

Law & Gospel in Hermann Sasse

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Nisi enim diserte discernatur Evangelium a lege, non potest salva retineri doctrina Christiana. (If the gospel is not clearly distinguished from the law, Christian doctrine cannot be retained undamaged.)

WHEN MARTIN LUTHER MADE THIS STATEMENT IN HIS GREAT Galatians commentary of 1530, he knew what he was talking about. At about the same time, he wrote that he would like “to place someone in the top position and call him a doctor of the Holy Scriptures, who can master this skill of distinguishing the law from gospel.”¹ In Luther’s view this was

the highest art in Christendom that we should know. Wherever this knowledge is lacking, one cannot be thoroughly certain about who is a Christian or a heathen or a Jew, because it depends altogether on this distinction.²

Why did Luther so emphasize the distinction between law and gospel? Why did Luther fear that Christian doctrine would be destroyed altogether if this distinction were not understood and applied? Why did he call it “the highest art”? The answers to these questions are deeply connected with the question regarding how sinful man can be righteous before God, for this theme of the sinner’s justification had determined the theological thinking in the West already before the Reformation took it up and focused attention on it.

Neither justification of the sinner by grace through faith for Christ’s sake nor the proper distinction between law and gospel are essentially teachings that belong solely to Luther and the Reformers. Their understanding of the gospel and the necessary distinctions they made to safeguard it from falsification were not merely personal convictions having equal rights with differing convictions—not mere matters of private judgment and opinion. Recalling his appearance at the Diet of Worms in 1521, Luther made it clear: *Tunc eram ecclesia*—“At that time, I was the church.” The same may be said about his confession of the doctrine of justification and the proper distinction between law and gospel: he spoke for the church, not for himself, proclaiming and defending the truth of the Scriptures and the doctrine of the church catholic against all error and false doctrine.

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NO OTHER GOSPEL

In his essay “Luther and the Teaching of the Reformation,”³ Hermann Sasse presented an excellent summary of Luther’s position. He raised the question: what did Luther understand by the “gospel,” and how was his understanding different from the predominant understanding in the church of his day? Sasse finds that Luther returned to the living God portrayed in the Scriptures instead of following philosophical conceptions. Luther recognized man’s total corruption by original sin, which makes him completely unable to contribute to his own salvation. There is no righteousness that human beings can achieve by their own capabilities or activities. That is what Luther found in the Scriptures. There is no righteousness created by our own obedience or fulfillment of the divine law. We are not justified and are not saved by a righteousness that rises to human standards as we may lay them down. A better righteousness is needed, one that rises to God’s own standards. It must be a righteousness given exclusively to us by God’s mercy, without any contribution from us. It is the righteousness of Christ, transferred to sinners who are baptized and believe. Without Christ and apart from Christ, God will always remain a God of law and wrath, who judges and executes. In Christ, however, he reveals to us his heart—his love, his mercy, and his intention to save and to bring us back to him.

For Luther this is the gospel—a joyful message that God forgives all sin and regards the sinner as justified and holy, regardless of his shortcomings and transgressions. It applies to the sinner who has learned to despair of himself, who longs for salvation, and who hopes in Christ to be free from sin and from eternal punishment. This gospel turns out to be no mere theory or teaching about the possibility of forgiveness. Rather, it is the concrete offer of God, proclaimed and thereby made effective. What the gospel promises and announces becomes a reality for the believer.

This gospel is abandoned wherever any form of human righteousness replaces Christ’s righteousness or adds to it. According to Hermann Sasse, the Lutheran doctrine of justification, though formulated in the sixteenth century, is much more directed against modern Protestantism and its overestimation of human abilities than against medieval theology or Roman Catholicism of the sixteenth century. At least medieval Christianity knew of Christ’s merit, though relying on human merits as well. For modern Protestantism, however, fashioned by the Enlightenment, there exists no more the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” Instead, Christ has been made into a new legislator—a second Moses, who left us a system of morals and religion. To

observe or not observe his rules determines man's salvation or disaster. Luther found this kind of thinking, which is totally alien to the gospel and, in fact, contrary and incompatible with it, already among the Enthusiasts of his time.

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

When Article V of the Formula of Concord warns us against a fatal mixing of the law and the gospel and against changing the gospel into a new law, it points to the merit of Christ. When the law is not distinguished from the gospel, the merit of Christ is almost automatically put in the dark, and afflicted consciences are deprived of the comfort they can take from the pure gospel. This last great Lutheran confessional statement of the sixteenth century makes perfectly clear how important it is for the church and for the Christian individual to distinguish clearly between the two. Literally, every aspect of Christian life and doctrine is affected by it: the understanding of the Holy Scriptures, the pure preaching of the gospel, the merit of Christ, and comfort for afflicted consciences. The proper distinction between law and gospel clearly proves to be a precondition for understanding the justification of sinners.

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For Luther and the Lutheran Church of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the question of the relationship between law and gospel aimed at much more than merely expressing doctrine in a theologically correct way. It was truly a question of life and death for the entire church, a question bound up with all other questions of the Reformation. In the end, it turned out to be a decisive issue that divided theologians and churches in the sixteenth century. All the differences between Lutherans and Roman Catholics, between Lutheranism, Enthusiasm, and Calvinism depended on the different answers given to the question of law and gospel. Even today, no one can fully understand the tensions and differences between the various confessions and denominations in Christendom unless he is aware of this basic distinction.

For this reason, the proper distinction between law and gospel is not merely a matter of theological speculation or of the history of dogma, even though other more burning issues have arisen and determined the course of present-day discussions. Rather, we are still confronted with the same problem from the sixteenth century, as with Christianity around the world: how do we understand the gospel of God's glory and grace, which is, according to Luther's 62d Thesis, the true treasure of the church?⁴ Do we accept it as the message of the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake, bringing to an end our fatal separation from God? Or is it more than that, perhaps something entirely different? Is it, as some theologians have understood it, the message of the com-

ing kingdom of God, of which the message of forgiveness is only one small part? Does the gospel, apart from whatever else it may be, give us guidelines and standards for transforming our society and for providing for better conditions in our community? Is the gospel, as such, a "new law"? Liberation theology in Latin America is an example of such a notion. It is not much different from what Karl Barth and his followers made of law and gospel. They deliberately chose the sequence "gospel and law." Are they right when they insist that the gospel contains and includes the law, just as the Ark of the Covenant contained the Tables of Testimony? Is Christ as Lord and King of the universe, to whom all power in heaven and on earth is given, not also a legislator?

LAW AND GOSPEL TODAY

To raise these questions stirs up the whole multitude of contrasts and tensions existing in Christianity today. If one studies the various documents of bilateral or multilateral negotiations between denominations of our time, the term "gospel" will appear frequently, but we are far from a consensus as to what it actually means and how it relates to the law. Existing dissent is carefully screened. A typical and prominent example of this is the *Leuenberg Concord* of 1973, by which the Reformed, United, and Lutheran Churches in Europe tried to give expression to their "consensus in understanding the gospel"⁵ and to make church fellowship among them possible. In this document, the question of law and gospel was deliberately left for further discussion, thereby making it perfectly clear that no consensus in understanding the gospel really existed, in spite of boastful declarations to the contrary.

In this respect, the Lutheran Confessions speak a different language. They give expression to a consensus on the doctrine of the gospel.⁶ They do not appoint a study group to develop principles for making the world a better place (something it certainly stands in great need of). Rather, they constitute a fellowship of faith and confession. Whenever modern ecumenical statements and declarations of doctrine are considered to be a decisive interpretation of the confessional writings of the sixteenth century, we should be very careful. What was confessed in the Reformation period should rather be interpreted by itself and be taken as a norm to judge doctrinal documents written in our own time. And if we compare the clear language of the fathers with the often indistinct and vague expressions used today, we will find that the Christianity of today seems unable to teach the world what the gospel really is. Whether we like it or not, there is no consensus, and since there is no consensus on the gospel, Christianity likewise is unable to explain to the world what the law of God is.

This very fact confronts us with the existing divisions in Christendom today. No doubt, these divisions are altogether rooted in the deplorable fact that Christians, to a much larger extent than they want to admit, are unable to speak with one voice and to proclaim the gospel. This lack of unanimity deeply affects all of Christendom. After all, in the age of the Reformation and Counter-reformation a new period of expansion began for the Christian church. The church was spread into all the world by emigration from already Christianized countries and by mission work. This began the third epoch of mission activity in church history. The first was the Christianizing of the ancient world. The second was directed predominantly to the Germanic and Slavic

nations. Thus the third period has been characterized by confessional differences and divisions. Missionaries from all denominations come to "Third World" countries, bringing the message that Jesus Christ is the Redeemer of the world. And yet, what does this mean? Is Jesus Christ the Redeemer because he is the eternal Son of God "who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was made man," as those churches who still confess the Nicene Creed proclaim? Or is Jesus the Redeemer because he was a most noble-minded and virtuous individual, a great teacher of religion and ethics?

And what about the meaning of "grace"? Is it the forgiveness of sins, as Lutherans teach, or does it mean that we gain new strength and courage to follow and accomplish God's will? And what about man? Is he a poor, sinful being, totally deprived of the knowledge of God, without fear of God and without faith in him, completely inclined to evil? Or is he just a weak and somehow defective creature needing improvement and correction, in the end able to achieve by his own gifts and talents something of what God wants him to do? The way in which we answer these questions automatically determines our understanding of the gospel, and it reveals an almost hopeless dilemma: in trying to bring the gospel to all nations, races, cultures, and religions of this world, Christians do not agree in what they are bringing, in what the gospel essentially is about. Using the same term, they often mean something completely different from each other.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons for the vast array of contradictory confessional statements and documents in our times. In many cases, these statements use a language in which each tradition and confession may find itself quoted, reproduced, or accepted. And yet it becomes a compromising language, not a clarifying one—perhaps even deliberately ambiguous.

The sixteenth century spoke a much clearer and more precise language. These Lutherans clearly defined the gospel as the promise and gift of forgiveness for Christ's sake. Nothing else. The Calvinists clearly said that they agreed with the forgiveness part, but forgiveness for them was never without sanctification.⁷ In our century, Karl Barth insisted on grace as always including both justification *and* sanctification. By grace, he asserted, we belong to Jesus Christ. In him we are justified by faith that receives the forgiveness of sins. In Christ, however, we are sanctified as well by *obedience* that places us under the direction and commandments he gave us. Such a teaching leaves no doubt that the gospel is understood as essentially being more than and different from the mere forgiveness of sins. Roman Catholicism on the other side also still teaches that justification has a twofold aspect in the remission of sins and renovation of the sinner, not an absolute and unconditional promise and gift of life and salvation.

ANOTHER GOSPEL

Today the meaning of sanctification and how it is connected with justification is often not clear at all, especially when combined with social ethics. We are told that the gospel is a source of power for social renewal, and that it shows us how we can be freed from the evils of racial discrimination, economic injustice, military armament, environmental destruction, and the like—problems that could undoubtedly become fatal threats to mankind and ought to be resisted. But if we take man's sinfulness seriously, can

we ever really expect to make this world a better place or achieve any essential change? There is no question that human reason and good will can achieve a lot in eliminating problems, trouble, danger, difficulties, and tensions among people and nations, but they cannot achieve salvation or any fundamental renewal of mankind. We have to live with sin and exist in a sinful, evil world determined to find its own end. "We are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness" (2 Pt 3:13); but we are not able to build it ourselves. "The best and holiest deeds must fail / To break sin's dread oppression" (*The Lutheran Hymnal*, 329:2). To some Christians this sounds like blasphemy since they believe in a Christian obligation to erect the kingdom of God on earth. And a position that does not follow this ideology and that does not teach that it is we who should contribute to making this world more pleasing to God is widely regarded as no longer in accord with the gospel. To proclaim salvation through the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake through faith is considered to be an outdated theology, far from what the world really needs today.

Forgiveness for the Calvinists was never without sanctification.

"Mission outreach," "evangelism," "Church Growth"—all are catchwords discussed almost everywhere in Christianity. Is it not our task to respond to the needs of this world, to meet its expectations? Does it not expect a general improvement to which Christians can contribute? We are called to participate in bringing unbelievers to repentance, in proclaiming the message of redemption, and no one will deny that it is a redemption for Christ's sake. But do we still know from what Christ has redeemed us? Are we not tempted to tell only the purpose for which we believe we are redeemed, namely, to cooperate in establishing the kingdom of God, in fulfilling God's divine will, in bringing about what Christ began when he started sending his apostles? We are told that we are the ones who can do it, at least who can cooperate in it once we are in God's service and renewed by his grace. Of course, we are still convinced that we cannot do anything by ourselves. We still sing: "With might of ours can naught be done." But then we think, "With God, we *can* do it!" At first sight, this looks very much like a genuine biblical truth, but we should consider such truth in its context, not as an isolated statement. It must be understood along with its indissoluble connection with biblical anthropology, with the doctrine of original sin, the doctrine of Christ's vicarious sacrifice and the wrath of God that condemns us to hell unless we are saved. All these biblical truths are linked with each other and safeguard each other. If we speak of Christ freeing men to serve him, we must keep this context in mind in order to find the correct ranking of any statement.

Today, however, all negative statements are widely disregarded and viewed as unpopular. We are told that modern man will only accept a message that gives hope to society and offers redemption and healing for all the evils and defects with which our world is confronted. When we speak of sin, we are told to look not so much

to the life of the individual, but rather to society in general, which is thought to have made societal structures and living conditions inhumane. This understanding of sin is not determined so much according to the criterion of *God's* will, but according to standards of *human* dignity, rights, and claims. Man is placed in the center and is made the measure of everything. And the gospel? It is considered to be merely a teaching as to how this world can once again be put under God's claim and rules. This is thought to be in accord with the beginning God himself made by sending Jesus Christ into this world. He started it, and now we must continue and finish it.

Such a position is, to a large extent, merely a variation of the old "social gospel," as proclaimed by Rauschenbusch and his followers at the beginning of this century. This social gospel of old is by no means outdated or dead. Instead, it comes up again and again and seems to be the most widespread interpretation of the "gospel" in our times. The Lutheran Church, however, cannot but resist this "social" interpretation of the gospel by declaring an unconditional "No!" It is not the gospel of the New Testament. It is a misunderstanding and a misinterpretation. And so we are confronted with a great and profound contrast in the teaching of the gospel, with far-reaching implications among Christians. The old question as to how the law and the gospel are related to each other is indeed a pressing and undeniable reality.

Wolfhart Pannenberg, one of Germany's best-known systematicians, only recently presented the notion that the traditional Lutheran distinction between law and gospel is not to be found with St. Paul in the New Testament. Pannenberg says that we should not treat the law-gospel distinction as some kind of a "holy vessel," never to be touched. To do so could be a violation of the principle of *sola Scriptura*.

Such a statement is nothing new. It goes along with the traditional warning from Karl Barth that we should not follow the Lutheran distinction but rather view the law as a divine word of eternal kindness—on the same level as the gospel and not in competition with the gospel. According to Barth, it is the same process of revelation and reconciliation that confronts us with gospel and law, with absolution and the challenge of repentance, with justification and sanctification. Barth wants to connect the two. We should hear the law together with the gospel, as of one and the same origin and intention. Otherwise, sanctification will come off badly. He who says "faith" must also say "obedience," according to Barth. He who says "gospel" must also say "law."⁸

Is Pannenberg right? Is Karl Barth right? Are we in danger of misunderstanding the Scriptures and short-changing obedience and sanctification? Indeed, there exists a danger. But we will never master it by mixing and exchanging law and gospel, making the gospel into a new law and obscuring the article of justification. Otherwise we will end up in Nomism, a kind of religion in which man attempts to reach salvation by his own doings and conduct—by obeying the law and preparing his own righteousness.

"AND THEY'LL KNOW WE ARE CHRISTIANS . . ."

People who try to earn their salvation by their own merits are found everywhere because it belongs to natural man to think and operate this way. You can find such an attitude among the heathen, in Judaism, and among Christians. At first sight, it is always impressive to see their "holy" lives. But we should know that we

can never recognize a Christian by his visible sanctity, by the extent to which he obeys the commandments. Jews know the commandments just as well; even the pagans do. If Christian sanctity consists in keeping the commandments and doing good works, why should only Christians be regarded as holy? Why not pious Jews and noble pagans as well?⁹

A Christian can never rely on his own righteousness nor base his salvation on what he is able to do. Rather, he is founded on the righteousness of Christ alone. This is the soteriological point derived from New Testament Christology. A Christian whose faith looks up to the Lamb of Calvary will know that he is always in a position before God of receiving and never in a position of giving him anything. For human piety, even in its best form, will always be penetrated by the natural *amor sui*, by subtle egoism. What then is the difference between a Christian and a pious non-Christian? A Christian does not believe in himself nor in his doings but in Christ alone. That's what makes the difference. There is no other criterion but such a faith.

Man is placed in the center and is made the measure of everything.

When the New Testament speaks about fruits of the Spirit and teaches sanctification, we should not distort and pervert such teaching. We do so when we maintain that the distinction between Christians and non-Christians can be determined by their works, by the fruits of a good or a bad tree. No doubt, a true faith in Christ is reflected in a Christian's life; it produces good works. We should rejoice in this fruit that comes from the Word of God. The Holy Spirit does things that we may consider completely impossible. Indeed, he creates faith, and from faith flows new obedience, according to Article VI of the Augsburg Confession. On the other hand, we must contest the opinion that on the basis of some factual findings one can state that such and such a good work has been caused by the Holy Spirit and by nothing else. We may make such a statement 'only by faith; we cannot prove it or demonstrate it.

Certainly, whenever the Holy Spirit is working, he is going to free people from all kinds of bondage and passions. But it is a fallacy to conclude from such a fact that it is always the Spirit who does so and not any other influence. If you give up smoking, it is probably not primarily the Holy Spirit. Your doctor may have convinced you, or you might have learned it in a Buddhist monastery. If you fast, you may be motivated by love for Christ or for the sake of the least of his brothers, to whom you give your food. But it may just as well be that you do it for health reasons because you feel that it would be better to lose some weight. If you care for the poor and the needy, if you work with the Peace Corps or Amnesty International, it may all be for Christ, or it may be for your own happiness and satisfaction. From what you are doing, nobody can tell what is motivating you. And so, to be honest, we cannot observe much of a difference between a Christian's holiness and that of a Jew or a Muslim. There is no visible Christian holiness different from any other. We do not see it. For

the holiness of God's children is only seen by God himself, and it remains hidden from human eyes. In fact, our Christian holiness and sanctity exists in being accepted by God in Christ Jesus so that his righteousness becomes ours. And in the same manner, a Christian congregation is recognized not by its activity, its social work, its good works, or its efforts, but only by its faith and what creates this faith, namely, God's word and sacraments.¹⁰ We are not Christians because we do mission work. It is the other way around. We do it because we are members of the body of Christ and are his instruments. Others do the same kind of work—Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons, for instance. But they come with another message that makes their efforts unacceptable to God, regardless of how "effective" they may be.

Certainly, a Christian congregation is to be active in Christian love. But can we be sure that it is a greater and better love than in a synagogue or mosque? Social welfare, organized by secular institutions or state agencies, can produce equally as impressive results. The Golden Rule of Matthew 7:12, "Do to others what you would have them do to you," is known just as well by non-Christians. And if we are told, "Indeed, such noble principles exist also outside the church, but Jesus gives us the power to fulfill them," then we had also better take into consideration the ethical standards of so-called Christian nations. If we do so honestly, we will feel ashamed. Are these standards any higher than those of Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, or even Communists? At least the Communist countries banned pornography. Even the Nazis organized a perfect welfare system. And what about today's crime rate in Western countries? What about abortion, human exploitation, war, and other evils? Do they not exist at least to the same extent (if not higher) among people deeply and traditionally influenced by Christianity? What are we going to answer if we are asked about the ethical results of the Christian faith? Can we say anything other than "Kyrie eleison"?

In reality, we have hardly anything of which we can be proud. And even more, if we have truly experienced what the Holy Spirit can do to man and through man, we will no longer speak of our own abilities. Rather, we will know that we cannot trust in what we may achieve but must put all our hope in Christ.

Is there any church or Christian group in this world that could present itself to the Lord on the Last Day and say: "You were hungry and we gave you something to eat; you were thirsty and we gave you something to drink; you were a stranger and we invited you in?" Such a church would get the answer: "I don't know you." It is indeed a profound mystery that in this great parable of the last judgment (Mt 25:31–46), all those who gave something to eat and to drink, who invited in and clothed and looked after him and

came to visit and served the Lord in doing so to the least of his brothers, did not know at all what they were doing and to whom.

THE FINAL DISTINCTION

This makes it clear again why Luther fought Nomism so vigorously—that mixture and exchange of law and gospel that tries to make the law a kind of gospel and ends up turning the gospel into a law. The two must be properly distinguished because the gospel's uniqueness cannot be understood otherwise. The gospel is the message of forgiveness for Christ's sake. This is not just one theological concept among others; this is not a meaning developed by men that can easily be exchanged for a different opinion. It is, in fact, the utter *reality* of forgiveness in Christ.

It was Christ's *opus proprium* to call sinful men, to die for them on the cross, and to reconcile the world with God. It is the church's *opus proprium* to proclaim Christ as the reconciler to all the world: "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:19–21).

That is the gospel, and saving faith means to trust this gospel and no other. Luther discovered and proclaimed again this gospel, which declares that God justifies the sinner and that an alien righteousness alone shall be man's righteousness. To understand this gospel, one must give up all patterns of thinking in terms of self-righteousness achieved by one's own merits and good works. Nobody can understand the gospel who does not distinguish it from the law. For the law tells me what I should do; the gospel tells me what God has done and is still doing. The law says what God demands from me; the gospel tells me about God's gift. The law states: the righteous is justified; the gospel states: the sinner is justified. The law reveals God's wrath; the gospel shows his mercy. The law kills; the gospel makes alive. The law closes the door to heaven and condemns to eternal death; the gospel opens the door to heaven for the sinner and grants him eternal life.

No other religion has this to offer. It is a unique message. If we lose this understanding of the gospel, Christianity will again become a religion of the law, not essentially different from any other human religion.

Hermann Sasse confessed this gospel. He gave witness to it in all of his writings. And it was this gospel that opened for him the door to heaven when his Lord called him home on August 9, 1976. XXXX

NOTES

1. New Year Sermon on Galatians 3:23–24. WA 36:29, 13–14.
2. WA 36:25, 5–8.
3. See Edward Gordon Selwyn, ed., *History of Christian Thought* (London: John Heritag, the Unicorn Press; later the Centenary Press, 1937), 106–124.
4. AE 31:31.
5. The official English translation by Martin Cressy has "common understanding of the gospel." See the opening paragraph and Section II in *Lutheran World* 20 (1973): 347 ff. Similarly the superior translation by John Drickamer in *The Springfielder* 35 (March 1972): 241–249.
6. The Preface to the *Book of Concord* (Tappert, 3) and the opening section of the Epitome of the Formula (Tappert, 464).

7. Hermann Sasse examined this difference especially in *Here We Stand*, trans. Theodore G. Tappert (New York: Harper and Bros., 1938; reprint Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1946), 110–122 [hereafter, 1st. ed.]. A reprint from Lutheran Publishing House (now Open Door Books), Adelaide, South Australia [hereafter, 2nd ed.] has different pagination: 118–130.
8. See Sasse, *Here We Stand*, 1st ed., especially 112–113, 163–166; 2nd ed., 120–121, 171–174.
9. See AE 31:335 and also AE 54:110, no. 624.
10. For the same reason we decline to sing: "And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love."