

Ten Theses Of Walther's *The Proper Distinction Between Law And Gospel* And Their Implications For Evangelism

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To be a student at Concordia Seminary between the dates of September 12, 1884 and November 6, 1885 must have been quite an experience. It was between those dates that the learned professor, Dr. C. F. W. Walther, gathered the seminary student body as well as visiting laymen and clergymen around his desk on Friday evenings and informally discussed doctrine with them. Anyone who has read Walther's *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* has given at least a little thought to those original circumstances. Yet no matter what the circumstances, these words of Walther stand tall among doctrinal theses, and many a student of theology has used them to shape his understanding of God's Word.

In the original setting it seems Dr. Walther applied most of his theses to preaching, counseling and occasionally church discipline. This paper, however, will take a portion of those same truths and apply them to the work of evangelism and specifically the ministry of calling on prospects.

The only sources used for this paper were Walther's lectures, the Bible and my own meager experience in congregational evangelism work from the last three years. I do not claim to be an expert in the field of evangelism, or in distinguishing Law and Gospel for that matter, but my aim is to 1) evaluate various evangelism methods in light of proper application of Law and Gospel, 2) inspire the reader toward a greater appreciation for and confidence in these two divine doctrines as tools for gaining the lost, 3) educate myself in both doctrines of Law and Gospel regarding their theory and practice. I will do this by capsulizing the thoughts of ten theses of Walther and then applying them to evangelism. The reason only ten theses will be treated isn't because the other fifteen are not worthwhile, but because many of the theses are rather similar and become even more so in their application to evangelism, and secondly because some of the theses are difficult to apply to the work of outreach (e.g. those dealing with the Lords' Supper, or all believers). With that brief introduction, let's start at the beginning.

Thesis 1 – The doctrinal contents of the entire Holy Scriptures, both of the Old and the New Testament, are made up of two doctrines differing fundamentally from each other, viz. the Law and the Gospel.

Walther begins by stating six reasons why Law and Gospel are not different, e.g. the Law is the teaching of the Old Testament and the Gospel is the teaching of the New Testament, etc. Afterwards he gets to six true points of difference according to Scripture.

1) Law and Gospel differ according to the manner of their being revealed to man. Here Walther reminds us that man is created with the Law *in* his heart, but *since* the fall it has become clouded. The Gospel, however, only becomes known through an act of the Holy Spirit. So Walther urges us not to hesitate to speak the Law because "the Law may be preached to the most ungodly person, and his conscience will tell him, "That is true" (Walther, p. 7). Therefore, when we speak the Law to prospects we are really not telling them anything new. Their consciences, as the megaphone of God's law, are already accusing or defending them. Perhaps that is why very few prospects ask an evangelist to leave who accuses the prospect of sin. On the other hand, a common reaction to the Gospel might be doubt or confusion. Why? Because "the man without the Spirit does not accept

the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him" (1 Corinthians 2:14). The Gospel is foreign to people, the Law is not. What a good reminder for us that when prospects reject the Gospel it is not us they are rejecting but God. At the same time, the Gospel needs to be made clear and simple if it is something the prospect has never heard and doesn't know by nature. It may even need repeating so that the Holy Spirit has frequent opportunity to break through a heart hardened by unbelief.

2) The Law and Gospel differ according to their contents. The Law says, "Do!" The Gospel says, "Done!" Walther puts it also this way, "The Law issues only commands and demands. The Gospel, on the other hand, only makes offers" (Walther, p. 9). The Gospel of John makes an interesting analogy, "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). What a comfort for prospects, then, when they hear that there is nothing left for them to do for eternal life. It is already theirs! This glorious distinction between Law and Gospel is one which totally annihilates the *opinio legis* in people. May we always use it to do so.

3) The Law and the Gospel differ according to promises. Walther remarks that both the Law and the Gospel promise everlasting life and salvation...*but* all the promises of the Law are made on certain conditions, while the Gospel guarantees the grace of God without any condition whatsoever. So a precise presentation of Law and Gospel to a prospect might be this: there are two ways you can get to heaven, and one of them is impossible. Certainly the Gospel will ring sweetly in the ears of someone who realizes he cannot get to heaven by fulfilling the Law, but only by believing the Gospel.

4) The Law and the Gospel differ according to threats. The main point Walther makes in this distinction is that only the Law threatens – the Gospel consoles. So our Savior fulfills the Scripture which says, "He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18,19). In our evangelism work we should remember not to switch Law and Gospel so that the Gospel makes threats. This subject will be treated more extensively in a later thesis.

5) The Law and the Gospel differ according to effects. The Law knocks down, but does not build up. It tells people what to do but it doesn't enable them to do it, thus hurling sinners into despair and conjuring up the wrath of God. The Gospel, on the other hand, as soon as it demands faith offers and gives it. It does not uncover sin but fills people with peace. "It demands nothing, but it gives all" (Walther, p. 16). We will always employ Law and Gospel, then, as an effective combination. By the Law we will show prospects their need for a Savior, and then by the Gospel we will show them how that need is filled. Teachers are encouraged to do the same thing in the classroom, first to give an introduction to the subject which arouses the students' curiosity and develops a need for them to know it, and then to proceed with the lesson. So we could consider the Law really an introduction to set up the need of hearing the Gospel.

Finally, 6) The Law and the Gospel differ according to the persons to whom they are preached. The Law must afflict those who are comfortable in sin, and the Gospel must comfort those who are afflicted by sin. Each must be proclaimed without mingling it with the other. Again, this material will be covered in a separate thesis. So *Thesis 1* comes to a close after having listed six differences between Law and Gospel. All subsequent theses of Walther could really be grouped under one of these six differences, but he gets more specific in his presentation. One of those theses is *Thesis 6*.

Thesis 6 – In the second place, the Word of God is not rightly divided when the Law is not preached in all its full sternness and the Gospel not in its full sweetness, when, on the contrary, Gospel elements are mingled with the Law and Law elements with the Gospel.

Walther quotes one basic passage in Scripture which testifies to the clear distinction of Law and Gospel. "Clearly no one is justified before God by the Law, because, 'The righteous will live by faith'" (Galatians 3:11). The Law cannot make a person righteous, and the Gospel cannot condemn. In this thesis Walther speaks more to the point of injecting Gospel into the Law than vice versa. He says anyone who mingles a single evangelical ingredient into the Law is like a nurse who adds sugar to bad tasting medicine. The result is that the medicine, neutralized by the sugar, does not take effect and the patient remains sick. Medicine cannot be sweetened to attain proper results. So also with the Law.

In our dealing with prospects may we consider Dr. Walther's admonition. When directing a prospect to the Law we will do him more harm than good if we give him the impression that God is satisfied with anything less than perfection. What are our responses to statements like, "Well, God would never demand the impossible if he knows I can't do it," or "I think I am right with God as long as I am sincere in what I do and try my best?" If our responses are evangelical we are mistaken. God demands perfection – nothing more, nothing less. Walther urges us to preach the Law so that our hearer says, "If that man is right, I am lost" (Walther, p. 82).

We can look to Jesus as an example of not minimizing God's Law. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus made his point clear to his disciples that the Pharisees' idea of keeping only the literal meaning of the Law was contorted. "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder'... But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment" (Matthew 5:21,22). Jesus didn't allow the Pharisees to inject Gospel comfort into the Law. We shouldn't let prospects do it either. Rather, we will use the law to break down their false sense of security so that they may be built up by the Gospel.

Thesis 8 – In the fourth place, the Word of God is not rightly divided when the Law is preached to those who are already in terror on account of their sins, or the Gospel to those who live securely in their sins.

Scripture dictates that we refrain from threatening those who are already broken-hearted with the Law, but rather freely proclaim forgiveness and salvation to them. This was the practice of Jesus. To the woman who washed his feet with her tears and wiped them with her long hair, who had publicly lived a sinful life of fornication and adultery, Jesus did not utter a single reproof, but soothed her and said, "Your sins are forgiven" (Luke 7:48). To the woman caught in adultery by the Pharisees, Jesus, after inviting any Pharisee without sin to stone her, comforted her, "Than neither do I condemn you" (John 8:11). To Zaccheus, who expected Jesus do give him a transcript of his sins, Jesus replied, "Today salvation has come to this house" (Luke 19:9). Note also the thief on the cross, and Jesus' parable of the lost son. How could Jesus not condemn these sinners for their ungodly lifestyles? Because they were already in terror an account of their sins. They were ready for the Gospel.

Are we right to assume that every evangelism call we make must contain a portion of God's Law? Certainly not. If Jesus would have made the same assumption during his ministry there would be fewer souls in heaven right now. But by definition isn't a prospect an unbeliever because he is willfully absent from the means of grace in Word and Sacrament? Not always so. Perhaps he is avoiding a congregation because he was jilted in some way by a past body of believers. Perhaps he does not feel that he is forgiven for a past sin and is burdened even more greatly by his guilt when he sets foot into a church. Perhaps he has been excommunicated from a legalistic church body, and whether or not he deserved such action he is penitent and eager for forgiveness – but they will not accept him back. I'm sure many other examples could be cited. All of these people are already broken-hearted, and the Law would simply make the wounds deeper and more difficult to heal, wouldn't it? Perhaps the most we would do is to remind the prospect that any sin he confesses is indeed a sin, but quickly offer God's comfort of forgiveness in the Gospel.

What a joy it is to be blessed with this type of an evangelism call. Not in the sense that the prospect has been heavy laden for years, but that the result of faith in God's good news usually shows in some outward form of joy and relief. Without a doubt these people are those who become very firm in their faith and upright examples of godly living and leadership. Walther makes the comment, "It is indeed a common observation that those who have passed through great and profound sorrow at the beginning have become the best and most stalwart

Christians" (Walther, p. 119). It was in this way that God prepared Martin Luther, remember. Yet, if people do not consider their sinful condition, we need to help them do it – for their own sake.

Therefore, Scripture dictates that we preach the Law to those who are secure in their sins. This was also the practice of Jesus. "By observing His conduct in the Gospel records, we find that, whenever He met with secure sinners... He had not a drop of comfort for them, but called them serpents and a vipers' brood...and told them they would not escape eternal damnation" (Walther, p. 115). After the rich young man claimed perfect obedience to God's Law, Jesus convicted him of his selfish pride and greed. Why didn't Jesus offer him forgiveness like so many others? Because Jesus knew he was secure in his sin. Certainly, however, Jesus would have liked an opportunity to speak the Gospel to this man, but Scripture says of him, "he went away sad, because he had great wealth" (Matthew 19:22). Jesus also gives the same treatment to a teacher of the law by means of the parable of the good Samaritan. Walther makes the point that the apostles likewise did not hesitate to preach the Law when necessary. Peter fastened the murder of Christ onto the Jews in Jerusalem during his Pentecost sermon, and Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin was neither given nor taken as a compliment. It is in this section that Walther speaks the words with which many an orthodox Lutheran homiletician is familiar, "We must preach them into hell before we can preach them into heaven. By our preaching our hearers must be brought to the point of death before they can be restored to life by the Gospel" (Ibid., p. 118). This has implications for evangelism as well as homiletics. To those prospects who are comfortable in sin it is necessary for us to condemn them with the Law. It has already been stated that we will not be telling them anything new, yet we may expand on the conviction of their conscience and explain that God's Law aims at the heart. It may be helpful on an evangelism call to be straight forward with a prospect that the Law is undoubtedly bad news (especially if he is noticeably contrite), and that the good news is coming. When speaking God's Law we may also include ourselves as guilty to support the fact that no one is innocent (even pastors!). We can appeal to Scripture as we condemn a prospect with the Law, so that he doesn't get the idea it is a personal attack against him by us. We can frankly say, "I can sit here and point the finger at you and accuse you of sin, even though I don't know you, because the Bible tells us that all have sinned. You could also point your finger at me..."

Applying another homiletical principle to evangelism calls, we will want to take every opportunity to speak specific Law to the prospect when possible. Lest they get the impression that "the world out there is so evil" or "society really stinks," we should aim the Law with the rifle approach rather than the shotgun – it will penetrate with greater effect.

Now, an important method underlying the applications of this thesis to evangelism is that we get to know the prospect before we share Law and Gospel. It goes without saying that a proper spiritual diagnosis is a must, and then we can adapt our presentation accordingly as to whether the person is afflicted or comfortable. This can also help in preaching specific Law and in using illustrations from everyday life to clarify a presentation of Law and Gospel.

Thesis 11 – In the seventh place, the Word of God is not rightly divided when there is a disposition to offer the comfort of the Gospel only to those who have been made contrite by the Law, not from fear of the wrath and punishment of God, but from the love of God.

Walther calls this error appalling, namely, that a person is to sorrow over sin in response to what great things God has done for that person. He makes the statement that a sinner "is not to become a different being... is not to amend his conduct, *before* coming to Jesus. He who alone is able to make him a better man is Jesus; and Jesus will do it for him if he will only believe" (Walther, p. 237). Walther cites some different instances in Scripture to remind us that God's Law produces contrition because of the threat of his wrath, not because God is such a loving being. One such instance is Pentecost, when Peter condemned the crowd for murdering Jesus. "We are not told they (the crowd) said, 'Oh, we feel so sorry for having grieved our faithful God.' It was not the love of God, but fright and terror that made them cry: 'What shall we do?'" (Ibid., p. 239).

How terrible when the Gospel is transformed into the Law to produce contrition. Yet that is exactly what plagued brother Martin Luther as he tormented over his sin compared to God's righteousness. Luther read Romans 1:17, "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith,'" and he hated God and harbored anger against him for demanding unattainable righteousness. Luther's presuppositions misguided him, however, when he read Romans 1:17 to read this beautiful Gospel passage as the Law. Now, indeed, we can properly consider the righteousness of God as Law when we compare ourselves to it and realize our imperfection, but the righteousness in Romans 1:17 is all Gospel. It is the righteousness that results from God's declaration of forgiveness. Luther's eyes were opened to this when he focused on another part of the passage, "The righteous will live by faith," and realized God makes us righteous by faith apart from the Law.

So then, we will remember to do a service to Luther and give honor to God by resisting the urge to use the Gospel as a club rather than a comfort. As a club, the Gospel only prompts an emotional renewal in a prospect. For example, if a faithful prospect confesses a certain sin to us, we could say, "How could you do what you did when you consider all that Jesus did for you?" He will assuredly feel awful, but it will only be an emotional renewal and will produce even further guilt. On the other hand, when we preach the Law to accomplish the purpose of the Law, that is, to convict a person of sin, and then preach the Gospel to accomplish the purpose of the Gospel, that is, to comfort the contrite sinner, we are faithful to God's Word.

A professor recently reminded us of a favorite saying by the late Pres. Carl Lawrenz, "Preach the Law as if there were no Gospel, then preach the Gospel as if there were no Law." That short summary statement will help us in our application of Law and Gospel as we seek to lead sinners to contrition and faith.

Thesis 13 – In the ninth place, the Word of God is not rightly divided when one makes an appeal to believe in a manner as if a person could make himself believe or at least help towards that end, instead of preaching faith into the person's heart by laying the Gospel promises before him.

Walther condemns the error that the command to believe is a work of the Law rather than an invitation of the Gospel. He reminds us that we ought to be able to preach a sermon without using the word "faith," and simply lay out the Gospel promises clearly, moving every hearer to lay their burden of sins on Jesus. Spending an undue part of time telling people that they must believe to be saved might give them the wrong impression that something is required of them to do for salvation. Then doubt sets in and invokes questions like, "Do I have proper faith? Is my faith strong enough?" and others. Walther goes on to describe how this exact point caused Melancthon to fall into synergism.

How easy it is for us to lean towards this error in evangelism. After all, isn't it our immediate goal to share Law and Gospel with a prospect so that he is brought to faith and saved? Consequently, we may encourage the prospect to believe or attempt to gain some feedback whether he has faith by asking for a confession. Of course, neither of these two procedures is wrong, but they may be dangerous. They may give the prospect the wrong impression that faith is his work and not God's, as a result we may rob the prospect of the objective comfort of the Gospel by creating a stumbling block of personal obedience to the Law.

Therefore, one option is to present God's plan of salvation to the prospect without encouraging or asking for a response on his part. We can simply trust that the Holy Spirit will do his work well, and pray for the planted Word to take root. On the other hand, we would also be in line with Scripture by encouraging the prospect to believe, or even asking for a confession. When we do so, however, we should act in accordance with his previous religious background and his present spiritual condition. Then, when it is appropriate to speak to the prospect about a response to the Gospel, we will want to present God as the subject of the action and the prospect as the object. In so doing we can avoid confusion and uncertainty on the part of the prospect, and at the same time allow the Holy Spirit to place the prospect's trust in God for salvation.

Thesis 16 – In the twelfth place, the Word of God is not rightly divided when the preacher tries to make people believe that they are truly converted as soon as they have become rid of certain vices and engage in works of piety and virtuous practices.

Those caught in this error attempt to make men godly by their own works, and then appeal to godliness as evidence of conversion. Walther gives us a caution, however, regarding such improper use of Law and Gospel.

It proposes to empty a great river of iniquity by continually dipping up pails of water from it and expecting to reach the bottom some time. If a river of iniquity is to be dried up, the evil source from which it springs must first be stopped up, and then pure water can be led into it (Walther, p. 300).

Simply placing one's confidence in pious actions is misleading, according to Walther, and it may even lead to a false sense of security and salvation. St. Paul says, "Everything that does not come from faith is sin" (Romans 14:23). Therefore, a person must be renewed and reborn from a corrupt creature to a Christ-like one, and then he will act accordingly, and his actions will be genuine good works. Walther urges us to appeal to this inner change as the source of good works. So does Jesus in Matthew 12:33 with the words, "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit."

This thesis has a significant implication for evangelism, namely, pious works performed by a prospect can be deceptive. Does it ever happen that a prospect indicates interest in visits, becomes a faithful church attendee, maybe even attends Bible class, and even contributes to the Lord's work? We rejoice at the sight! Therefore we might assume that this certain prospect is secure in his faith and we might concentrate evangelism efforts elsewhere, only later to be disappointed when we do not see the prospect for quite some time. Efforts to establish contact with the prospect prove futile, then he goes on vacation, then he becomes too busy for a visit, and then he is no longer interested in the church. What happened? Perhaps he never placed his faith in the Lord in the first place.

The preceding circumstance is a good reminder for us to continue in the proclamation of the Gospel to a prospect, and to speak frankly with him about his relationship with God to the point of being confident ourselves, by his confession, whether he believes. This is preferable to assuming that he believes because he exhibits "good works."

Consequently, we will also strive for long range spiritual results rather than short term changes. We will share the Gospel so that a prospect finds the route to heaven, not just to church. Finally, when we are confident of a prospect's faith in Jesus, we can compliment his godly obedience, not as social good, but as a spiritual response to God's grace. By doing so we will always turn the trust of prospects towards the Lord and away from themselves.

Thesis 20 – In the sixteenth place, the Word of God is not rightly divided when a person's salvation is made to depend on his association with the visible orthodox church and when salvation is denied to every person who errs in any article of faith.

Christ himself said of Peter's confession, "On this rock I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18). So Walther replies, "Being built upon Christ does not mean connecting oneself mechanically with the church, but putting one's confidence in Christ and hoping to obtain righteousness and salvation from him alone" (Walther, p. 334). Walther goes on further to distinguish between the visible church and the invisible church. So the teaching is false and misleading that if a person does not belong to a particular visible church then he is not a true believer.

Orthodox Lutherans are accustomed to accusing the Roman Catholic church of such error, but Walther chastises Lutherans for thinking that outside of the Lutheran church there is no salvation. No, people become *true* believers even *before* they become Lutherans. If the opposite were true, we would be setting up a demand

for salvation in addition to faith and contradicting Scripture. Therefore, on the one hand we can be thankful that a number of heterodox churches preach Christ as the Son of God who redeemed the world from sin, yet on the other hand we must continue to mark such churches and avoid them. We do so not because they don't preach salvation, but because they tolerate false teaching and lead people away from saving faith.

Making it obvious to prospects that our primary concern is that they become a child of God and our secondary concern is that they join an orthodox church body will gain rapport and respect. Of course, it will always be our prayer that they are enlightened to see the truth of Scripture and seek to nurture their faith among a church body that teaches that truth in its purity.

At the same time, if we are convinced after prolonged instruction and guidance that a prospect knows Jesus as his Savior, but does not intend to seek fellowship among an orthodox church, will we be willing to let go? Sometimes family ties influence a prospect, or perhaps religious upbringing, or perhaps a prospect lives much closer to another church, or maybe another church has some peripheral program to offer that our church admittedly has no intention of beginning. Should we promote an "our church or no church" philosophy? Moreover, Walther would indicate that we might harm his faith if we condemn his decision to attend church elsewhere, as if church membership determined salvation. At the same time, a clear and concise explanation of any false teachings of that church body would be in order, not as a hindrance, but as a help.

So, leading a prospect to believe that the WELS is the only church that leads to salvation is a sinful blunder and mishandling of God's Word. While holding firmly to the truths of Scripture, then, we are compelled to agree that prospects can be fed with the Gospel elsewhere and survive heterodoxy all the way to heaven. May we rejoice that Christ even uses false teachers to accomplish his will!

Thesis 22 – In the eighteenth place, the Word of God is not rightly divided when a false distinction is made between a person's being awakened and his being converted; moreover, when a person's inability to believe is mistaken for his not being permitted to believe.

In this thesis Walther confronts the Pietists and their false distinction of the way to salvation according to three groups: those still unconverted, those who have been awakened but are not yet converted, and those who have been converted (Walther, p. 363). They are mistaken, however, because awakening is synonymous with conversion in Scripture. "Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you" (Ephesians 5:19), proclaims that the same one who awakens from spiritual death is the same one who will be called out of darkness and turned (converted) to the light. Such a person is nothing less than a Christian saved by the blood of the Lamb.

The Pietists, however, claimed that a person who has not yet experienced true and genuine contrition in his heart (like that of David) has not yet been converted, he is merely awakened. Arguments from Scripture against such a view would be the Ethiopian eunuch, the jailer at Philippi, the crowd at Pentecost, and others who repented and were baptized. These people did not show any signs of sorrowful, agonizing remorse – yet they were accepted into the kingdom of God.

We will be wise to follow Scripture and assign two, not three, categories to souls on earth - believer and unbeliever. Jesus made it that simple when he said, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:16). That makes the principle of evangelism rather simple: use the Gospel to bring people from the condemned category to the saved category. Now, when exactly prospects make that transition is not for us to plainly see, for only God sees the heart. But what a joy it is to bring this comfort to a person's soul: if there is no unbelief, there is faith, and where there is faith there is salvation!

In addition, we will certainly, not set up any man-made standards for contrition, whether they are in our own mind or made known to others. The focus of forgiveness would then turn toward one's own feelings of guilt and may even work penance, rather than turning the sinner to the cross. If standards of contrition are carried out they will eventually promote despair and then rebellion against God. Instead we can offer the sinner who

confesses his sin the certainty of forgiveness from the Gospel. A more powerful message is nowhere to be found.

Thesis 23 – In the nineteenth place, the Word of God is not rightly divided when an attempt is made by means of the demands or the threats or the promises of the Law to induce the unregenerate to put away their sins and engage in good works and thus become godly; on the other hand, when an endeavor is made, by means of the commands of the Law rather than by the admonitions of the Gospel, to urge the regenerate to do good.

The Law cannot make a person godly, rather "through the Law we become conscious of sin" (Romans 3:20). Yet, Walther laments that it was common in that day for a preacher to use the Law in an attempt to make people more godly.

Ministers become aware that all their Gospel preaching is useless because gross sins of the flesh still occur among their hearers... These people come to church occasionally... [so] the preacher may come to the *conclusion* that he has preached too much Gospel to them and must adopt a different policy; he must hush the Gospel for a while and preach nothing but the Law, and conditions will improve (Walther, p. 387).

However, God is not pleased with service to him done under coercion, like a slave working only because of the crack of a whip. Walther says that such preachers as above are not concerned about the condition of the people's hearts, but only with enforcing the people's obedience. There is a difference. Are there any of us guilty of the same today?

In the work of evangelism, encouraging proper godly action from prospects is a tricky assignment. If the prospect is an unbeliever, the Gospel will be meaningless as a motivator and will bounce off his hardened heart in an instant. In that case it is permissible to prompt proper action by commands of the Law (e.g. non-member parents of a child in Lutheran Elementary School must enroll in Bible Information Class). On the other hand, if the prospect is a believer, the Gospel will be a motivating force behind his willingness to obey God. Just think of the different types of prospects and the different circumstances; there are so many. May we always consider the spiritual condition of the prospect before we address the situation and use Law or Gospel accordingly.

Thesis 25 – In the twenty-first place, the Word of God is not rightly divided when the person teaching it does not allow the Gospel to have a general predominance in his teaching.

We would probably assume correctly that Walther knew from the very beginning that this would be his final thesis. He waits until the end to give his students this final evangelical reminder.

Even when we are frustrated with the lazy performances of people, even when we are distraught at the frequent falling into sin, even when we know people can do better, Walther reminds us to take the attitude that Paul had toward the Corinthians (who were far from perfect themselves), "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). Paul continually wrestled with the Corinthians, yet all the while he was laying a firm foundation for their faith by preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Walther concludes this thesis and his lectures with these words: "God grant that some day people may say about you that you are preaching well, but too sweetly" (Walther, p. 412). Where the Gospel predominates, there God's people will grow in a life of faith.

Perhaps it is easier for us to let the Gospel predominate in our evangelism efforts than in preaching, because we recognize it as the sole means by which our prospects will come to faith. Even so, may the Gospel always have a predominance as we share our faith with others, to the end that they might be saved.

Especially in light of the Church Growth Movement we will want to keep our methods and means clearly focused on the power of the Gospel to convert unbelievers into believers. While we may use the assistance of various preliminaries and peripherals, we will do service to God and to the prospects to serve them with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Praise be to God for choosing to reveal himself, his will and his plan of salvation in the words of Scripture so that all mankind might come to a knowledge of the truth. May it be our prayer that God bless our efforts in evangelism, and that he give us success as we attempt to correctly, handle his Word of truth in the application of Law and Gospel.

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