness emphasized. Even the unchurched in our Bible Information classes may be willing to admit he’s not perfect, but his theology is pretty well summed up in this bit of doggerel: “There’s so much good in the worst of us and so much bad in the best of us, that it hardly seems fitting for a few of us to say what’s wrong with the rest of us.”

Antinomianism is not a heresy that only the men who wrote the Formula of Concord four centuries ago had to contend with. The people who sit beneath our pulpits are daily inundated with philosophies hostile to the message of God's law. "Come to terms with your uniqueness." "What I do with my life is my own business!" "Don't ask whether a thing is good or bad, right or wrong. Just ask 'Does it work?'" "There is no objective and absolute truth about what human conduct ought to be." "Whatever's right for you." Self-indulgence is in vogue; self-discipline is not.

The attitudes just described are the inevitable result of dragging God down to our level. The person who has acquired that unholy habit will dare to disagree with God's testimony. He's quite ready to take his chances of going head-to-head with him.

There's only one antidote for that, and that is sensitizing consciences to the Bible truth that God hates sin and punishes it. This is not only an article of faith; God actually permits us to see evidence, on the pages of history, of how he reacts to sin. Moses describes that in the 90th Psalm:

"We are consumed by your anger
and terrified by your indignation.
You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your presence.
All our days pass away under your wrath;
we finish our years with a moan." (Ps 90:7-9)

Do our sermons confront people with evidence that God punishes sin? As you look at the world around you, do you see evidence of a nice, neat creation set in order by a loving God? Or do you discern the devil's tracks in a world in rebellion against God and suffering the consequences of that rebellion? How else can you explain the tedious toil, the meanness and apparent meaninglessness of so much of life, the existence of pain, of tragedy, heartache and heartbreak? Apart from God's anger over sin, how do you explain the existence of death? Is it really a normal, natural part of life —as school children are being taught — or is it an ugly, putrid, face-to-face encounter with the foul breath of the dragon? The curse of God is on our sin, just as a hard frost works havoc on Florida's citrus crop. No, death was not part of God's original design, but ever since Adam's and Eve's war of secession in the garden the principle has held: "All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, *because the breath of the LORD blows on them*" (Is 40:6f).

Who among us is accustomed to take God's anger into account in our day-to-day existence? We're even tempted to question if this is normal and healthy. We need to hear that God's hatred of sin is one of the factors that determine his world rule, one of the factors that shape life as we live it. Ever since the fall one principle of God's world government (not the only one, but one principle) has been: "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The man who sows to please his sinful nature from that nature will reap destruction" (Ga 6:7-8).

The voice of God's law has, unfortunately, been muffled in our day. Think it over. Satan cannot force Jesus back into the grave. He cannot hang him again on the cross. So all he *can* do is to blind us, the recipients of Good Friday and Easter morning. He can try to intimidate us to forfeit what Christ has already placed into our hands. The sin we inherited from our first parents, the private pet sin we coddle, the self-deception we practice, the pitiful self-defense we erect to

save face and to ease our accusing conscience have all conspired to blind us to the nature of the heathen at work within each of us. The testimony of the inscribed law has been scuffed and vandalized in the conscience of many, with the result that the Bible teacher simply cannot assume that the retired couple, yuppie executive or neighborhood “stray” whom we try to reach with the gospel understand their desperate need for it. What a person knows of God’s law by looking around is simply not enough to bring him to the point where the empty grave can meet him at his point of need.

In a world like ours preaching the message of God’s law will not be easy. Moses and Elijah and Amos and John the Baptist would tell you it never was. But proclaiming that God hates and punishes sin is necessary if we are to prepare the Savior’s way into people’s hearts. Telling of a God who hates and punishes sin is necessary if we are to keep the re-routed person on the narrow path of which Jesus spoke.

The law of God was, however, never intended to be an independent message, proclaimed on the pages of scripture for its own sake. In the household of God it’s a maidservant, serving the queen, God’s gospel. The gospel is the essential message God has for the human race; it announces the essential message God from all eternity has wanted the world to hear.

And this message of the gospel will predominate in our preaching and practice. Some time back at Princeton Seminary’s Institute for Advanced Pastoral Studies laymen were asked to evaluate their pastors’ sermons. One criticism voiced frequently was; “Too much analysis, and too little answer. Why give 18 minutes to analyzing our need for the gospel and 2 minutes to the gospel in answer to the need?” Hearers “have been shown what’s wrong with the world, but they’re left wondering: ‘Where is the good news?’”

Do you see the practical significance of this for our efforts to foster spiritual renewal? Alarm over the deplorable spiritual conditions in classroom, teeth-grinding over absent congregational fruits will surely not produce positive change. Nor, for that matter, will dropping the sword of the Spirit in frustration or dejection. Each of us, with our *quia* subscription, pledged loyalty to the doctrine contained in the scriptures and in the Lutheran confessions. But simply saying that does not make a man a confessional Lutheran pastor any more than good intentions before an altar guarantee a marriage.

Our joyous task, therefore, will not be to tell the unchurched that your synod has the truth, not to remind people that our synod is more orthodox than Brand X. Priests of God, announce freedom to the captives! We can assure men and women who by nature and by preference were captives of sin and Satan that God has done and will continue to do everything necessary to carry his plan to completion until the day Jesus returns for us.

THE GOSPEL’S ROLE IN SPIRITUAL RENEWAL

The bedrock of Lutheran faith and life is the truth that God deals with people not primarily in terms of demand but of promise. The gospel message is not an argument to human reason or an appeal for human cooperation, but an announcement, a statement of fact.

We call ourselves Gospel preachers. We dare to make Paul’s declaration our own; “I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” We repeatedly emphasize that the only motivation we want to lay on the hearts of God’s people is “gospel motivation.”

The gospel is a many-splendored thing. In it God offers us good news of various kinds. He assures an entire world of sinners: “I love you!” And he said that as sincerely to Cain and to Absalom and to Judas as he did to Abraham and David and Paul. The day to day grind is

becoming more and more depersonalized; instead of loving God and people and using things, we're tempted to love things and to use God and people. We can counter that with God's declaration: "You are important to me. I want you at my side — now and forever!"

God's love, however, is not only a matter of words. To implement his great good plan God took decisive action in Jesus Christ. Through his perfect life of obedience Christ met the demands of God's law. Because Jesus is God his life counts for you and your friends and relatives, too. God looks upon you and me and every human being as having flawlessly met the law's requirements. And then! Then on that evil Friday we call "Good" our walking Curse, God's Scapegoat, took upon himself every one of the threats God's law announced. It was emphasized earlier that God hates sin, that God punishes sin. Here's where it all went down. And now a just God can rightly consider the penalty for sin to have been paid. Jesus was wearing your nametag on that cross. God's hatred of sin, his terrible strength overwhelmed his Messiah like a dump truck hitting a child. But according to the Scripture, that was the only way, a costly way, to secure pardon for all. "God reconciled the world to himself." That's the promise made to every alienated, separated sinner in the Good News. And the same gospel message — read, heard, remembered — that announces this wonderful news creates the faith in our hearts that believes it.

There's still more to God's good news. The first part of this essay pointed to the crux of the problem plaguing those born of God: the struggle between the old nature and the new nature. The gospel announces the welcome news that God has not only freed us from the guilt of our sin but that he has broken the *power* of sin in our lives. Christ's death and resurrection not only created a new status for us; they created a *new life* in us. "Sin shall not be your master," Paul assured the Christians in ancient Rome (6:14). "You're no longer under sin; Satan can therefore no longer expect your obedience as his flunkies. The chains that bound you to him were broken by Christ." When the Spirit ignites the faith that accepts God's promise of pardon he plants a new heart, a new attitude in us. Like Adam's and Eve's original image of God, it agrees with the will of God and delights in it.

Without Christ we were hopelessly in bondage to the power of evil. With Christ we are free. But as long as he leaves us here to build his Church, we are engaged in an endless civil war between our new self and our old self. That dark side of our personality has been overcome. Believe this! But you can believe, too, that our old nature is still dangerously active as it seeks to strangle/intimidate/bully the free and new nature that has arisen from the water of baptism. To help us in this life-long battle, God promises the support of his Spirit as we seek to live lives that now have an entirely new purpose: everything to the glory of God! We have God's word for this, that "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Php 1:6).

These are the two promises God makes to us in the gospel. It's critically important for you, the handler of God's oracles, to note that God has attached no conditions to his promises. That's the reason God's gospel covenant is powerful to save: it offers the antidote to any ruined life absolutely without condition. (By way of contrast, think of the condition God attached to the covenant he once announced at Mt. Sinai, through which he attempted to mold a stubborn and immature Israel into his kind of people. At that time God told them: "*If* you obey me fully and keep my covenant, *then* out of all nations you will be my treasured possession," Ex 19:5). Dr. Walther: "The gospel does not require anything good that a man must furnish: not a good heart, not a good disposition, no improvement of his condition, no godliness, no love either of God or

men.”⁶ God created us without any help from us, and he wishes to save us in exactly the same way.

It was emphasized earlier that if there is to be spiritual renewal in the WELS, the law may not be presented as something which it is not. The same is true of the gospel. Preaching faithful to the Bible may not take on a legalistic tone. For this would misrepresent the true nature of the gospel. And this would render it incapable of producing its God-intended results. If the certainty of our faith is to be unconditional, a match for any situation in life — any guilt, any weakness — then the promise on which it rests must be unconditional. A conditional gospel will bring no one to faith in the Jesus of the Scripture and will sustain no one in faith. It will instead buckle and cave in at the Accuser’s approach.

Several quotations from the pen of Chuck Swindoll will illustrate how Evangelicals not only mishandle the law but incorporate conditions in the *gospel* promise:

“Man will need to take the first step if he is to experience God’s salvation.” Conversion is “choosing to let Christ come into your life.”⁷

“From the moment we believe in (Christ), we stand forgiven, relieved of guilt, before a satisfied God, freeing him to shower upon us his grace and love .”⁸

“The person with a servant’s heart ... is promised a place in God’s kingdom.”⁹

Making God’s offer of forgiveness and acceptance contingent on my faith or my behavior is tantamount to telling people: “If you will do God the favor of believing him then you will make it possible for God to forgive your sins.” What a caricature of the “God who performs miracles” (Ps 77:10-15)!

There will be no spiritual renewal unless people — world-weary, jaded, guilt-carrying people — hear again and again that God loves them unreservedly and unconditionally. Think of Jesus’ words when from the cross he looked down at the crucifiers and the careless, vile-mouthed, with no conception of what was happening before their very eyes: “Father, forgive them...” Now that is startling ... a truth to shake anyone who mulls it over. God knows our sin. He who probes heart and mind (Jer 20:12) sees and knows all that is fearfully wrong at the very wellsprings of our personality. And that’s why he wants us. This is purest mercy. He saw our need, and responded to it.

This is law-free gospel. And now, in God’s remarkable plan, you’ve become a carrier, also without any condition attached.

In striving to work for spiritual renewal, we talk a lot about the importance of “gospel motivation.” Exactly what do *you* mean by that term? “Jesus did a lot for you, so now, out of gratitude to him you ought to do something for him”? *That* type of motivation has hoary precedent in the Lutheran Church, but it ought not be called gospel motivation. “Since Christ bought you, it’s now your duty to get to work” is little more than thinly-veiled law motivation. Luther: “The law, like a housebreaker, wants to climb in where he does not belong, causing me to lose what has been given me.”

In sharpest contrast, true gospel motivation is based on the profound truth that what I cannot do for myself *God has done*. Open your Bible right now and check out Paul’s well-known analysis of his and our human predicament, Romans 7:21-25. Along with Paul the Christian senses uneasily that the problem facing us is not our ignorance of God’s will or even our indecision, but our impotence. The remedy, therefore, is not good advice about what we ought to do, but good news about what God has done. Here, then, is gospel motivation worthy of the name: emphasizing that because of what God is and because of what God has done we can be what we ought to be, and do what we ought to do.

According to the Bible, the Holy Spirit is the sole agent not only in conversion but-also- in motivating the concerted human will to choose what is good and to avoid what is evil. And just as in the case of the new birth, he carries on this daily activity only through the Means of Grace. Through his promise in word and sacrament, then, the God who once created Adam and Eve in his image is re-creating us in that image. You have God's word on that; let the Holy Spirit do his work.

Our call to the gathered flock, then, is not so much "Do!" as it is "Believe!" "Trust that God's powerful Spirit is even now at work in you through the word — the word you have heard, the word you have read, the word you have remembered — equipping you to be what he has called you to be." Our life of sanctification — our life after we are led to say "I believe ..." is not our own doing. It's God's doing. Like God's verdict of "Not guilty!" it is appropriated by faith. And like our justification, our sanctification cannot always be seen or felt. "Your life is now hidden with Christ in God" (Col 3:3).

While we're on this subject, let me mention a bad habit we've gotten into. Why is it that we usually speak of Christ's resurrection only in connection with our justification? Romans 6 links it to our sanctification. God's promise in baptism gives us the justification/courtroom assurance that we not only share in Christ's death. The promise vouches that we're joined with him also in rising to a new life. The same power that brought Jesus out of the grave is at work to mold us into God's kind of people. You can trust that. Your Father has told you that.

Anyone who has camped on a windy night knows that keeping a fire alive takes energy and imagination. Our job as preachers is to fan that spark of faith God's promise creates into flame. Only the gospel promise in word and sacrament can do that. Treat the audience God has gathered for you to rich banquets from the Book. The preacher who wants to foster spiritual renewal will therefore provide a solid and steady diet of God's promises on which doubting, hesitant Christians can nurture and strengthen their new nature. They need to hear again and again:

"Sin will not be your master" (Ro 6:14).

"You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them" (false teachers, false message, false lifestyle) "because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 Jn 4:4).

"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses" (Ac 1:8).

"My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (Php 4:19)

"He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion" (2 Cor 9:10f) .

Just as in our *justification* faith accepts God's gift of *pardon*. So in our *sanctification* faith accepts God's gift of *strength* to live the life to which he has called us. Faith says "Yes!" to God's written promises and takes from them the strength to walk in his paths. "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature," i.e. stop sinning (2 Pe 1:3f)

Is this daydreaming? Seminary years speculation? Now really, given the realities of our secular world, is it realistic to expect that the feeble words of a feeble preacher can alter attitudes

and call a halt to habits formed over years? I don't know enough about dogs to know whether the old proverb about the impossibility of teaching an old dog new tricks is true or not. But I do know that that proverb is not applicable to men and women in whom the Spirit of God is at work. He can change people from the inside out. And what's more, he has promised to do just that.

Something ought to be said about the style that's appropriate to faithful gospel delivery. The only way the New Testament knows of preaching the gospel is with the Holy Spirit sent down from heaven. Timid, apologetic, defeatist preaching insults God and cheats men, women and children. Entering the pulpit with a mind-set "I don't suppose this sermon is going to change anything" is demeaning to the God who has called witnesses — just tellers of what we've seen and heard. Witness to his love and to his power. Timid preaching is also an impediment to the credibility of the word we preach. If I am individually unresponsive to the promises God holds out to me, my attitude will very likely be contagious.

To recap: spiritual renewal is not a businessman's hard-nosed approach to solving an obvious problem. Spiritual renewal is not some kind of pop psychology. Let's not waste our time attempting to change people with our poor appeals to logic or to their emotions or to their sense of decency and fair play. We will not change people by appealing to God's law. "You should be grateful; now get grateful" simply won't do any more.

Spiritual renewal is the Holy Spirit's job. Spiritual renewal is a supernatural activity — God-designed, God-created, God-fueled, God-honoring. Only the Spirit of God can give us the will and has promised us the strength to live the new life outlined in his law.

What, then, is the role of the called worker in spiritual renewal?

1. to make sure people understand their sinner-saint nature. Waldo Werning makes this significant comment:

The nature of the Christian's tension is that he is both sinner (old man) and saint (new man). This does not mean that he is partly a sinner and partly a saint, but altogether in his natural self a sinner and altogether in Christ a saint .10

Every Christian, therefore, needs to be reminded constantly of what he has going for him and what he has going against him.

2. to show people they have not met and cannot meet God's obligations. Here is the primary function of God's law, which condemns us for so often drowning the new man and letting the old man dominate our thinking and our action. And when we preach the law we dare not introduce the note of God's love, his pity, patience, understanding, concern. This note is totally absent from the law, and our law preaching must reflect the law's true nature.
3. to point to God's powerful action in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, reconciling me to God, answering my sin's guilt, answering my sin's power.
4. to assure the Christian that through the powerful Means of Grace the Holy Spirit brings Christ's victory over Satan to touch my life. He has reversed my deadly drift in the evil swirling around me. My dominant sin-loving nature died. I am under the control of a new nature, which increasingly becomes the dominant nature. This new nature says: "To do your will, O my God, is my desire" (Ps 40:8). This spiritual renewal will not happen without a struggle, a struggle St. Paul has documented for us in Romans 7.

But we can trust that victory is ours through Christ. Faith is the hand that grasps those faithful promises of God. You and I are not born losers. We are not reborn losers, either.

5. to direct Christians back to the Means, to word and sacrament the channels, the conveyors, the Spirit's high voltage lines from God's house to yours. Here, and here alone, are the channels through which the blessed Spirit continues to work on us, as he shapes us into his kind of people. Our call, then, is not so much "Do!" as it is "Trust! Trust the God who saved you to make you strong for your tasks! "

One closing thought. If I didn't know it before, twenty years of reading student sermons have certainly alerted me to the absolutely critical role the conclusion of a sermon or catechism lesson plays in influencing our hearers. If Luther was correct in saying that with one sermon he could undo the results of twenty-five years of reformation, then an ill-conceived conclusion can do much to undermine the ground gained in the rest of the presentation. Which mood of the verb predominates in the conclusions of the sermons you write? Is it the *imperative*? ("This morning we've seen an example of a man of God who triumphed over sin. Follow his example!" or "You must let Jesus take over all of your life, and then you'll be truly happy." "You must ... "You should ..." "Don't you dare ...")?

Or does the *subjunctive* mood predominate? ("Let us ..." "May we ..." "God grant ..." "We would hope ...") ?

Close your eyes for a moment and range through God's written record. Which is the predominant mood of New Testament verbs? Isn't it the *indicative*?

"You are the salt of the earth." (Jesus didn't say: "Come on, be salty;" or "I wish you were salty").

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, *he will bear* much fruit" (not "If I were in another city, or had another job, or made more money ...").

"You *will be* my witnesses" (not "You might be one day if you ever get serious about religion").

"Sin *will not be* your master" (not "Sin won't always predominate").

Ephesians: "We *have* life ... boldness ... forgiveness ... confidence; we *are* God's workmanship ... fellow-citizens with God's people and members of God's household."

Messages from our mouths that will foster spiritual renewal can do more than *express the hope* that the old sinner inside me will be wrestled down, and my brand-new nature show his colors. And they surely must do more than to *issue a command* to the Christian to do something he's apparently not doing now. So, friends, even the verb moods we use, (particularly in that critical closing portion of the sermon!) can direct our precious friends, relatives, acquaintances to the powerful action God has taken and is taking. You can be what God has made you.

Remember, people loved by God, the primary message of Christianity is not "This do!" but "This happened!"

"The great and precious promises of God ... I think it is right to refresh your memory" (2 Pe 1:4, 13). That has always been the strength of apostolic teaching. Ten years from the new millennium, and until Jesus returns for us, it still is.

"The grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of the Lord stands forever.

And this is the word that was preached to you.” (1 Pe 1:24f)

END NOTES

1. Charles R. Swindoll, *Strengthening Your Grip*, p. 23. Quoted by Harold L. Senkbeil in *Sanctification: Christ in Action*, p. 90.
2. See Luther’s sermon on Galatians 3:19 in *Luther’s Works*, St. Louis IX: 412f.
3. August Pieper, “*Die rechte Scheidung von Gesetz und Evangelium in ihrer Bedeutung fuer reine Lehre und geistliches Leben,*” *Theologische Quartalschrift* 7:106. The essay can be found in the following issues of the *Quartalschrift*: April, 1910, pp 103-128
July, 1910, pp 188-203
October, 1910, pp 280-300
4. John Calvin, *Institutes* II: 7,12.
5. Peter H. Eldersveld, *The Word of the Cross*, p. 35.
6. C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law & Gospel*, p. 16.
7. Charles R. Swindoll, *Dropping Your Guard*, p. 166.
8. Charles R. Swindoll, *Improving Your Serve*, p. 57
9. Charles R. Swindoll, *Improving Your Serve*, p. 102
10. Waldo J. Werning, *The Radical Nature of Christianity*, p. 39.