

Safe Harbor

Dispatches to Fellow Christian Pirates and Gospel Privateers Waging Battle On The Religious High Seas

The Pastor & the Pulpit

Plundered From the Historical Treasures of Great Theology

In order to preach the saving Word in its truth and purity a careful and thorough distinction between Law and Gospel is indispensably necessary. The distinction between these two doctrines is the key to the Bible. Any man who does not know that the Bible contains these two distinct doctrines will not and cannot understand its teachings; the Bible will appear to him a book full of contradictions. When the Lord says, "Do this — love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and your neighbor as yourself, — and you will live," Luke 10:27-28, and the apostle writes, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works" Eph. 2:8-9, these two words cannot but seem contradictory to him who does not know that they belong to two distinct systems of teaching. It is not possible that a preacher who has himself not learned to distinguish doctrines could present the plan of salvation in its proper order. A sharp distinction between Law and Gospel alone will teach the pastor where each doctrine belongs and in what connection it must be preached.

On the importance of this distinction the Formula of Concord (Art. V, No.1) says: "The distinction between law and gospel is a particularly glorious light. It serves to divide God's Word properly [cf. 2 Tim. 2:15] and to explain correctly and make understandable the writings of the holy prophets and apostles. Therefore, we must diligently preserve this distinction, so as not to mix these two teachings

together and make the gospel into a law. For this obscures the merit of Christ and robs troubled consciences of the comfort that they otherwise have in the holy gospel when it is preached clearly and purely. With the help of this distinction these consciences can sustain themselves in their greatest spiritual struggles against the terror of the law."

For the right distinction and application of both Law and Gospel it must be remembered that the Law is the hammer to shatter the rocky hearts of the impenitent, a fire to consume the impurities remaining in the hearts of the converted, Jer. 23:29. The Gospel is the good Samaritan pouring oil into the wounds of the alarmed conscience and binding up the broken hearts with the assurance of mercy, Luke 10:34. The Gospel is the glad tidings of great joy which comes from heaven and proclaims the gracious forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake.

To hurl the thunders of Sinai at the alarmed and penitent is using the hammer on the broken hearts, a cruelty rebuked in Ezek. 34:4. To comfort those who "go on in sin" with grace and forgiveness in heaven is pouring oil over the unbroken rock, this is waste of 'the precious' which is forbidden in Matt. 7:6. To mix up Law and Gospel, to preach that faith and works must go together for the salvation of man, that, if man does what he can, God will not fail to do His part, to speak of the Gospel of love to our neighbor and to picture Christ as a savior whose favor we must win by doing good is using hammer and oil indiscriminately, which will create a muddle and such a splashing that neither

preacher nor hearer can tell which is which. In all theology and in all preaching the right distinction between Law and Gospel is the most necessary thing, because without it the way of salvation cannot be taught right.

This distinction between Law and Gospel must not only be presented theoretically — a sermon bearing directly on this subject is frequently in place — in all his preaching the pastor is to carry it out practically. A point where the two are frequently mingled without the preacher knowing or intending it is in exhortations unto good works. To make the Law the primary motive for good works, to teach people that they must do a certain thing because it is a service of God commanded in His Law, and to make the mercy of God the primary motive for doing good, teaching people to walk in good works because God has shown them such great mercy in Jesus Christ are two very different ways of exhorting unto good works. The one is legalistic, the other evangelical. The one genders a servile spirit of bondage, the other a free spirit of adoption. When one man goes to church on Sunday morning thinking he must because it is commanded in God's Law, and the other goes to church on Sunday because he wants to, remembering the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, those two men are actuated by two very different spirits. The one has the Jewish spirit of legalism, the other the free spirit of Christ. The one is a son of Hagar, the bondmaid, the other a son of Sarah, the mistress of the house. The pastor's preaching should therefore not make the hearers Hagarites, it should be of such a character as to make them sons and daughters of the free woman. By preaching the love of God, free salvation in Jesus Christ, the preacher should fill his hearers with zeal and ardor to run, and then he should lay down the Ten Commandments as the way in which to run, so that the word be fulfilled in them: "I will run in the way of your commandments when you enlarge my heart! Ps. 119:32.

In his sermon on the Epistle for the First Sunday after Epiphany, Luther speaks of the right way to exhort unto good works in this way: "I beseech you, brethren, by the mercies of God. Paul does not say: I command you. He is preaching to those who are already Christians, pious through faith after the new man. And these should not be compelled by commandments, but admonished, so that they may do willingly what is to be done with the sinful old nature.

For whosoever does not do it willingly, moved by friendly admonition, is not a Christian and whosoever extorts it from the unwilling by commandments is no more a Christian preacher or ruler, but a worldly taskmaster. The legalist drives with threats and punishments, the preacher of grace incites and persuades by the divine goodness and mercy which has been manifested unto us; for he does not want unwilling works or a demure service, he wants cheerful services rendered to God joyously."

Next to St. Paul no other man was such a master in distinguishing Law and Gospel as was Martin Luther, and none other saw the necessity of such a distinction more clearly than he did. He had learned it in a hard school of bitter experience, and it is self-experience indeed which alone can make a man truly skilled in this divine art. To give a definition in theory is easy enough. The Law commands, the Gospel persuades; the Law drives, the Gospel draws; but to carry out the demarcation line practically in all the work of the ministry is an art which the Holy Ghost must teach, and every truly God-fearing man who has grown gray in the work of the ministry is ready to confess just with regard to the right application of Law and Gospel: In Thy light alone, O Lord, can we see the light (Ps. 36:9); for it is the right application of Law and Gospel which teaches when to rebuke, when to praise, when to warn, when to comfort.

The right distinction between Law and Gospel will go far towards presenting the various doctrines of the Scriptures in their proper order. It is true that all teachings of the Scriptures are divine truth, the least as well as the greatest, but not all are of the same importance. Hence it is a duty of the pastor in the course of time to preach all the teachings of the Scriptures, as Paul testified of himself in saying to the elders of the church at Ephesus: "Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God." Acts 20:26-27. But the more important truths must be preached the more frequently. The first elements of the Christian doctrine, as, the articles of redemption, of justification, of the means of grace, must be made familiar to the hearers, and the preacher should exercise care to put each doctrine in the proper place where it belongs. To preach the election of grace in such a way as though it preceded redemption in Christ is corrupting the Scriptures for according to the Scriptures election

grows out of redemption, and not contrariwise. We once heard a preacher speak of sanctification, urging all his hearers to follow holiness, and then going on to speak of conversion, without showing the relation between the two, thus making the impression that a man could be sanctified before being converted.

When we say that the doctrines should be preached in their proper order, we do, of course, not mean that a pastor should preach the articles of doctrine in the order in which he finds them in a compendium of theology, but he should present the teachings of the Scriptures in such a way that the simplest among his hearers can gather a clear knowledge of the way of salvation from his preaching. To attain this object the preacher must exercise care to employ a clear and lucid arrangement and style in each sermon. It is, of course, true that the Holy Ghost can use also disconnected truths to kindle saving faith, but the confused sermon is not adapted either to hold the attention of the hearer or to impart a clear knowledge of the plan of salvation. For this purpose, too, a sermon must be carefully prepared, that it may form a logical, or, at least, a well-connected discourse in all its parts...

A pastor who teaches the true doctrine is duty bound to reject and to refute the opposite false doctrine, and this he dare not omit where circumstances require it. St. Paul emphatically enjoins this duty :when he writes: "An overseer... must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it. For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for shameful gain what they ought not to teach." Titus 1:9-11 The pastor who can see the wolf breaking into his own fold and who will not open his mouth to warn against him is a hireling and not a true shepherd. "if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes any one of them, that person is taken away in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at the watchman's hand.' Ezek. 33:6. The lack of positive firmness in the proclamation of the truth is a disease of our unionistic times. It must be called a running sore of the modern" church that the refutation of falsehood has so largely disappeared from the pulpit and the preaching of heresy is encouraged in wide circles. The very love of the souls

entrusted to his care must constrain a faithful pastor to warn against errors which threaten to undermine the faith of his hearers and to poison their souls...

The most essentially important thing in a pastor' work is preaching. Therefore he is called a preacher, because he is called to preach. To this function of his office the pastor is to devote the best of his time and energy. "Preach the Word," says the apostle, 2 Tim. 4:2 "be ready in season and out of season." The Lord's marching order to His apostles was: "Go ye and preach," and this is enjoined on all the followers of the apostles. The pastor who is negligent in preaching is negligent in the most essential part of his office. The main thing in the office of a priest is sacrificing, and the main thing in the office of a preacher is preaching. Happy is the preacher who loves to preach, who takes delight in delivering the message entrusted to him.

It is, however, not much preaching, but rather the right kind of preaching which is wanted. Much harm is done in the world by the wrong kind of preaching, and the more there is of it the worse it is. Every minister who would build the kingdom of Christ must take heed what he preaches and how he preaches. On this the Apology says: "Because by the grace of God there is Christian and wholesome teaching in our churches for comfort in all trials, therefore the people gladly frequent good preaching. For there is nothing which tends so much to attach the people to the church as the good sermon. But our adversaries preach the people out of the churches, because they do not teach the necessary articles of Christian doctrine, but relate legends of saints and other fables." (Art. of the Mass, No. 51.)...

Now a good sermon wants to be studied. Those men are rare indeed who can go to the pulpit and deliver a good sermon without previous preparation. Only when the preacher enters the pulpit well prepared can the congregation expect a good sermon, and it may be laid down as a rule: the more thorough the preparation the better the sermon. This rule is, of course, denied by those who claim inspiration for their preachers, Tunkers, Mennonites, and some others. These declare that preachers must not study their sermons, but are to say what is given them by the Spirit while they are speaking. In support of this extravagant opinion they appeal to the Lord's words: "Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness

before them and the Gentiles. When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you." Matthew 10:17-20. In these words the Lord promised His disciples, at a certain hour they should be enabled to speak by the Spirit of God without previous preparation, but He gave this promise to martyrs and not to preachers, and to refer this promise to the "hour" of preaching is a woeful corruption of the Lord's words. Hearing the insipid talk of such a would-be inspired preacher once ought to be sufficient to convince any man of sober judgment that it is not the Spirit of God speaking by him. There is no promise that preachers shall be inspired, although it is not denied that in cases of extreme necessity, when there was absolutely no time or opportunity for preparation, a God-fearing preacher may arise to preach with the sure confidence that the God who has sent him to preach and has placed him in such a situation will also be his helper. The preacher who is careless and neglectful in preparing his sermons acts in direct violation of the Word of God for to Timothy Paul writes: "devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress." 1 Timothy 4:13-15. And Malachi 2:7 it is said: "For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts." If the people are to learn the Law at the preacher's mouth, he must study the Law and must compare all the words which he speaks to the people with the Law of the Lord, and must make sure that he is a true messenger of God. But of this he cannot be sure of except when he speaks after careful preparation. The ambassador of Christ is in duty bound to make full use of his time, that he may deliver the Master's message right and to the best of his ability. Every sermon should be his best effort.

In preparing a sermon a pastor should nevertheless not depend on his own learning, ingenuity, and skill. Prayer should precede the composing of each and every sermon. The pastor's study should be a closet of prayer, his writing desk an altar from which sighs arise to the Author of all true spiritual wisdom. Neither linguistic,

nor philosophic, nor scientific education and knowledge, nor the most brilliant mental gifts will properly fit a man for the composing of a good sermon. These may all be helps, but they must be counted only handmaids and nothing more.

While making full use of the knowledge which he has acquired and the gifts of mind which he has received the pastor should never forget that he is called to proclaim "the mystery hidden for ages in God," Eph. 3:9. The true and living knowledge of this mystery cannot be obtained by human research and sagacity, it must be revealed to the heart by Him in whom it is hid. Of this mystery the Lord said to Peter, "For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven," Matt. 16:17. Let the preacher be ever so highly educated and ever so gifted, if he depends on "flesh and blood," his own wisdom and ability, the true inwardness of this mystery will remain hid to him. God reserves to Himself this glory that He is "the only wise God," 1 Tim. 1:17, who "stores up sound wisdom for the upright," Prov. 2:7, and He will not show His secrets to those who are wise in their own conceits, for which the Son returns thanks to the Father saying: "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will," Matt. 11:25-26. Humility, despairing of one's own ability, is an essentially necessary prerequisite for the right and truly fruitful study of the Scriptures. "The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple," Ps. 19:7. A pastor must be humble enough to acknowledge with St. Paul: "Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God," 2 Cor. 3:5. When going to work to prepare a sermon let it be done with urgent prayer for the light, the guidance, and the governing of the Holy Ghost.

This necessity of prayer is by no means refuted by the fact that a pastor who is himself an unconverted man and who performs his labors without prayer, or whose prayer is but sounding brass may also compose and deliver a sermon which is good in itself. He may possess a formal, theoretical knowledge of the Scriptural doctrine, and he may present it in orthodox words and in such a form and manner that his sermons must be pronounced good both as to contents and form, but he, nevertheless, cannot preach as every ambassador of Christ ought to do. If conceit and

ambition possess his heart, it will show in his conduct and his language, style and subjects will be chosen and framed to find honor with men. If he is a hireling, he will aim to avoid what would be unpleasant to the hearers and might tend to diminish his revenues. If he is ruled by the love of ease, he will not devote the time and labor to his sermons which he might and should devote to them. Even when aiming to preach only what is in the Bible the unconverted preacher who does not seek the face of the Lord will speak of the mysteries of God as would a blind man of colors. He cannot speak as a man who has himself 'tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come,' Hebr. 6:5. He is a man who speaks in a cause in which his own heart is not concerned, and his preaching must be lacking "in demonstration of the Spirit and of power," 1 Cor. 2:4. The scribes and Pharisees also studied the Law of Moses and expounded it to the people, but when Christ explained the Law, "the people were astonished at His doctrine. For He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes," Matt. 7:29. That preacher alone whose heart believes what he preaches to others, whose soul has stood under the lowering clouds of Sinai and has tasted the sweetness of Christ, he alone can preach as a man knowing of what he speaks, and though he be an Amos and not an Isaiah, the Spirit of God will make his preaching a polished shaft.

Fervent prayer before composing and before delivering a sermon is like a strong anchor for the God-fearing pastor who feels his weakness and realizes his own insufficiency. The right kind of preaching is God's gift. He must give a spiritual eye to discern the things of the Spirit of God, 1 Cor. 2:14. He must open the understanding to behold wondrous things out of His Law, Ps. 119:18. Of the times of the New Covenant He said by the prophet: "The tongue of the stammerers shall be ready to speak plainly," Is. 32:4. In the hour of distress, when all wisdom and skill seems to have departed from him, let the pastor do what the Scriptures bid him: "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him," James 1:5. And when a sermon has been prepared with much study and prayer and seems so poor that the manuscript would go into the fire but for lack of time to make another effort, the pastor should commit it to God and should go to the pulpit cheerfully. Not infrequently does God bestow a special blessing on sermons that we

are altogether dissatisfied with. And though our preaching do not find the applause of the public or the praise of the learned, what of it? Among the polished Corinthians some said even of St. Paul, "His letters are weighty and powerful, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible," 2 Cor. 10:10. Yet this same Paul accomplished more for the planting of the Church than any of the other apostles. God judges differently from men, and He never despises the petitions of a humble pastor who is urgent in prayer.

The primary reason why each and every sermon must be prepared carefully and prayerfully is, because it dare contain anything which is not in full harmony with the Word of God. Churches are built and pulpits are erected for the proclamation of God's revealed Truth unto the salvation of souls. Sectarian churches are built and sectarian preachers are called for the promulgation of sectarian doctrines, a mixture of truth and error, but Lutheran pulpits are built and Lutheran ministers are called for the preaching of "the everlasting Gospel," Rev. 14:6. Every Lutheran pastor who has subscribed the Book of Concord in an unqualified manner has pledged himself to the principle: "The Word of God makes articles of faith, and no one else, not even an angel." (Smalcald Art., Part II, No. 15.) The sermon, all of it, must be taken from the Word of God. Self-evidently it may be embellished with illustrations taken from nature, from history, from current events, from the doings of men, both pious and wicked, etc., but it must not contain anything which is against the Word of God, or by which men are led into error. Nor should any dubious expressions be used which are liable to be misunderstood or misconstrued. The pastor must pattern after Paul who declared in his defense before King Agrippa, "To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass," Acts 26:22. Paul did not preach politics and science; he did not aim to tickle the ears of his hearers with pleasing discourses; he studied the Scriptures of the Old Testament, and these he preached as having been fulfilled in Christ. The pastor must make sure that the doctrines which he preaches are none other than the doctrines taught in the Scriptures.

In his Reply to Henry of Brunswick, entitled: Wider Hans Wurst (§ 66), Dr. Luther says: "But the doctrine must not be sin, nor reprehensible. It does not

belong into the Lord's Prayer where we say, 'Forgive us our trespasses,' because it is not our work, but God's own Word, who cannot sin or do wrong. For a preacher must not pray the Lord's Prayer and seek the forgiveness of sins after preaching (if he is a true preacher), but must be bold to say with Jeremiah, Jer. 17:16: 'You know what came out of my lips; it was before your face.' Yea, he must be ready freely to say with St. Paul and all the apostles and prophets: 'Haec dixit Dominus,' God Himself hath said it. And again: I was an apostle and prophet of Jesus Christ in this sermon. Here it is not necessary, yea, rather, not good to ask forgiveness of sin, as though he had taught wrong. It is God's word, not mine, and this God neither shall nor can forgive me, but He must confirm, praise, crown it, and say: Thou hast taught right; for I have spoken by thee, and the Word is mine. The man who cannot boast of his sermon in this way should let preaching alone for he will surely lie and blaspheme God." (Walch's ed., vol. XVII, 1685.)...

The great importance of every sermon containing nothing but the truth of God is also specially evident from the words of the Lord: "the truth will set you free," John 8:32. The wood, hay, stubble of human thoughts and human opinions will be burned up in the day of trial. Divine truth alone can fortify the soul against all trials. Every pastor having a heart for his people must be intent on building their souls on a foundation which cannot give way when the last test approaches. But the truth alone can make free, free from error, free from terror. Ever should we pastors in preparing sermons bear in mind the truth which our Confessions express in the words: "If there is to be a Christian church and a Christian faith,.. they must preach and teach a doctrine which places the soul, not upon error or sand, but on a foundation on which it may firmly rely and trust." (Apology, De Justificatione, No. 119.)

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