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*Lutheranized Calvinism:  
Gospel or Law,  
or Gospel and Law*



*P. Andrew Sandlin*

We are profoundly grateful for the progress that was made by the Reformation. We were led into a more biblical understanding of the way of salvation. Nonetheless, unresolved issues remain. There have been long-standing differences between adherents of the historic Lutheran and Reformed confessions. That is evident especially in their different attitudes toward the law. The law can serve to reveal and convince us of our sin, but Lutherans fear that making the commandments a rule for Christian living will confuse law and gospel. They fear that it will confuse salvation by grace with salvation by works.

NORMAN SHEPHERD

The latest division in the Reformed ranks (of the several hundreds, since Calvinists, being of all things “doctrinalists,”<sup>1</sup> seem to love to divide) is spearheaded by a distinct *Lutheranizing* tendency. Some rather prominent Calvinists are leaning more heavily toward the Wittenberg Reformer and leaning somewhat away from John Calvin and, more accurately, from a more consistently Reformed perspective at key points.<sup>2</sup>

Let’s acknowledge, at the outset, that Calvinists owe a great deal to Luther.<sup>3</sup> His break with the synergistic *soteriology* (salvation is a collaborative effort by God and man) of medieval Rome sparked the Reformation. Almost as important was his denial of a synergistic *epistemology* (both the Bible and tradition stand on equal par as the sources of revelation and authority in the church).<sup>4</sup> Luther, in principle, would have none of that, although like the other Reformers, he assumed a greater role for tradition than his express statements allowed.<sup>5</sup>

In any case, we Calvinists are grateful to Luther for the process of reformation he set in motion.

But we Calvinists aren’t Lutherans, and Lutherans aren’t Calvinists. It’s strange that some notable Calvinists don’t detect the chasm separating Lutheranism from Calvinism,

because Lutherans certainly do. There are, in fact, clear distinctions between us—not distinctions touching on the cardinal issues of the catholic faith, but distinctions that flow from those issues. Here is where the new Lutheranizing Calvinists come in. We can detect their increasing Lutheranization in several major areas. In this brief essay I will address the *soteriological* dualism (a rigid distinction between gospel and law)

### SOTERIOLOGICAL DUALISM

Good Lutherans see the distinction between gospel and law at the *heart* of the Christian faith, and they perceive justification by faith alone as the *organizing principle of Christian theology and the faith itself*. The gospel (in both New and Old Testaments) is the good news of salvation in Christ, and the law (in both New and Old Testaments) is the goading demand of God on man that (sinful) man cannot keep and which therefore *hounds* him to trust in Christ. Man does this by faith alone; and when he trusts in Christ, he is justified, or declared righteous, Christ's righteousness being "imputed" to him, that is, *credited* to his account. Lutherans warn the Christian against sanctification,<sup>6</sup> because it may lead him to believe that he is trusting in his good works to save him. In fact, sanctification is nothing more than "getting used" to justification.<sup>7</sup> It can be a dangerous thing, and perhaps should not be stressed at all.

Herman Sasse, one of Lutheranism's most celebrated twentieth-century theologians, writes that "the doctrine of Justification is the key which 'alone opens the door to the whole Bible.' The Reformed Church repudiates this."<sup>8</sup> Sasse champions the "rigid distinction between law and gospel"<sup>9</sup> which Lutherans maintain. He correctly observes that the Reformed have not followed the Lutherans in this rigidity. Lutherans see *sola fide*, justification by faith alone, as preeminent and anterior to *sola scriptura*, the Bible alone as our final authority. As Sasse elsewhere teaches, Calvinists hinge their view of Christianity on "Scripture alone," and Lutherans suspend their view of Christianity on "faith alone."<sup>10</sup> Justification, and not Scripture, is ultimate for Lutherans.<sup>11</sup> It is not

biblical authority that animates Lutherans, but salvation by faith alone.

Lutheran theologian Richard E. Muller perhaps best summarizes this contrast:

I suggest that Calvinism conceives of the Bible in terms of its regulating character—the rule for the Christian life. . . . For Lutheranism the Bible has primarily a declarative function and only secondarily a regulative function in the Christian life. . . . When the Lutheran turns to the Bible he wants to hear again the declaration that his sins are forgiven.<sup>12</sup>

When Lutherans read the Bible, they see *mainly* a declaration of forgiveness. When Calvinists read the Bible, according to Muller, they see *mainly* a demand for obedience. While we Calvinists would see our perspective as more full-orbed than Muller suggests, there is a more than a grain of truth in his distinction.

The rigid distinction between gospel and law in Lutheranism is expressed powerfully in their Book of Concord (Article V), a confessional standard. Note especially the portions I've emphasized with italics below:

2] 1. We believe, teach, and confess that the distinction between the Law and the Gospel is to be maintained in the Church with *great diligence* as an especially brilliant light, by which, according to the admonition of St. Paul, the Word of God is *rightly divided*.

3] 2. We believe, teach, and confess that the Law is properly a divine doctrine, which teaches what is right and pleasing to God, and reproves everything that is sin and contrary to God's will.

4] 3. For this reason, then, everything that reproves sin is, and belongs to, the preaching of the Law.

5] 4. But the Gospel is properly such a doctrine as teaches what man who has not observed the Law, and therefore is con-

demned by it, is to believe, namely, that Christ has expiated and made satisfaction for all sins, and has obtained and acquired for him, without any merit of his [no merit of the sinner intervening], forgiveness of sins, righteousness that avails before God, and eternal life.

6] 5. But since the term Gospel is not used in one and the same sense in the Holy Scriptures, on account of which this dissension originally arose, we believe, teach, and confess that if by the term Gospel is understood the entire doctrine of Christ which He proposed in his ministry, as also did his apostles (in which sense it is employed, Mark 1:15; Acts 20:21), it is correctly said and written that the Gospel is a preaching of repentance and of the forgiveness of sins.

7] 6. But if the Law and the Gospel, likewise also Moses himself [as] a teacher of the Law and Christ as a preacher of the Gospel are contrasted with one another, we believe, teach, and confess that *the Gospel is not a preaching of repentance or reproof*, but properly *nothing else than a preaching of consolation*, and a joyful message *which does not reprove or terrify*, but comforts consciences against the *terrors of the Law*, points alone to the merit of Christ, and raises them up again by the lovely preaching of the grace and favor of God, obtained through Christ's merit.

8] 7. As to the revelation of sin, because the veil of Moses hangs before the eyes of all men as long as they hear the bare preaching of the Law, and *nothing concerning Christ*, and therefore do not learn from the Law to perceive their sins aright, but either become presumptuous hypocrites [who swell with the opinion of their own righteousness] as the Pharisees, or despair like Judas, Christ takes the Law into his hands, and explains it spiritually, Matthew 5:21 ff; Romans 7:14. And thus the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all sinners [Romans 1:18], how great it is; by this means they are directed [sent back] to the Law, and then first learn from it to know aright their sins—a knowledge which Moses never could have forced out of them.

9] Accordingly, although the preaching of the suffering and death of Christ, the Son of God, is an earnest and terrible proclamation and declaration of God's wrath, whereby men are

first led into the Law aright, after the veil of Moses has been removed from them, so that they first know aright how great things God in his Law requires of us, none of which we can observe, and therefore are to seek all our righteousness in Christ:

10] 8. Yet as long as all this (namely, Christ's suffering and death) proclaims God's wrath and terrifies man, *it is still not properly the preaching of the Gospel*, but the preaching of Moses and the Law, and therefore a foreign work of Christ, by which He arrives at his proper office, that is, to preach grace, console, and quicken, which is properly the preaching of the Gospel.

This confession identifies Moses with the law and asserts that what *reproves* and *requires* is law, and not gospel, and what *consoles* and *comforts* is gospel, and not law. The "Gospel is not a preaching of repentance or reproof, but properly nothing else than a preaching of consolation, and a joyful message which does not reprove or terrify, but comforts consciences against the terrors of the Law." The law *only* condemns and the gospel *only* comforts. It is clear that *even the preaching of the Cross*, to the extent that it declares God's wrath, is not truly the gospel. One can thus preach the Cross without preaching the gospel! This may seem astounding, but it is just what confessional Lutheranism teaches.

Lutherans, Sasse asserts, see this distinction as "the *whole* content of the Gospel," while for Calvinists (he asserts) it's only "the *principal* content of the gospel." A crucial fact to grasp about Lutheran dogmatics is that it does not see the law as a ministry of Christ (they call it is his "strange" work, while the gospel is his "real" work).<sup>13</sup> Although the law surely *must* be preached (it drives men to Christ), there is nothing specifically *Christian* about it (and it, unlike the gospel, is revealed in nature<sup>14</sup>). The law is useful to Lutherans, but not especially *Christian*.

For this reason, according to another of their prime theologians, Francis Pieper, "Law and Gospel are actually, like yes and no, perfect opposites."<sup>15</sup> He goes on to declare that the

gospel makes no demands of any kind on man, and it condemns no sin, not even the sin of unbelief!

There is great scholarly debate over the extent to which these issues and others perpetuate Luther's actual views, but suffice it to say that good, confessional Lutherans today agree with Sasse's sentiment.<sup>16</sup>

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Increasingly, so do some prominent Calvinists. While their view of gospel and law is not always identical to that of Lutheranism, they see gospel and law as far as the east is from the west, manifesting separate content and serving separate functions. The gospel is good news, the delightful message of salvation to all that believe in Christ. The law, on the other hand, is bad news, the message of God's judgment on all those who transgress God's commands. We preach the law first, eliciting conviction from sinners; then, when they are "good and under conviction," we offer them the glorious message of the gospel, which does not condemn, but saves. If we mix law and gospel, the Lutherizing Calvinists suggest we will dilute both; worse yet, perhaps, we'll confuse people. We'll give them the impression that the law is somehow good and gracious and that the gospel makes demands and threatens judgment. Michael Horton, of *Modern Reformation*, is prime example of this trend.<sup>17</sup> To cite but one facet of his argument:

Sometimes it [the confusion of gospel and law] is due less to conviction than to a lack of precision. For instance, we often hear calls to "live the Gospel," and yet, nowhere in Scripture are we called to "live the Gospel." Instead, we are told to believe the Gospel and obey the Law, receiving God's favor from the one and God's guidance from the other.<sup>18</sup>

I believe Horton is greatly mistaken. While the Bible does not explicitly *tell us* to "live the gospel," it certainly does *teach us* that we must live the gospel (Mark 10:29; Romans 1:9; 2 Corinthians. 9:11; Philippians 1:27). A teaching may appear in the Bible even if it does not appear in so many words (the Trinity, for example). We *are* required to *obey* the gospel (Romans 1:5; 16:26; 2 Thessalonians 1:8), and we are required to *believe* the law (Psalms 78:5-22; 119: 42; Luke 24:25).

#### THE OBLIGATORY GOSPEL

To elaborate: The Apostle Paul relates that Christ will one day return, "taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thessalonians 1:8). Paul also declares of his gospel preaching, "For we are unto God a sweet savor [odor] of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that perish: To the one we are the savor of death unto death; and to the other the savor of life unto life" (2 Corinthians 2:15-16).<sup>19</sup> Note well that Paul did not haul in the law as a *prelude* to the gospel—the gospel itself sufficed to condemn the impenitent. To the Romans he writes that his gospel message is a *stumbling stone* to those who do not believe (Romans 9:32). Clearly, for Paul, the gospel is *not* only good news, and, moreover, it features an obligatory element. The gospel, in short, "lays down the law."<sup>20</sup> For one thing, it demands repentance (Matthew 21:32). Repentance is a change of mind that leads to a change of action,<sup>21</sup> and, in the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith (Chapter 15, Section 3), "none may expect pardon without it" (Luke 13:3,5; Acts 20:21). The gospel also requires *faith* (Romans 10:9; Ephesians 2:8-10). The Bible does not teach that men will be saved apart from the exercise of faith. So faith surely is

an obligation attached to the gospel message.<sup>22</sup> Theologians will sometimes speak of faith as the *instrumental* cause of justification, or our being declared righteous in God's sight.<sup>23</sup> This is a correct designation, and it is an *obligation*. So, it's incorrect to say that the good news of the gospel does not condemn, and that it does not impose obligations.

### THE GRACIOUS LAW

Similarly, it is mistaken to believe that the law only obligates and is not gracious. Jehovah declares plainly to Old Testament Israel that his giving them the law is an act of grace (Deuteronomy 4:6-8). In Psalm 119, David depicts the law not only as an obligation, but a gracious delight (verses 24, 41, 64, 76, 107, 165 and elsewhere).

The law, in fact, is life-giving (because it preaches Christ!); but, like the gospel, it is death-dealing to those who do not believe and do not obey it (Romans 2:13; 7:10). We learn from Paul (in Romans 10:4-10) that the law itself taught justification by faith.<sup>24</sup> In Luke 16, in the story of Lazarus and the rich man, we read that "Moses and the Prophets" (meaning large sections of Old Testament revelation, and believing and acting on significant parts of the law) would have sufficed to keep the rich man's brothers out of hell fire. We know that salvation is solely by the grace of God (Ephesians 2:8), so it is clear that the aspects of the law mentioned in this paragraph, at least, are gracious, engulfed in the gospel. Men could be *saved* by hearing and believing the Christ-oriented teaching within the law as a revelation.

The Lutheranized Calvinists are concerned that the paradigm I mentioned in the previous paragraph undermines the gracious character of salvation. Nothing could be further from the truth. Salvation occurs *solely* on the ground of Christ's redemptive work—his love-filled, law-keeping life (Romans 5:19); his atoning death (Mt. 20:28); and his victorious resurrection (Romans 4:25). If the Bible is emphatic about anything, it is emphatic that men are not saved by merit, works, or law (Gal. 3:21). They are not—and never could be—saved by merit or a "covenant of works."<sup>25</sup> They are saved *by*—or to

elaborate, *on the ground of*—Christ's redemptive work *alone*.

But this surely does not imply that men will be saved *without* faith, repentance, and obedience. The Bible requires that we "[f]ollow peace with all men and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14); and this obviously refers not simply to imputed holiness, but also to actual, experiential holiness. The Bible says that if we do not forgive our brother in our heart, the Lord will not forgive us (Matthew 6:14). The Bible declares, "faith [without] works is dead" (James 2:17). None of this, of course, indicates that men are saved *on account* of their faith, repentance, obedience, works, and so on. No man may boast (Ephesians 2:8-9). Men are chosen to salvation from eternity solely on the sovereign grace of God (Ephesians 1). But the scheme of salvation *requires* things of man. To assert otherwise is flatly to deny the Bible's teaching.

Lutherans are quite correct, therefore, that the Reformed view of gospel and law is not their view. For this reason, they declare that both Roman Catholics and Calvinists "deviate . . . from the gospel of Christ and the faith of the church universal [!]."<sup>26</sup> In short, Calvinists don't preach the gospel. We don't agree with this charge, of course; but it's clear that differences here are significant, if not vast.

We Calvinists oppose traditional Roman Catholicism's soteriology, which speaks of "condign" and "congruent" merit, and ties salvation up with a cooperative effort between God and man.<sup>27</sup> But we almost equally oppose Lutheran soteriology, which so separates gospel and law as to lead to antinomianism, the diminution of sanctification, and the dismissal of good works. It is only fair to mention that Luther did stress the Ten Commandments, and his catechism clearly did not dismiss the law. However, his firm law-gospel distinction could not sustain his commitment to the authority of the law. Rome collapses salvation into a cooperative effort; Wittenberg isolates gospel from law.

We Calvinists try to avoid both of these errors. In fact, a consistent Geneva must be equidistant from the traditional Rome and the traditional Wittenberg. We simply cannot fol-

low the Lutherans in their soteriology any more than we can follow Rome.

Not that they do not want to believe the Bible and wish to please our Lord. They do. Lutherans above all things want to be Christ-centered.<sup>28</sup> We applaud them in this ambition. Yet we invite them to concentrate not on one aspect of Christ, but upon Christ in his *fullness*—the loving, just, crucified, risen, and reigning Christ, Savior and Lord, Son of God, Prophet, Priest and King.<sup>29</sup> We ask our brothers to abandon their idea<sup>30</sup> that our Lord is no Lawgiver (Mt. 5:17-19; Gal. 6:2) and rather, embrace Him in all his fullness. Because it is Christ, and not faith, that at root saves us, we implore Lutherans to concentrate not so much on justification by faith alone, important though it is, as on justification by *Christ* alone.<sup>31</sup>

And we invite our Lutheranized Calvinist brothers to do the same thing.

A crowning aspect of the genius of the Reformed faith is its recognition of the proper relationship between, but fundamental unity of, dogma *and* practice, gospel *and* law, faith *and* works, mercy *and* justice, grace *and* truth, restraint *and* liberty.

Without demeaning other sectors of the faith, we should be proud of being Calvinists, just as we would expect our Lutheran brothers to be proud of their distinctives. We can be Calvinists or Lutherans.

We cannot be both.

#### Author

P. Andrew Sandlin, an ordained minister, is president of the Center for Cultural Leadership, a Christian educational foundation dedicated to reclaiming contemporary culture for Jesus Christ. An interdisciplinary scholar, he holds academic degrees or concentrations in English, English literature, history, and political science. He has written several monographs and books, including *The Full Gospel: A Biblical Vocabulary of Salvation* and *Totalism*, and hundreds of essays and articles, both scholarly and popular. He is a contributing editor for *Reformation & Revival Journal*. Andrew and his wife Sharon have five children and live in northern California. He can be

reached at sandlin@saber.net.

#### Notes

1. Richard J. Mouw, "The Bible in Twentieth-Century Protestantism: A Preliminary Taxonomy," in eds., National O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll, *The Bible in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 142-143.
2. A key tenet of the Reformed is *ecclesia reformata quia semper reformanda est*, "the church reformed because it must always be reforming," M. Eugene Osterhaven, *The Spirit of the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 33. For example, I agree with John Murray and W. Wilson Benton that traditional covenant theology needs re-casting. See Benton, "Federal Theology: Review for Revision," in eds., W. Robert Godfrey and Jesse L. Boyd III, *Through Christ's Word* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1985), 180.
3. John H. Gerstner, "Theological Boundaries: The Reformed Perspective," in eds. David F. Wells and John D. Woodbridge, *The Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977 edition), 21-23.
4. Alister McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987, 1995).
5. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Obedient Rebels* (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1964).
6. Gerhard O. Forde, "The Lutheran View [of Sanctification]," in ed., Donald L. Alexander, *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1988), 13-32.
7. Forde, 13.
8. Hermann Sasse, *Here We Stand* (New York and London: Harper & Row, 1938), 112.
9. *Here We Stand*, 116.
10. *Here We Stand*, "Additional Notes by Hermann Sasse Concerning the Doctrine of the Holy Scriptures (1951/52) From Letters & Notes," *Scripture and the Church: Selected Essays of Hermann Sasse* (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Monograph Series, Number 2, 1953), 162-163.
11. *Here We Stand*, 116-118.
12. Richard E. Muller, "A Lutheran Professor Educated at Westminster Theological Seminary Looks for Similarities and Dissimilarities," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 61 [January/April 1997], 85. I am indebted to John King for supplying me with this source.
13. Sasse, 121, emphases in original.
14. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1953), 232.
15. Pieper, 228.
16. A perusal of numerous articles in their preeminent journal *Logia* will confirm this.
17. Michael S. Horton, "The Law & The Gospel," *Alliance of Confessing Evan-*

- gelicals* online, <http://www.alliancenet.org/pub/articles/horton.Law-Gospel.html>.
18. Horton
  19. Robert S. Rayburn, "The Contrast Between the Old and New Covenants in the New Testament," doctoral thesis, University of Aberdeen, 1978.
  20. Karl Barth, "Gospel and Law," *Community, State and Church* (Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1968), 80. We must not allow Barth's errors on other issues to blind us to his insights on this one. Of course, this is no less true of Calvin, Hodge, Luther (and Sandlin!) than it is of Barth. We may be helped by accurate insights but abandon inaccurate (and heretical!) ones, no matter what the human source.
  21. A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1886), 487.
  22. John M. Frame, "Law and Gospel," Chalcedon on-line, <http://www.chalcedon.edu/articles/0201/020104frame.shtml>.
  23. G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 175.
  24. I realize that I have been using the term "law" in at least two distinct senses here, but they do overlap. The law can refer to specific commands that require or obligate, and it can refer to the objective revelation of most of the Pentateuch. See, in addition, Daniel P. Fuller, *Gospel and Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), Chap. 4. Consult also his *The Unity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992). Read, too, Norman Shepherd's *The Call of Grace* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 2000).
  25. I agree with those Calvinists breaking with a significant segment of the Reformed tradition in repudiating the covenant of works and the entire medieval notion of human merit on which it rested. It is summarized by Heppel: "But this righteousness [in justification] . . . is the righteousness of the Law, upon which God had concluded his first covenant with man [i. e., the "covenant of works"], and which Christ as man had acquired for himself by his active and passive obedience," Heinrich Heppel, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950), 550. For a rigorous apologia for this view, see Meredith Kline, "Covenant Theology Under Attack," Upper Register on-line, [http://www.upper-register.com/ct\\_gospel/ct\\_under\\_attack.html](http://www.upper-register.com/ct_gospel/ct_under_attack.html). I mention this version rather than the one that appeared originally in *New Horizons* because the on-line version declares, "A modified version of Professor Kline's article was originally published in the February, 1994, issue of *New Horizons*, the denominational magazine of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. What follows is the unexpurgated text."
  26. Kurt E. Marquart, "The Two Realms ('Kingdoms') in the Lutheran Confessions," in John R. Stephenson, *God and Caesar Revisited*, Luther Academy Conference Papers No. 1, (Association of Confessional Lutherans, 1995), 40.
  27. On the differences between Rome and the Reformation in the matter of justification, see Alister E. McGrath, *Justification by Faith* (Grand Rapids:

- Zondervan), chapter 5.
28. Sasse, *Here We Stand*, 114-115.
  29. William Symington, *Messiah the Prince* (Edmonton, Alberta: Still Waters Revival Books [1884], 1990).
  30. *Here We Stand*, 123.
  31. N. T. Wright, "The Shape of Justification," *Biblical Archaeology* on-line, <http://www.biblereview.org/br401/wright.html>.