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LUTHER'S DOCTRINE OF THE LAW
AND GOSPEL IN SELECTED WORKS

By

GEORGE BEIMLER

B.S., Columbia University

New York

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

A. The Subject

1. The Subject Stated and Explained.

One of the most distinct emphases of Lutheran theology is that of the doctrine of Law and Gospel. In fact, the Lutheran Church maintains that the Word of God is given to man in the form of Law and Gospel, as Luther himself taught. Conceived of in this way, almost all the basic doctrines of Christianity can be so divided.

However, there can be no satisfaction in a mere doctrinal formulation. The Law and the Gospel constitute God's living Word, and as such command attention in the realm of the Christian life. In view of this, the subject consists of Luther's concept of the Law and the Gospel as an outgrowth of his own experience, and an application of the results of that vital experience to the life of faith.

2. The Subject Justified.

When the Word of God comes to man as Law and Gospel, the Law condemns him, and the Gospel offers salvation. The true relationship between God and man is in clear focus. Man faces God as a sinner, stripped of his veneer of self-righteousness. It is immediately recognized that the full impact of the Law and the Gospel demands a transformation in man, one which would enable an individual to

call himself "peccator" (sinner) under the Law, and with the appropriation of the Gospel, "simul iustus et peccator," (at once righteous and a sinner).

As for all time, this working of the Law and Gospel has vital and primary relevance for today. Without it, man cannot explain himself and the results of scientific materialism around him. Without the life-transformation effected by the Law and Gospel man has no sure abiding place. His achievements have no purpose; they are often misused. There is a deep need for the application of the Law to men's hearts as well as the Gospel. For instance, this is why the work of Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Nature and Destiny of Man," has made such a contribution in the contemporary scene, both theologically and practically. For the author states that man does not truly know himself unless confronted by God. It is then that man realizes his destitute spiritual state and his inherent evil. He is in a dilemma because generally he refuses to acknowledge this condition, and all he attempts to do is colored by this tension. Here the true theologian must enter, and as Luther said, he must be able rightly to distinguish between the Law and the Gospel in order to apply it correctly. Besides Niebuhr's volume, two other recent books with the same theological inclination which are worthy of note are "Gospel and Law," by C.H. Dodd, and "Resurgence of the Gospel," by the well-known Lutheran minister, T.A.

Kantonen.

In addition, the struggle of man to meet God half-way is always present. The doctrine of the Law and Gospel cancels that struggle. The strivings of men for a good life will never approximate the demands of the Law. The Law is the eternal Tantalus making man conscious of his need; the Gospel is the water of life which tells men to let God be God. The Law seems to demand a rigorous ethic; the Gospel transcends ethics and creates a new life.

Finally, the average contemporary minister has in many cases a rather mechanical concept of the Law and Gospel, whereas it must be a dynamic one to do justice to either Luther or St. Paul. There must be sharp discernment of human character and nature and penetrating insight into God's Word as Law and Gospel before there can be a "rightly dividing of the Word of truth."

Luther felt keenly the inadequacy of man under the Law, yet he also realized the sufficiency of the Gospel to restore him in Christ. His recovery of the Pauline doctrine of Law and Gospel, his analysis and synthesis of it, combine to fill the needs of men in all ages.

3. The Subject Delimited.

Because of the abundance of material written by Luther on the Law and Gospel, it has been necessary to confine this study to selected works. A mere perusal of references to the subject indicated at once that all of his

works could not be included.

The purpose of the thesis will be to present a composite picture of Luther's doctrine of the Law and Gospel, noting the changes in view, if any, and variance in emphasis upon particular aspects of his doctrine.

The first chapter will attempt to show how Luther's doctrine proceeded from personal experience, for it was in the realm of experience that the wrath and grace of God was revealed to him. The second chapter will deal with the Law and the Gospel as contained in his exegetical commentary on The Epistle to the Galatians. This choice is governed by the fact that Paul emphasized both Law and Gospel in this Epistle and Luther lectured on it in detail, applying the doctrine to the surrounding situation. The basis of the third chapter will be certain of his doctrinal treatises, namely, The Treatise on Christian Liberty, The Treatise on Good Works, The Treatise on the New Testament, that is the Holy Mass, The Treatise on Secular Authority, The Smalcald Articles, and The Treatise on the Councils and the Churches. These treatises not only present his views but are also a defense of his doctrine. The fourth chapter, consisting of a study of Luther's sermons, will focus attention on his teaching of the Law and Gospel, for it is in his sermons that he attempts to inculcate life into doctrine. In the fifth chapter Luther's "Table Talks" will provide his view of the Law and Gospel. Although

recorded by others, the "Table Talks" give insights into his doctrine not revealed in more formal situations. In each chapter the emphasis will be upon the Law and Gospel in the Christian life.

B. Sources of Study

The primary sources are Luther's works as outlined in the Bibliography.

Secondary sources include such authors as Heinrich Boehmer, Wilhelm Pauck, Ernest Schwiebert, Preserved Smith, and Roland Bainton, men instrumental in the Lutherrenaissance.

CHAPTER I

THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL IN LUTHER'S PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

LUTHER'S DOCTRINE OF THE LAW AND GOSPEL IN SELECTED WORKS

CHAPTER I

THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL IN LUTHER'S PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

A. Introduction

"I did not learn my theology all at once, but I had to search deeper for it, where my temptations took me."¹ In this pronouncement Luther revealed the source of his theology, one which was rooted in personal experience. This is not to say that he relied upon inner experience as an infallible rule for doctrine. On the contrary, Luther's frame of reference always was the Word of God, which was his constant refuge. However, the essential struggle of man with sin and grace was realized with great intensity in Luther's life, and the doctrine of Law and Gospel was an outgrowth of that struggle. This chapter is an attempt to portray the development of that doctrine in Luther's life, particularly the period to the time of the Diet of Worms (April 16-26, 1521). By that time the reformer's thoughts had been crystallized, his doctrinal position was well-formed, and the remainder of his life was spent in

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1. William Hazlitt: The Table Talk of Martin Luther, p.27.

establishing his doctrine by preaching, teaching, and writing.

B. The Nature of the Law

The period of Luther's life prior to his entrance into the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt in 1505 contributes little information to this study. Perhaps his fright at being struck by a thunderbolt was at the same time fear initiated by the Law and wrath of God, but this is not certain. At any rate, this incident was the final deciding external factor which led him to the "Black Cloister" at Erfurt.

Once in the monastery, however, Luther was led through a series of revelatory experiences. He became a monk to save his soul, but he failed to find that salvation by the media prescribed by his order and his superiors. Philip Schaff writes:

..the monastic and ascetic life of Luther was a preparatory school for his evangelical faith. It served the office of the Mosaic law which, by bringing the knowledge of sin and guilt, leads as a tutor to Christ.¹

Thus when Luther wrote, "..He(Christ) has redeemed me from sin, from the devil, from death, and all evil," ² it may be inferred that these things from which

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1. Philip Schaff: History of the Christian Church, Vol.VI, p.124.
2. Concordia Triglotta; The Large Catechism, p.685.

Christ redeems were a part of his experience at Erfurt.

Although the clear concept of the Law came later, Luther was repeatedly assailed by the demanding Law of God. Rupp writes of this period:

..confronted with the goal of perfection, the divine imperative became something which withered all joy, and brought him a torment of doubt and uncertainty and guilt, an inner scepticism which ate corrosively through all the offices of consolation which were offered him. 1

Luther's own testimony is an amplification of this. He says:

I was as zealous for the papistical laws and traditions of the fathers as ever a man was. I tried hard to live up to every law as best I could. I punished myself with fasting, watching, praying, and other exercises more than all those who today hate and persecute me. I was so much in earnest that I imposed upon my body more than it could stand...Whatever I did I did with a single heart to the glory of God. 2

The tension of the Law of God and the law of sin almost broke Luther, for all he could envision was condemnation. The daily round of prescribed religious exercises he fulfilled in exemplary fashion. He felt that this was his true profession, the only one which could give him peace. But on the occasion of his first mass (May, 1507), Luther was filled with a sense of overwhelming dread. He was a sinner approaching a holy God, and he

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1. Gordon Rupp: Luther's Progress to the Diet of Worms, p.27.

2. Theodore Graebner: Commentary on Galatians by Martin Luther, pp.38-39.

could not stand because of his own unworthiness. Therefore, after this terrifying experience, Luther attempted to live what he considered an even more holy life. Some of the extremes to which he went are referred to by Bainton, who states:

He fasted, sometimes three days on end without a crumb ...He laid upon himself vigils and prayers in excess of those stipulated by the rule. He cast off the blankets permitted him and well-nigh froze himself to death.¹

He went before his confessor for as long as six hours on occasion, and, in addition to the necessary confession of recent sins, he reviewed his entire life until the confessor became weary of the repetition and upbraided him for being angry with God.

However, Luther was never able to feel that his sins were forgiven by means of these self-imposed duties and penalties. Neither his fellow-monks nor his superiors could offer sufficient comfort. Even Johannes Staupitz²,

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1. Roland Bainton: Here I Stand, p.45.
2. Preserved Smith: The Life and Letters of Martin Luther, p.14. "Most of all he was helped by John Staupitz, since 1503 Vicar of the German province of Augustinians, and dean of the faculty of theology at Wittenberg...His relations with Luther were so special that some have proposed to regard his influence as the decisive factor in the Reformer's development, but this view is hardly justified by the known facts. With many expressions of gratitude from the young man to the elder we have his own sorrowful statement that even Staupitz did not rightly understand him. His superior, a mystic in doctrine, helped him not so much by teaching as by loving him. The vicar was a man who understood men, and it was due to his recommendation that Luther received the call to Wittenberg.

Vicar-General of the Augustinian monastery (sometimes called Luther's spiritual father) could not resolve this conflict. A pilgrimage to Rome was sought as an answer to his problems, but this only served to deepen his anxiety. Luther later likened himself to a fool who carried onions to Rome and brought back garlic. The Law of God continued to reveal his sin.

This uncertainty over the state of his soul plagued Luther continually, but with his lectures on the Psalms (1513-1514), he clearly showed the "dawn of reformation consciousness," as Boehmer puts it. However, his doctrine of the Law and Gospel had yet to be developed. In his lectures on Galatians (1516-1517), he exhibits a "sympathetic grasp of the contrast between Law and Gospel, between spiritual slavery and spiritual freedom."¹ These lectures were delivered in the relative quiet and obscurity of the lecture hall, and so did not gain immediate attention. But when Luther approached the classic passage of the first chapter of Romans (1,17), "The just shall live by faith" (Der Gerechte wird seines Glaubens leben),² he realized the grace of God. Later he recalled this experience:

Then I saw of what righteousness Paul speaks, where

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1. Schaff, op.cit., p.125.

2. Die Bibel: nach der deutschen Uebersetzung Dr. Martin Luthers, ad loc.

there stood in the text 'iustitia,' righteousness. Then...I learned to distinguish between the righteousness of the Law and the righteousness of the Gospel.¹

After this soul-transforming discovery, the Law assumed its rightful place in his life. He continued to experience the antithesis between the Law and the Gospel, and this had much to do with his "Anfechtungen," (attacks, temptations); but the Gospel was always there to comfort him. The Law still showed forth God's wrath, but Luther could say that he and every believer was "semper peccator, semper penitens, semper iustus" (always a sinner, always penitent, always righteous).

The Law was no longer the prescription for salvation; it had a new relevance. The Law was now an effective tool to break down man's self-righteousness and lead him to the place of faith in Christ.

It was not until his controversy with the Antinomians and Agricola (1537-1540) that Luther publicly and in sequence enumerated his views on the specific functions of the Law, although they appear at other times.

C. The Nature of the Gospel

In his commentary on Galatians Luther said:

When I first took over the defense of the Gospel, I

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1. Luthers Werke: Achter Band, p.317.

remembered what Doctor Staupitz said to me, 'I like it well,' he said, 'that the doctrine which you proclaim gives glory to God alone and none to man. For never can too much glory, goodness, and mercy be ascribed to God.' These words of the worthy Doctor comforted and confirmed me. ¹

But when he first studied Romans 1,17, the Gospel did not give him consolation. It was not enough that the burden of original sin and the pressure of the Ten Commandments was upon him, but the Gospel also added its burden. Luther said:

..God through the Gospel must add sorrow on sorrow, and through the Gospel bring His wrath and justice to bear upon us. ²

Now that he had reached this period of despair, his experience seemed to have come to an impasse. Then, however, came the insight which profoundly changed Luther's entire outlook. He realized that the justice of God revealed in the Gospel is that justice by which God makes men righteous through faith. Luther wrote of this experience:

At this I felt myself to be born anew, and to enter through open gates into paradise itself, From here, the whole face of the Scriptures was altered. ³

This was in 1519, and it is at this time that Luther first grasped the true and full significance of the Gospel. Previously, the justice or righteousness of

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1. Theodore Graebner, op.cit., p.37.
2. Rupp, op.cit., p.33
3. Ibid.

the Gospel was merely another means whereby God set forth His demands for men. Luther could formerly see only the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man, with no immediate way of spanning the gulf. Now he understood that God shows man His grace through His righteousness, that is, God acts righteously when He counts man righteous by faith. This new understanding became the very pivot of Luther's faith.

It is true that the basis for this discovery extended into the past, particularly during the time of his lectures on the Psalms and Romans. There is evidence of this in the Ninety-Five Theses of 1517. The Sixty-Second Thesis reads, "The true treasure of the Church is the holy gospel of the glory and grace of God." ¹ But this understanding of the Gospel seemed to be a collective one, not a message of grace for the individual tormented by his sins.

The immediate importance of this revelation of the Gospel message was that Luther's tremendous inner conflict was resolved. The flood-gates were opened, as it were, and the power of the Gospel was reflected throughout his life.

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1. Schaff, op.cit., p.164.

D. The Function of the Law

1. In Restraining Evil.

Luther fully recognized the civil function of the Law. There is abundant testimony to this throughout his works. However, as far as his personal experience is concerned, it will suffice to illustrate this aspect of the Law's function by a study of Luther's relation to the Peasant's Revolt.

The peasants of Swabia, burdened by excessive demands by the nobles, enumerated what they thought to be their rightful claims. These claims were just, but the nobility would not acquiesce, and the peasants revolted.

Luther considered this revolt as contrary to the divine order, for its ultimate result would have been anarchy. Tyranny, in Luther's opinion, was preferable to anarchy, for the latter would abrogate the civil function of the Law. The basis for this action was Luther's concept long before the rebellion occurred. A definitive statement of this principle reads:

The first purpose of the Law, accordingly, is to restrain the wicked. The devil gets people into all kinds of scrapes. Therefore God instituted governments, parents, laws, restrictions, and civil ordinances. At least they help to tie the devil's hands so that he does not rage up and down the earth. This civil restraint by the Law is intended by God for the preservation of all things, particularly for the good of the Gospel that it should not be hindered too much by

the tumult of the wicked. ¹

This explains Luther's action, in part at least, in insisting upon a suppression of the revolt. The Law of God as a civil restraint was not to be overthrown regardless of the consequences.

2. In Conviction of Sin.

It is almost superfluous to deal with the Law of God as a convictor of sin in Luther's life. This is because his encounter with the divine wrath experienced through and under the Law is so generally familiar. However, by keeping in mind the inner soul-conflict of the monastery, the inescapable sense of doom which pervaded his life prior to his conversion, a more sympathetic understanding will accompany the following account:

The spiritual purpose of the Law...(is) to reveal to a person his sin, blindness, misery, his ignorance, hatred, and contempt of God, his death, hell, condemnation...The Law is the hammer of death, the thunder of hell, and the lightning of God's wrath. ²

This is the Law of God which, as he more than once exclaimed, produced fear at the mere rustling of a leaf.

Now even when a man attempts to live according to the Law, he sins; for when a person fulfills the Law

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1. Theodore Graebner, op.cit., p.129.

2. Ibid., p.130.

in its literal sense in any one point, he sins against the entire Law. Luther states:

When our opponents go about to perform the Law they sin against the first, the second, and the third commandments, in fact they sin against the whole Law. For God requires above all that we worship Him in spirit and in faith. ¹

Luther found this to be the case, for he could not fulfill the whole Law; he could not fulfill part of it. Therefore he was at continual odds with God, there was no cessation of miserable conflict. The hammer of God was constantly pounding at his attempts to reach Him.

A section of MacKinnon's paraphrase of Luther's Theses against the Antinomians is an illumination of this experience:

..the Law produces sorrow for sin by touching the conscience and begetting the consciousness of sin, detestation of self, it cannot produce the intention of the good. ²

3. In the Christian Life.

The experience of the grace of God as revealed to him in a new way led Luther to a deeper understanding of the place of the Law in the life of a Christian. Formerly he had known the Law as a messenger of condemnation only, but now he began to see different aspects of it. He realized that the Law was a necessary part of God's

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1. Theodore Graebner, op.cit., p.108.

2. James MacKinnon: Luther and the Reformation, Vol.IV, p.167.

salvation, that it had an admonitory as well as a condemnatory use. In short, he now believed that the Law could aid the cause of the Gospel in the life of grace.

One of the primary corollaries to this new insight was the fact that the unbeliever could see only one side of the Law. Luther himself had endured this torture. But now he could say, "Happy the person who knows how to utilize the Law so that it serves the purposes of grace and faith." 1

How does the Christian use the Law in this way? Luther replies that he should immediately call upon the Gospel. He mentions the story of Cain, who when censured for killing Abel, merely stated that his punishment was too great to bear. He remained under the imprisonment of the Law. As Luther stated, "He forgot that he was brought face to face with his crime so that he should hurry to God for mercy and pardon." 2

Luther also illustrated the use of the Law in the Christian life by a comment on the words of the Psalmist, "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me?" 3 Luther paraphrased an answer to this quest for peace:

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1. Theodore Graebner, op.cit., p.142.
2. Ibid.
3. Psalm 42,5.

Trouble me no more, my soul. Hope in God who has not spared His own dear Son but has given Him into death for thy sins. 1

This is the Gospel source of grace to which men may turn when the oppressive Law lies heavy upon them.

E. The Function of the Gospel

1. In Conversion-Justification.

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel. 2

In these words Luther described his own conversion as well as explaining the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed.

Luther's main tenet was justification by faith, that same justification which was revealed in the Gospel, as Romans 1,17 so expressly states. Luther understood the Gospel as a statement of credit for the believer. An excerpt from his letter on Christian liberty reads:

..this faith can rule only in the inward man, as Romans 10 says, 'With the heart we believe unto righteousness'; and since faith alone justifies, it is clear that the inward man cannot be justified, made free, and be saved by any outward work or dealing whatsoever, and that works, whatever their character, have nothing to do with this inward man. 3

This is why he called the Gospel the true trea-

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1. Theodore Graebner, op.cit., p.143.

2. Concordia Triglotta: Small Catechism, p.545.

3. Martin Luther: Three Treatises, On Christian Liberty, p.255.

sure of the church, for through the Gospel individual souls are justified from sin, death, hell, and the devil.

It is to be emphasized that Luther considered the Gospel as a channel of faith. "So likewise faith comes not, except only through the Word of God, or the Gospel.." ¹ This can be seen from his experience, for Luther may be said not to have possessed justifying faith until he was confronted with God's grace revealed in His righteousness. Only then did he experience justification.

The justifying faith of the Gospel sustained Luther at all times, and in 1537 he wrote in the Smalcald Articles;

What I have hitherto and constantly taught concerning this I know not how to change in the least, namely, that by faith, as St. Peter says, we acquire a new and clean heart, and God will and does account us entirely righteous and holy for the sake of Christ...And although sin in the flesh has not yet been altogether removed or become dead, yet He will not punish or remember it.

2. In the Christian Life-Sanctification.

Because Luther could never totally free himself from the remembrance of life under the Law's condemnation, he needed continually to flee to the promises of the Gospel for relief. In this connection there is an illumina-

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1. Martin Luther: Preface to St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, p.9.

2. Concordia Triglotta: Smalcald Articles, p.499.

ting passage in which Luther shows the necessity of reverting to the Gospel for consolation. It is taken from his explanation of the Fifth Petition of the Lord's Prayer. He wrote:

Dear Father, forgive us our trespasses. Not as though He did not forgive sin without and even before our prayer (for He has given us the Gospel, in which is pure forgiveness before we prayed or ever thought about it). But this is to the intent that we may recognize and accept such forgiveness. For since the flesh in which we daily live is of such a nature that it neither trusts nor believes God, and is ever active in evil lusts and devices...it is afraid of the wrath and displeasure of God, and thus loses the comfort and confidence derived from the Gospel; therefore it is ceaselessly necessary that we run hither and obtain consolation to comfort the conscience again. ¹

With a conscience as plagued as Luther's had been, it may readily be imagined how many times he had to seek this assurance of the Gospel in order to maintain a consistent Christian life.

Therefore the first fact of the life of faith is that it is also a life of conflict. The Christian sins, he is disturbed by the Law, and he looks to the Gospel and its promises in faith.

But the Gospel is not limited to the spoken or written word whose "peculiar" office it is to preach the forgiveness of sins. The Gospel aids the Christian life

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1. Concordia Triglotta: Large Catechism, p.723.

also in the Sacraments, Baptism and the Sacrament of the Altar. Luther writes:

First, through the spoken Word by which the forgiveness of sins is preached in the whole world;...secondly, through baptism. Thirdly, through the holy sacrament of the altar.. 1

The office of baptism is also a consoling one.

Luther wrote of it in the following manner:

Thus we must regard baptism...that when our sins oppress us, we strengthen ourselves and take comfort, (for) it is promised me that I shall be saved.. 2

The believer, however, still has the "old vicious nature of flesh and blood," and faced with the temptations of the world, he is prone to stumble. This is the place of the Sacrament of the Altar. Luther writes:

Therefore it is given for a daily pasture and sustenance, that faith may refresh and strengthen itself so as not to fall back in such a battle, but become ever stronger and stronger. 3

Thus for Luther the external signs of the internal faith help sustain the Christian life. Although not efficacious "ex opere operato," that is, by the performance of the external itself, yet these signs are substantiated by the promise and power of the Gospel which can never be negated.

There have always been those who maintained

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1. Concordia Triglotta: Smalcald Articles, p.493.
2. Ibid., Large Catechism, p.743.
3. Ibid., p.759.

that Luther's doctrine of justification by faith left no room for sanctification; that it was an "easy" doctrine which allowed any sort of life. Thus Charles Wesley spoke of Luther, "...And who was more ignorant of the doctrine of sanctification or more confused in his conception of it?" ¹ This statement is unfounded. Luther likened the Christian life to a convalescent, "Now they begin to be Christians whose life is not in rest, but in movement, from good to better, as a sick man moves from sickness to health." ²

The all-pervading influence of Luther's life was the power of the Gospel. Convinced of its infallibility and unfailing purpose in the life of faith, he denounced pope and papacy, rebuked noble and peasant, made many disputations, and wrote unceasingly. To him the Christian life was to be a manifestation of the power of God through the Gospel.

F. Summary

As James MacKinnon has said, the key to Luther's work as a reformer lies in his personal religious experience. ³ This chapter has aimed to depict the influence and growing concept of the Law and Gospel in his life.

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1. Philip Watson: Let God Be God, p.171.
2. Rupp, op.cit., p.41.
3. MacKinnon, op.cit., p.251.

The Law as a messenger of condemnation and the Gospel as one of consolation played large roles in his experience. From this he observed how the Law and Gospel operated as living truths in his life; he formulated the functions of both Law and Gospel; and he rejoiced in that both Law and Gospel worked for God's glory in the lives of all who trusted His Word.

CHAPTER II

THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL IN LUTHER'S EXEGETICAL COMMENTARY ON GALATIANS

LUTHER'S DOCTRINE OF THE LAW
AND GOSPEL IN SELECTED WORKS

CHAPTER II

THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL IN LUTHER'S
EXEGETICAL COMMENTARY ON GALATIANS

A. Introduction

Of Paul's Letter to the Galatians Luther said, "The Epistle to the Galatians is my epistle. To it I am as it were in wedlock. It is my Katherine." ¹ Luther's commentary as a reflection of his lectures ² offers much evidence in support of this statement. The reasons for Luther's strong attachment to this Epistle are many. In the first place, it sets forth in clear terms the necessity of justification by faith. It sharply outlines the office of the Law and Gospel. And to Luther it vividly portrayed not only the glorious liberty of the Christian man but also the thralldom of those who had wandered from

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1. Theodore Graebner, op.cit., p.IV.

2. Schaff, op.cit., p.141. "These exegetical lectures (Psalms, Romans, Galatians) made a deep impression. They were thoroughly evangelical, without being anti-catholic. They reached the heart and conscience as well as the head. They substituted a living theology clothed with flesh and blood for the skeleton theology of scholasticism. They were delivered with the energy of intense conviction and the freshness of personal experience. The genius of the lecturer flashed from his deep dark eyes which seem to have struck every observer."

the true doctrine of the Law and Gospel. All of these emphases were primary principles of the Reformation.

The lectures on Galatians which comprise the commentary were delivered in 1531 and recorded by George Rörer. They are therefore mature expressions of his theology. However, in substance there would probably be complete agreement with the Galatian lectures of 1516-1517 if, indeed, the comparison could be made. Luther's basic views underwent little change, while his reformatory work deepened and widened in scope.

The center of attention in this chapter will be Luther's theological interpretation of the Pauline doctrine of Law and Gospel. In addition to the theological emphasis, stress will also be placed on the ethic of the Gospel, a phase of Christian life which Luther never neglected.

B. The Nature of the Law

The lives of Martin Luther and Paul the Apostle are strikingly analogous in many ways. If Paul was a zealous Pharisee, Luther was a zealous monk. If Paul lived under the Hebraic law, Luther lived under the monastic law. If Paul had his Damascus Road, Luther had his famous tower-experience. This explains why Luther could identify himself with much of Paul's autobiographical material, especially in his commentary on Galatians.

Both Paul and Luther were well-acquainted with life under the Law. Paul was "exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers." ¹ Luther, in commenting on this statement of Paul, emphasized his own extreme asceticism to which he subjected himself in order to win God's favor. ² But in his zeal for God's Law, he found only frustration. Just as Paul could never find peace under the Law, so also Luther felt only conflict with God as the Law probed his inmost being. The Law was continually revealing the angry countenance of God; it was the minister of sin, wrath, and death. Thus, in commenting on Paul's query, "Is therefore Christ the minister of sin?," ³ Luther emphatically answers in the negative. He states:

In conclusion, if the Law is the minister of sin, it is at the same time, the minister of wrath and death. As the Law reveals sin it fills a person with the fear of death and condemnation. ⁴

Luther even goes so far as to say that this fearful and condemnatory nature of the Law may drive one to suicide, so great is its effect. This is because the conscience knows how impossible it is to fulfill the Law regardless of the motivation. In this connection he said:

Whoever teaches that good works are indispensable to salvation, that to gain heaven a person must suffer

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1. Galatians 1,14.
2. Ante, p.3.
3. Galatians 2,17.
4. Theodore Graebner, op.cit., p.71.

afflictions and follow the example of Christ and the saints, is a minister of the Law.. ¹

The reference to Roman Catholic doctrine is unmistakable here, for to Luther "synergism" meant spiritual suicide.

Besides the condemnatory aspect, it is of the essence of the Law that it is powerless to justify. This, of course, is a fundamental tenet of Pauline theology, and Luther makes repeated reference to the Law's inability on this score. In a very graphic manner Luther depicts the incongruity of justification by the Law. He states:

The words, 'The Son of God who loved me, and gave Himself for me,' are so many thunderclaps and lightning bolts of protest from heaven against the righteousness of the Law. The wickedness, error, darkness, ignorance in my mind and my will were so great, that it was quite impossible for me to be saved by any other means than by the inestimable price of Christ's death. ²

His following comment is on the two words, "for me," ³ which reveals the purpose of Christ's sacrifice in contradistinction to the Law. He closes his argument on this note:

Did the Law ever love me? Did the Law ever sacrifice itself for me? Did the Law ever die for me? On the contrary, it accuses me, it frightens me, it drives me crazy. ⁴

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1. Theodore Graebner, op.cit., p.71.

2. Ibid., p.81.

3. Galatians 2,20: "...who loved me and gave Himself for me.."

4. Theodore Graebner, op.cit., p.82.

Furthermore, in seeking justification by the Law, Luther maintained that such a search is, in effect, a rejection of the grace of God. This he considered the pope's, or Antichrist's doctrine.

Thus Luther believed that the Law in its very nature alienates man from God in that it condemns man for his helplessness of fulfillment. In addition, he held that the more man attempts to gain a right standing with God by means of the Law, the further he moves from God's grace.

C. The Nature of the Gospel

The focal point of Paul's conversion as recounted by himself in the first two chapters of the Galatian Letter was God's revelation of Jesus Christ to him. Luther interpreted this revelation of the Son of God as the doctrine of the Gospel, the "good news." Paul had found it difficult to "kick against the goads," but with this revelation of Christ on the Damascus Road, his conflict with God was resolved.

This is the intrinsic nature of the Gospel, namely, that it imparts salvation and its blessings to all who accept it. Luther describes the nature of the Gospel as follows:

The Gospel does not threaten. The Gospel announces that Christ is come to forgive the sins of the world. The Gospel conveys to us the inestimable treasures of God. 1

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1. Theodore Graebner, op.cit., p.41. Galatians 1,16.

Involved in this, of course, is the fact that in opposition to the Law, the Gospel can and does justify when received in faith. Luther claimed that Paul went to Jerusalem in order to confirm this doctrine, for justification by faith was the "true Gospel." The false Gospel was justification by Law, or in Paul's words, "another Gospel." In commenting on Galatians 2,4-5, Luther says:

When Paul speaks of the truth of the Gospel he implies by contrast a false gospel. The false apostles also had a gospel, but it was an untrue gospel. "In holding out against them," says Paul, "I conserved the truth of the pure Gospel." Now the true Gospel has it that we are justified by faith alone, without the deeds of the Law. The false gospel has it that we are justified by faith, but not without the deeds of the Law. ¹

Just as Paul stresses the fact that his message of the Gospel was divine in origin, so also Luther makes much of this in commenting on the source of Paul's Gospel. He states:

In declaring that his Gospel is not after man, Paul does not merely wish to state that his Gospel is not mundane...Paul means to say that he learned his Gospel not in the usual and accepted manner through the agency of men...He received the Gospel by special revelation directly from Jesus Christ. ²

For Luther the Gospel was God's Word to man who is sinful both in an individual and collective sense. The only hope for humanity lies in the justifying Gospel of God.

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1. Theodore Graebner, op.cit., p.48.
2. Ibid., p.35; Galatians 1, 11-12.

D. The Function of the Law

1. In Restraining Evil.

Luther considered a true theologian one who was able to distinguish correctly between the Law and the Gospel. To him this distinction was of utmost importance, and a confusion of the Word of God on this account would result in impurity of life and doctrine. Accordingly, when Peter withdrew himself from the Gentiles because of Judaistic pressure, Paul justly reproved him, for by this compromising attitude Peter had not kept the Gospel and Law in right proportion. He had, in effect, forced the Law into the life of faith.

Paul's reproof of Peter consisted primarily of an emphasis upon the solid ground of justification by faith, and Luther in his comment on this incident placed great stress upon this element (Galatians 2,11-21). However, he also set forth the function of the Law and explained it in terms of civil as well as spiritual life as follows:

In civil life obedience to the Law is severely required. In civil life Gospel, conscience, grace, remission of sins, Christ Himself, do not count, but only Moses with the Law-books. 1

It is apparent from this that the Law serves as a bridle or rein to check the evil native impulses of

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1. Theodore Graebner, op.cit., p.61.

society, individually and corporately. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is entirely separate from this function, for its primary business is to justify men, not to keep them in line. The Law "bridles mad and furious man to keep him from running wild." 1

2. In Conviction of Sin.

St. Paul made it very clear to his Galatian readers that the Law cannot be the basis of justification before God. In doing this, he seemed at times to speak in a deprecatory manner of that which had been instituted by God. Therefore he posed the question which had already formed in the minds of the readers, "Why then the Law?" 2 His answer was, "It was added because of transgressions." 3

Luther interpreted this answer as revealing the twofold purpose of the Law. The first purpose was civil, and this has been treated above. The second purpose was spiritual; it was to magnify spiritual transgressions.

In this vein Luther wrote:

..the Law is a big axe. Accordingly, the proper use and function of the Law is to threaten until the conscience is scared stiff. 4

But once having awakened the conscience, the Law does not rest; its ministration continues in the

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1. Theodore Graebner, op.cit., p.129.
2. Galatians 3,19.
3. Ibid.
4. Theodore Graebner, op.cit., p.130.

sphere of the conscience. Thus Luther says:

The Law is a specialist to bring us to Christ...The Law means to enlarge my sins, to make me small, so that I might be justified by faith in Christ. ¹

In other words, the Law, as Luther and Paul agree, is the schoolmaster who leads to Christ. After the Law has humbled a man, he will be brought to a correct estimate of himself and subsequently will repent.

3. In the Christian Life.

There is a valid place for the Law in the Christian life, and although not expressly formulated by Paul, Luther considered this concept implicit in the Galatian Letter. In commenting on Peter's relation with the Jews and Gentiles, Luther enunciated the following principle:

If it is a question of faith or conscience, ignore the Law entirely. If it is a question of works, then lift high the lantern of works and the righteousness of the Law. ²

A Christian may test his works by the Law, but he may not allow the Law to step over into the province of faith, for this has to do with justification, with man's relation with God in Christ. Therefore Luther would never allow the Law to accuse or trouble him. He said:

When a person is a Christian he is above the Law and sin. When the Law accuses him, and sin wants to drive the wits out of him, a Christian looks to Christ. ³

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1. Theodore Graebner, op.cit., p.145.

2. Ibid., p.60.

3. Ibid., p.67.

The believer is to realize this, and he must be on the alert lest the Law slip into his life of faith in Christ. He has to know where the Law begins and ends, or else he will be driven either to despair or self-righteousness. Luther said:

The Law is also a light like the Gospel. But instead of revealing the grace of God, righteousness, and life, the Law brings sin, death, and the wrath of God to light. This is the business of the Law, and here the business of the Law ends..¹

E. The Function of the Gospel

1. In Conversion-Justification.

The major criticism of the Galatians was that they had moved from the foundation of their spiritual lives, namely, justification by faith apart from works of the Law. This is why Paul asserts they are "foolish" or "senseless." The apostle therefore wrote:

This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by the hearing of faith? ²

Luther paraphrased this passage, and a section of it reveals his belief as to the importance of faith, especially in relation to conversion through the Gospel. It reads as follows:

But as soon as the Gospel came your way, you received the Holy Ghost by the simple hearing of faith, before you ever had a chance to do a good deed. ³

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1. Theodore Graebner, op.cit., p.131.
2. Galatians 3,2.
3. Theodore Graebner, op.cit., p.90-91.

The Gospel is the means whereby man is justified before God; it is the only basis for conversion. This is Luther's main emphasis throughout his commentary, and almost every page has a reference to the Gospel. For Luther the message of the Gospel could never be repeated too often. The following passage is an example of Luther's recurring theme:

The Gospel carries the news that God for Christ's sake is merciful to the most unworthy sinners, if they will only believe that Christ by His death had delivered them from sin and everlasting death unto grace, forgiveness, and everlasting life. ¹

2. In the Christian Life-Sanctification.

The more severe sections of Paul's epistle chide the Galatians for seeking sanctification by works of the Law. Paul's task was to lead them to the realization that having begun their lives in Christ by the Gospel, they could continue only by that Gospel. The foundation had been laid, but no building was being erected. Theirs was an anthropocentric morality. On the other hand, Paul would have their attention centered upon God's work through the Spirit, for he states, "God sent the Spirit of His Son into your hearts." ² Luther commented on this verse:

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1. Theodore Graebner, op.cit., p.131.
2. Galatians 4,6.

This sending is accomplished by the preaching of the Gospel through which the Holy Spirit inspires us with fervor and light, with new judgment, new desires, and new motives. This happy innovation is not a derivative of reason or personal development, but solely the gift and operation of the Holy Ghost. 1

By means of the Gospel men are both justified and sanctified. The inspiration for a life of good works is from without, from God. Good works are the embellishment of faith, and that faith is the gift of God. So Luther would have the Gospel understood. It is in all fairness to him that he never taught justification by faith and a subsequent life of license. The Gospel not only saves, but it continues to save. Luther removed the life of a Christian from his own hands and placed that life into the hand of God.

Man, however, is frail and the article of justification is fragile. Man can easily forfeit the joy of the Gospel, when it should be his constant consolation. Therefore Luther urged:

Let every believer carefully learn the Gospel. Let him continue in humble prayer. We are molested not by puny foes, but by mighty ones...our flesh, the world, the Law, sin, death, the wrath and judgment of God, and the devil himself. 2

Doctor Staupitz once told Luther that he favored very much the doctrine of justification because it as-

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1. Theodore Graebner, op.cit., p.156.

2. Ibid., p.36.

cribed all glory to God and none whatever to man. While this is true of justification, it is true as well for Luther's doctrine of sanctification, the continued power of the Gospel.

F. Summary

The Epistle to the Galatians emphasizes Luther's fundamental evangelical doctrine of justification by faith. The subject matter of the Epistle revolves around the righteousness of faith in opposition to the righteousness of works. Thus the Law and the Gospel have important roles both in Paul's Letter and Luther's commentary. This chapter has sought to particularize the role of the Law and Gospel by stressing Luther's interpretation of Pauline passages which reflect that doctrine. The nature and function of both Law and Gospel has been studied in the light of the relationship of Paul to his contemporary readers in order to understand more fully the implications of Paul's teaching on the subject.

Luther considered the Law to be the minister of God's wrath upon the conscience. Unable to comfort man and powerless to justify him, the Law magnifies spiritual transgressions. The office of the Law is properly fulfilled when it humbles man and prepares him for the justifying Gospel. In addition, the Law is also a test of the works of a Christian, whether or not they measure

up to the divine standard. Finally, the Law is a necessity in civil life, for it holds in check the wanton impulses of unregenerate man.

The Gospel, on the other hand, conveys salvation to those who accept its message. The Gospel is the proclamation of justification by faith without the deeds of the Law. Its office is to create a new man and develop the new life within the individual.

The above themes constitute Luther's main emphases on the Law and Gospel, and they recur repeatedly in his commentary on Galatians.

CHAPTER III

THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL IN LUTHER'S DOCTRINAL TREATISES

LUTHER'S DOCTRINE OF THE LAW AND GOSPEL IN SELECTED WORKS

CHAPTER III

THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL IN LUTHER'S DOCTRINAL TREATISES

A. Introduction

In general, the doctrinal treatises of Luther were written to present formally a statement of his theological beliefs. In some cases they were addressed to individuals in defense or refutation, but for the most part Luther prepared them for public scrutiny. It is for this reason that his treatises so well outline his fundamental doctrine of the Law and Gospel.

This chapter will not attempt to incorporate material from all the treatises, but it will include the following: The Treatise on Christian Liberty (1520), The Treatise on Good Works (1520), The Treatise on the New Testament, that is the Holy Mass (1520), The Treatise on Secular Authority (1523), The Smalcald Articles (1539), and The Treatise on the Councils and the Churches (1539). These include a time span of nineteen years, from 1520-1539. They are his most important treatises concerning material on the Law and Gospel, and they treat that subject from various points of view. For example, "On Christian Liberty" deals with the motivating power of the Law

and Gospel in the Christian life; "On Good Works" is concerned primarily with the use and abuse of the Law and Gospel; the "New Testament" treats the relationship of grace and promise over against Law in the Christian celebration of the Mass; "Secular Authority" outlines the functions of the Law as conceived in secular life; the Smalcald Articles formally present the Lutheran doctrine of Law and Gospel at a time when the Lutheran Church was awaiting a conference with Rome on doctrinal matters; "On Councils and Churches" is largely an historical account of church councils which presents the contemporary need for a reform council. It contains a vivid picture of the Law-Gospel controversy of the first Church council (cf. Acts 15).

Therefore, in regard to both doctrinal development and emphasis of content, these treatises offer a definitive view of Luther's concept of the Law and Gospel.

B. The Nature of the Law

In his treatise on "Councils and Churches,"

Luther wrote:

..the Ten Commandments, or the work of the Ten Commandments, are not and cannot be called the grace of Jesus Christ, but are something altogether different, and must have another name. ¹

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1. A.J. Holman: Works of Martin Luther, On the Councils and the Churches, p.191.

What then, might these commands be called? While never applying one consistent name for God's Law, Luther nevertheless very pointedly outlined its nature. He agreed wholeheartedly with Paul's summary statement, "The Law works wrath."¹ The wrath of God is demonstrated by means of the Law in opposition to the unrighteousness of men. In amplification of this, Luther held that the Law is God's thunderbolt, striking both manifest sinners and false saints, and declaring no one righteous. He likened the Law to a hammer,² which produced not "activa contritio" ("manufactured" repentance), but "passiva contritio" (torture of conscience).³

The nature of the Law may be likened to that of stern Mt. Sinai, the representation of all that God demanded of the Israelites. The Law may indeed command man to obey without compromise, but it cannot in any way enable him to perform these commands. Luther wrote:

The commands indeed teach things that are good, but the things taught are not done as soon as taught; for the commands show us what we ought to do, but do not give us the power to do it.⁴

There are echoes of Luther's own experience in the passage above. Over a period of approximately ten years he had realised with full intensity the overwhelm-

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1. Romans 4,15.

2. cf. Jeremiah 23,29; "Is not my Word like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?"

3. Concordia Triglotta, Smalcald Articles, p.479.

4. Martin Luther: Three Treatises, On Christian Liberty, p.256.

ing truth of this statement. Here there is the concrete assertion of the Law's utter powerlessness to produce life pleasing to God. It is fitting that this passage should stand near the beginning of his treatise on the liberty of the Christian man.

Also involved in the essence of the Law is the fact that, in Luther's opinion, man has a natural aversion to the Law and to the multiplying of laws as an accretion of the basic commandments of God. The laws, of course, which were given to Israel through Moses in addition to the Decalogue served the sole purpose of teaching human nature that many laws were useless in producing piety in individuals. Luther states:

For although the Law leads and drives away from evil to good works, it is still impossible for man to do them willingly and gladly; but he ~~had~~ at all times an aversion for the Law and would rather be free... Consequently, all the laws cannot make one really pious without the grace of God, for they can ~~produce~~ only dissemblers, hypocrites, pretenders, and proud saints (who)...never please God. ¹

Of course, in mentioning "laws" Luther is speaking of man-made statutes, not the Law of God. Yet, in effect, they are the same. Various groups merely differ in the number of laws, combining laws with God's Law to effect a standard. Therefore, according to the number of standards thus established, the Law may become divisive

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1. Holman, op.cit., On the New Testament, Vol,I, p.294.

and produce sects, which situation Luther described as lamentable.

Whatever else the Law could perform, it could not bring the grace of God to man. Powerless and impotent to save, its nature is to transmit that sense of powerlessness to man who can see himself in its mirror only as a creature without hope.

C. The Nature of the Gospel

Philip Schaff wrote of Luther's treatise on the Liberty of the Christian Man:

The beautiful tract on 'Christian Freedom' is a pearl among Luther's writings.¹

To many this is an understatement, and there is just cause for such an opinion. One of the many reasons for holding this treatise in such high esteem is the wonderful portrayal of the Gospel as God's vehicle of grace. There is a remarkable simplicity and persuasiveness in this description which complements its doctrinal significance.

After a short discussion of the Word of God in the form of commands and promise, or Law and Gospel, Luther elaborated on the latter phase:

Thus the promises of God give what the commands of

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1. Schaff, op.cit., p.294.

God ask, and fulfill what the Law prescribes, that all things may be of God alone, both the commands and the fulfilling of the commands. He alone commands, He also fulfills. Therefore, the promises of God belong to the New Testament, nay, they are the New Testament. ¹

The Gospel, as truly good news, conveys to man all that he needs and desires for righteousness, peace, and liberty. It is "full of goodness," as Luther stated. This is in direct contrast to the Law which can only demand. Through sin the Law brings death, but the Gospel conveys life. Luther wrote:

On the other hand (in opposition to the Law), the Gospel brings consolation and remission...through the Word and Sacraments..²

For Luther the Gospel was always the resolution of the conflict with God which was aggravated by the inroads of the Law. From the time of his evangelical experience to the end of his life, the Gospel was his only comfort, the one source of God's grace to sustain him in his personal life and in his relations with various individuals and groups. The Gospel offered entrance into a new life of communion with God.

D. The Function of the Law

1. In Restraining Evil.

In the second of the Smalcald Articles entitled "Of the Law," Luther wrote:

Here we hold that the Law was given by God, first, to restrain sin by threats and the dread of punishment, and by the promise and offer of grace and benefit..³

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1. Martin Luther: Three Treatises, Christian Liberty, p.257.
2. Concordia Triglotta: Smalcald Articles, p.481.
3. Ibid., p.479.

As noted above, the Articles were published only six years before his death, and they represent in summary fashion the mature convictions of Luther. But the suppression of evil as the first function of the Law was a much earlier view. In his treatise on "Secular Authority" he posed the question as to why God gave to all men, Christian and non-Christian, so many commandments. His answer excluded Christians from the dominion of the Law, for he considered believers to be inclined by the Spirit and faith to keep the Law. He wrote:

To put it as briefly as possible here, Paul says that the Law is given for the sake of the unrighteous, that is, those who are not Christian may through the Law be externally restrained from evil deeds..¹

The word "externally" deserves to be emphasized, for the Law in the province of the inner man multiplies his sinfulness. The restraint Luther speaks of here is much more a social than an inner one.

Another reason for the imposition of the Law upon all men was that Luther maintained no human being is by nature Christian or holy. The Law does not allow them to give free rein to their impulses and desires. This led Luther to state that God instituted two governments, spiritual and secular. He wrote:

For this reason (i.e., an evil world unrestrained in

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1. Holman, op.cit., Secular Authority, p.236.

any way) God has ordained the two governments; the spiritual, which by the Holy Spirit under Christ makes Christians and pious people, and the secular, which restrains the unchristian and wicked so that they must needs keep the peace outwardly, even against their will. So Paul interprets the secular sword, Romans 13, and says it is not a terror to good works, but to the evil. And Peter says it is for the punishment of evil-doers. 1

The secular government rules by the Law, and it is indispensable. Luther imagined an attempted world-rule under the Gospel without the Law, and the result in his opinion would be chaos. He stated that a man who dared to attempt to rule a country or the world without the Gospel would be like a shepherd who "should place in one fold, wolves, lions, eagles, and sheep together." The sheep, Luther said, would keep the peace, but they would not live long.

2, In Conviction of Sin.

There is little difficulty in discovering extended statements by Luther which express his teaching of the Law in its condemnatory office. According to this aspect he is most vocal, as might well be anticipated from a study of his own personal battles with "Mister Law," a designation often used by Luther. This personal experience must be recalled for a fuller appreciation of the doctrinal formulation which later came into being.

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1. Holman, op.cit., Vol.III, Secular Authority, p.236.

There is perhaps no more lucid an explanation of the humbling purpose of the Law than is contained in the treatise on "Christian Liberty." It will be remembered that here Luther did not use the terms, "Law and Gospel," but he substituted for them the commands and promises of God. Thus, in speaking of the commands of God, he wrote:

..they are intended to teach a man to know himself, that through them he may recognize his inability to do good and despair of his powers. That is why they are called the Old Testament. ¹

This emphasis on the convicting power of the Law was always strong in Luther's life. The treatise on "Christian Liberty" was written in 1520. In 1523, in describing secular and spiritual authority, he wrote; "It (the Law) is to teach men to recognize sin." ² In stronger language the second of the Smalcald Articles, "Of the Law," depicts this office of the Law:

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1. Martin Luther: Three Treatises, Christian Liberty, p.256. Luther thereupon provided an example worthy of quote: "For example: 'Thou shalt not covet' is a command which convicts us all of being sinners, since no one is able to avoid coveting, however much he may struggle against it. Therefore, in order not to covet and to fulfill the command, a man is compelled to despair of himself, and to seek elsewhere and from someone else the help which he does not find in himself, as is said in Hosea: 'Destruction is thy own, O Israel: thy help is only in Me.' And as we fare with one command, so we fare with all; for it is equally impossible for us to keep any of them."

2. Holman, op.cit., Vol.III, Secular Authority, p.235.

(the) force of the Law is that it reveal original sin ...and show man how very low his nature has fallen, and has become utterly corrupted...In this way he becomes terrified, is humbled, desponds, despairs, and anxiously desires aid, but sees not escape. 1

And in the treatise of 1539, "On the Councils and the Churches," Luther interpreted Christ as preaching the Law unto damnation when He told the Pharisee that not one of them kept the Law.

The foregoing examples do not do justice to Luther's experience, even when his language becomes vehement and forceful, but they do stress the fact that this was no mere doctrine which was produced by pen and paper. Luther faced God's Word honestly, and being tormented with no "guilt-complex," he maintained that doctrine of the condemning Law even after the basic religious conflict had passed from his own life.

3. In the Christian Life.

In characterizing the scope and function of the spiritual and secular kingdoms, in his treatise on "Secular Authority," Luther clarified his stand at the outset concerning Christians and the Law. True believers in Christ, as members of the spiritual kingdom, are not under the Law, neither the secular law nor the Law of God. He wrote:

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1. Concordia Triglotta: Smalcald Articles, p.479.

..these people (Christians) need no secular sword or law. And if all the world were composed of real Christians, that is, true believers, no prince, king, lord, sword, or law would be needed. For what were the use of them, since Christians have in their hearts the Holy Spirit, who instructs them and causes them to wrong no one, to love every one, willingly and cheerfully to suffer injustice and even death from every one. ¹

At first glance, this reference to Law would seem to be limited exclusively to the secular law, but its significance lies deeper than that. In the same paragraph in which the passage above occurs, Luther said:

Therefore, it is not possible for the secular sword and law to find any work to do among Christians, since of themselves they do much more than its laws and doctrines can demand. Just as Paul says in I Timothy 1, 'The Law is not given for the righteous, but for the unrighteous.' ²

The passage of Paul referred to by Luther deals primarily with the Law of God over against the dispensation of grace in Christ. Thus, it seems logical to consider that Luther is speaking of both secular law and divine Law here, although, because of the subject of the treatise, the secular law is being emphasized.

The treatise on "Secular Authority" appeared in 1523. Four years earlier, in 1519, Luther wrote of the only "law," if it can be so called, which obtained among Christians. This treatise is entitled, "On the New Testament, that is, the Holy Mass." In it he advanced the

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1. Holman, op.cit., Secular Authority, p.234.
2. Ibid.

belief that the Mass, or the Lord's Supper, was the only "law" for believers. He wrote in part:

Christ, in order that He might prepare for Himself an acceptable and beloved people...abolished the whole Law of Moses. And that He might not give further occasion for divisions (because of multiplication of laws), He did not again appoint more than one law or order for His entire people, and that the Holy Mass. ¹

Luther affirmed this because he believed that in the Mass God's promise through Christ offered holiness and salvation to all who accept and believe it. He wrote the following passage in connection with this promise in the Mass:

What then is this testament, and what is bequeathed us therein by Christ? Forsooth, a great eternal and unspeakable treasure, namely, the forgiveness of all sins, as the words plainly state, 'This is the cup of a new eternal testament in My blood, that is shed for you and for many for the remission of sin.' ²

Christ enjoined his disciples to remember Him as often as they partook of His supper (Luke 22,19), and Luther elaborated on these words:

Even as a man who bequeaths something includes therein what shall be done for him afterward...so also Christ has ordained a requiem for Himself in this testament; not that He needs it, but because it is necessary and profitable for us to remember Him; whereby we are strengthened in faith, confirmed in hope and made ardent in love. ³

Despite the foregoing, there are Christians who

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1. Holman, op.cit., Vol.I, The New Testament, p.295.
2. Ibid., p.300.
3. Ibid.

need the outward discipline of the Law in their lives. They are a class of people who need definite guide-lines and prescribed limits in order to inspire them to good works. Therefore, in his treatise concerning good works, Luther wrote of this type of person:

The fourth class, who are still lusty, and childish in their understanding of faith and of the spiritual life, must be coaxed like young children and tempted with external, definite, and prescribed decorations, with reading, praying, fasting...and such other things as are commanded and observed in monastic houses and churches, until they also learn to know the faith. 1

For those who are more spiritually advanced, the Law also has a place. Luther held that human nature and natural reason could never be wholly purged of the innate striving for salvation by works. He therefore gave this advice:

Therefore there is need of the prayer that the Lord may give us and make us 'theodacti,' that is, taught of God, and Himself, as He promised, write His Law in our hearts; otherwise there is no hope for us. 2

Furthermore, in controverting the practices of the Antinomians, Luther emphasized this belief that the Ten Commandments have much significance for the believer. He wrote:

For they, rejecting and not understanding the Ten Commandments, preach much about the grace of Christ instead. They strengthen and comfort those who remain in sins, telling them that they shall not fear sins or be terrified at them since through Christ, these are

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1. Holman, op.cit., On Godd Works, p.200.
2. Martin Luther: Three Treatises, Christian Liberty, p.289.

all done away; and yet they see people going on, and let them go on...without any renewal or improvement of their lives. From this one observes that they really do not understand the faith and Christ aright, and abolish Him even as they preach Him. For how can a man preach rightly about the works of the Holy Ghost in the First Table and speak about comfort, grace, forgiveness of sins, if he neither heeds nor practices the works of the Holy Ghost in the Second Table, which he can understand and experience, while he has never attempted or experienced those of the First Table. 1

This is the role of the Law in the Christian life as conceived by Luther; not with the restraint of legalism, but in the grace of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit.

E. The Function of the Gospel

1. In Conversion-Justification.

The means whereby God makes known and effects His righteousness is the Gospel of His grace. Luther subscribed to this statement unequivocally in his doctrinal treatises. In the treatise on "Christian Liberty," Luther wrote:

One thing and one only is necessary for Christian life, righteousness and liberty. That one thing is the most holy Word of God, the Gospel of Christ, as He says, John 11, 'I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me shall not die forever;' and John 8, 'If the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed.' 2

One would not expect any development of doctrine in regard to Luther's article on justification through the Gospel, for this was the basis of the Reformer's experi-

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1. Hoöman, op.cit., Vol.IV, On the Councils and Churches, p.268.

2. Martin Luther: Three Treatises, Christian Liberty, p.253.

ence and work. In support of this, there is no evidence of change in his teaching on this fundamental doctrine in the doctrinal treatises. The passage quoted above was taken from one of the famous treatises of 1520, but there is total agreement in the Smalcald Articles of 1537. In the fourth article, "Of the Gospel," Luther concisely wrote of the Gospel of justification:

..God is superabundantly rich in His grace. First, through the spoken Word by which the forgiveness of sins is preached in the whole world; which is the peculiar office of the Gospel. 1

When Luther uses the term "forgiveness of sins," he is speaking of justification, for the latter directly involves forgiveness; justification enables man to approach God because man's sins are forgiven. In his treatise on the "New Testament" Luther wrote:

For the whole Gospel is nothing but a proclamation of God's grace and of the forgiveness of sins, granted us through the sufferings of Christ..²

A very apt summary of Luther's view of the justifying Gospel is found in his treatise on "Christian Liberty":

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1. Concordia Triglotta: Smalcald Articles, p.491.
2. Holman, op.cit., Vol.I, On the New Testament, p.321.

The Word is the Gospel of God concerning His Son, who was made flesh, suffered, rose from the dead, and was glorified through the Spirit who sanctifies. For to preach Christ means to feed the soul, to make it righteous, to set it free, and to save it, if it believe the preaching. 1

2. In the Christian Life-Sanctification.

The sanctifying, ethical power of the Gospel is nowhere emphasized more than in Luther's treatise on "Christian Liberty." He made the sweeping claim that the Gospel, the Word of God ², is man's sole support:

..the soul can do without all things except the Word of God...this Word is the Word of life, of truth, of light, of peace, of righteousness, of salvation, of joy, of liberty, of wisdom, of power, of grace, of glory, and of every blessing beyond our power to estimate. 3

The source of all Christian living is in the Gospel of God which both gives spiritual life and also maintains that life.

But for the Gospel to have vital effect it involves faith. Without faith the Gospel is powerless. With faith it saves from sin and confers all benefits.

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1. Martin Luther: Three Treatises, Christian Liberty, p. 254.

2. The Gospel of God is equated with the Word of God in many places by Luther. He regarded the two expressions as synonymous in fundamental meaning. Thus in "Christian Liberty" he said: "The Word is the Gospel of God concerning His Son.." This concept is necessary in order to understand statements made concerning the effect of the Gospel in Christian life.

3. Martin Luther: Three Treatises, Christian Liberty, p. 253.

Luther wrote:

Hence true faith in Christ is a treasure beyond comparison, which brings with it salvation and saves from every evil..1

For God our Father has made all things depend on faith, so that whoever has faith shall have all, and whoever has it not, shall have nothing. 2

The Gospel also has outward manifestations of its power, but even here faith is essential. This is illustrated in his treatise on the Mass, where he states:

But the chief reason for outwardly holding mass is the Word of God, which no one can do without, and which must daily be used and studied. Not only because every day Christians are born, baptized and trained, but because we live in the midst of the world, the flesh and the devil, who do not cease to tempt us and drive us into sin, against which the most powerful weapon is the holy Word of God, as St. Paul also calls it, a 'spiritual sword,' which is powerful against sin.3

In addition, by means of the Gospel the social as well as the individual life is enriched. The Christian is lord of all and subject to none, yet he is also servant to all and subject to all. This is Luther's thesis in his treatise on "Christian Liberty," and the Gospel message had created those relationships. It is for this reason that Luther exclaimed in a paean of praise:

Who then can comprehend the riches and the glory of the Christian life? It can do all things, and has all things, and lacks nothing; it is lord over sin, death, and hell, and yet at the same time it serves, ministers to, and benefits all men. 4

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1. Martin Luther: Three Treatises, Christian Liberty, p. 255.
2. Ibid., p.257.
3. Holman, op.cit., The New Testament, p.320.
4. Martin Luther: Three Treatises, Christian Liberty, p. 279.

F. Summary

The material of this chapter, drawn from Luther's various treatises, reveals that his concept of the Law and Gospel in nature and function did not vary over a comparatively long period of time. The Law is constantly referred to as condemnatory in nature; the Gospel is always the source of justification and consolation. The Law always exercised its almost negative functions in opposition to the grace of God revealed in the Gospel.

The Law commands but never fulfills; the Gospel fulfills what the Law prescribes. The Law holds back sin in the social order by threat of punishment; it teaches man to see himself as a hopeless sinner before God; it must be written in the hearts of believers by God.

The Gospel gives life, righteousness, and liberty to all who accept and believe the message; it enables the Christian man to live a life of holiness before God and his fellow man.

These are the most notable emphases of Luther's teaching on the Law and Gospel in his doctrinal treatises. The unity of his beliefs and his presentation of these truths is a forceful commentary on the intellectual and religious aspects of his life.

CHAPTER IV

THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL IN LUTHER'S SERMONS

LUTHER'S DOCTRINE OF THE LAW
AND GOSPEL IN SELECTED WORKS

CHAPTER I V

THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL IN
LUTHER'S SERMONS

A. Introduction

In general, Luther followed the pericopic system of preaching. He would preach on the same texts year after year, adhering faithfully to the Gospel and Epistle lessons. ¹ Nevertheless, although his subject matter was repeated, his expositions never became trite. Bainton makes a pointed remark concerning this:

If one now reads through his sermons of thirty years on a single theme, one is amazed at the freshness with which every year he illumined some new aspect. ²

The form of many of these sermons is significant. Most of them appear in two sections; the first an application of the Law, and the second an application of the Gospel. Luther never tired of emphasizing this division of the Scriptures, for by this device his audience was

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1. MacKinnon, op.cit., Vol.IV, p.308: "Luther's sermons mark an epoch in the history of preaching and that of evangelical religion as well. They are homiletic in character, though he sometimes spoke without reference to a text, and freely expatiated on the theme of the day. He made it a rule to devote his sermons to the exposition of the Scriptures."

2. Bainton, op.cit., p.350.

enabled to distinguish correctly between these two offices of the Word. By the use of simple and vivid illustrations, he impressed his doctrine of the Law and Gospel upon the people, effectively teaching and exhorting.

In order to gain a more complete idea of the significance and influence of Luther's sermons in relation to a study of the Law and Gospel, it is necessary to refer to the method of collection of his sermons, and to the various editions and revisions which they underwent. ¹ In 1521, because of widespread interest elicited by his pericopic sermons, he published the Latin "Postils." They were sermon volumes on pericopic texts. ² The Latin "Postils" were followed by a series in the vernacular. From 1525 to 1528 additional volumes were issued on the basis of notes taken by various auditors. Luther was not entire-

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1. Cf. John Nicholas Lenker: Luther's Works, Vol. XI, pp. 7-11. The source for this study consists of Vols. IV, IX, X, XI, XII, and XIV in Lenker's edition of Luther's works.

2. Ernest G. Schwiebert: Luther And His Times, p. 636: "Luther's own personal, dynamic concept of religion became available to a much wider following, for in the 'Postillen' he expounded the dynamics of Christian ethics in Christ's redeemed, the inner relationship between Law and Gospel... Even such brief sermonets enabled preachers with little background to catch the spark and to preach a vital message to their backward congregations eager for light. Luther's 'Postillen' did far more than supply poorly prepared clergymen with easy sermon materials. Though simple in form, their scholarly foundation and sound doctrine caused the best scholars of the day to consult them eagerly, and they were particularly useful to the leaders of the new Protestantism."

ly satisfied with these editions, and he appointed Caspar Creuziger to revise them. This revision was ultimately published in 1544. In 1532 he began to preach to his household on Sunday evenings and continued this practice until 1534. These were the "Hauspostille" (house-postils) as distinguished from the "Kirchenpostille" (church-postils). They were recorded by Veit Dietrich and George Rörer and issued in two subsequent editions, in 1544 and 1559. Thus these sermons are a good representation of Luther's preaching over a period of many years. His doctrine is well-illustrated, not least that of Law and Gospel. Although the work of other men is incorporated in the "Postils," they are essentially Luther's.

This chapter will not be an attempt to include all of Luther's "Postils." A selection of approximately forty sermons has been made from various pericopes which emphasize Luther's doctrine of Law and Gospel.

B. The Nature of the Law

In almost all of his sermons Luther attempted first to inculcate the essential nature and spirit of the Law, and then he would apply the saving grace of the Gospel. This was his favorite pattern, and it has become a model for Lutheran ministers of every generation. In fact, the Puritan, Presbyterian, and Reformed divines in colonial America, such as Jonathan Edwards, Gilbert Tennent,

Jonathan Dickinson, and Theodore Frehlinghuysen, all followed this structure.

While Luther respected the Law in its rightful place, he never preached its message exclusively. This was because the Law, although emanating from God, could never be the vehicle of His grace. In a sermon on the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10,23-37), Luther dwells much on the relation of the Christian to the nature of the Law:

Now we must have high regard for the Law. It says: 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me!' Thou, thou, it says, thou, and everything thou art; and especially does it mean the heart, the soul and all thy powers. 1

The Law is absolute in its demands and establishes a divine standard for humanity. This, of course, is none other than an explanation of Jesus' words to the Lawyer who asked the Lord what must be done to inherit eternal life. Immediately Christ set before the man the highest demand of the Law. That no man fulfills this demand is obvious. Luther says:

Thus this Law here makes us all sinners so that not the least letter of this commandment is fulfilled, even by the most holy persons in the world.2

The Law proclaims to every man, regardless of his moral status, that he is a sinner before God. Luther likened the Law in this sermon to the Priest and Levite, who, although they passed by the wounded man, did not help him in any way, but permitted him to remain in his

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1. Lenker, op.cit., Vol.XIV, p.22.
2. Ibid., p.25.

hopeless condition. The Law removes all basis for ethical righteousness and yet is unable to put man on his feet before God. Thus Luther states in another sermon, but on the same text:

Since I am to love God with my whole heart and my neighbor as myself, and I do not do it, I must therefore be condemned and God approves and confirms the sentence of condemnation. Who will counsel me in this instance? I do not know what to counsel you, says the Law: but it decrees and demands plainly that you be obedient. 1

The conflict which the Law produces within man cannot be resolved by that Law. In a sermon on Christ's circumcision, Luther pointedly summarizes the nature of the Law. He believed that circumcision symbolized the fact that the entire nature of man needed redemption. Therefore he states:

God looks at this sin of the nature alone. This can be eradicated by no punishment, even if there were a thousand hells; but the grace of God alone, which makes the nature pure and new, must purge it away. The Law only manifests it and teaches how to recognize it, but does not save from it; the Law restrains only the hand or members, it cannot restrain the person and nature from being sinful; for in birth the nature has already anticipated the Law, and has become sin before the Law could forbid it. Just as little as it lies in one's human power to be born and receive natural existence, so little does it lie in his power to be without sin or escape from it. He who has created us, he alone must take it away. Therefore he first gives the Law, by which man recognized this sin and thirsts for grace; then he also gives the Gospel and saves him. 2

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1. Lenker, op.cit., Vol.XIV, p.187.
2. Ibid., Vol.X, p.311-312.

C. The Nature of the Gospel

Luther's great concern with the Gospel was that it should be preached. He had a true appreciation of the universality of the Gospel message, a greater appreciation than has perhaps been credited to him. As the means of God's grace, the Gospel is essentially a message which is to be proclaimed to all people. In a sermon on Christ's missionary commission to the disciples (Mark 16, 14-20), which dates back to 1523, Luther explained the Gospel in the following terms:

We have often said heretofore that the Gospel properly speaking, is not something written in books, but an oral proclamation, which shall be heard in all the world and shall be cried out freely before all creatures, so that all would have to hear it if they had ears; that is to say, it shall be preached so publicly that to preach it more publicly would be impossible. 1

If this describes the method of transmission of the Gospel, what is its content? According to Luther, this is concisely expressed in the latter part of the Lord's commission, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." (Mark 16, 16). Therefore he states:

What is the Gospel? It is these words which the Lord speaks: 'He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.' We have often said, and I think we ought to thoroughly understand it by this time, that the Gospel cannot suffer us to preach works...for it seeks to pluck us down from our presumption and to set and plant us solely upon God's mercy. 2

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1. Lenker, op.cit., Vol.XII, p.183.
2. Ibid., p.184.

Here again Luther is summarily sweeping away all pretensions of man which elevate or even consider his own righteousness as a basis of salvation. Belief in what God has done in His grace is the sine qua non of the Gospel.

This is emphasized later in the same sermon:

Now what does such preaching call for? It calls for this, that I believe in it, for in no other way can I apprehend it. 1

Luther also considered Baptism an integral part of the Gospel, for this Sacrament was to him an act of faith on the part of the believer. It was an outward expression of the inward work of grace through the Gospel. In elaboration of this he states:

It (baptism) is to be coupled, however, with faith, because God would not have faith to be hidden in the heart, but would have it burst forth and manifest itself to the world. For this reason he ordained such outward signs, by means of which everyone may show and confess his faith. 2

Moreover, the sign of baptism is given us also to show that God himself will help us, and that we should be certain of His grace, and that everyone be able to say: Hereunto did God give me a sign, that I should be assured of my salvation, which he has promised me in the Gospel. 3

The center of the Gospel message, in fact the Person without whom there would be no Gospel, is the Lord Jesus Christ. It is He who is the Gospel and who has

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1. Lenker, op.cit., Vol.XII, p.186.
2. Ibid., p.188.
3. Ibid., p.189.

given humanity a Word of hope and joy. In a sermon on the raising of Jairus' daughter (Matt.9, 18-26) Luther began with these words:

Dear friends, you know that the Gospel is nothing else than a sermon about one person who is called Christ. 1

And in a paragraph which follows shortly after he says:

He who knows this may well thank God, that he knows where to place his comfort, help and confidence..2

In a sermon on Christ's resurrection appearance to the disciples (Luke 24, 36-47) Luther showed how the Gospel message offers that comfort. He has already mentioned the fact that the Gospel is a solace only to the faint-hearted, and then he continues:

They (the faint-hearted) are the poor, conscience-stricken ones, whose sins lie heavily upon them... (who) are well-nigh startled by the sound of a rustling leaf. To these contrite, poor, and needy souls the Gospel offers comfort, to them it is a sweet savor.3

This is the nature of the Gospel, that it offers Christ and what He has done to remove all sins and evil from the one who believes its message. Any individual who recognizes Christ as his Savior has heard the Gospel as it should be heard.

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1.Lenker, op.cit., Vol.XIV, p.328.

2. Ibid., p.329.

3. Ibid., Vol.XI, p.303.

D. The Function of the Law

1. In Restraining Evil.

Although Luther himself was extremely sensitive to the Law as God's perfect standard for man, he recognized the fact that there are many who care little for the divine rule. The Law neither torments them nor urges them on to the good. Therefore, Luther believed that the power to enforce the Law should be vested in the state. Only in this way can evil remain potential; otherwise it will erupt. The Law as God's instrument for order pertains particularly to those who are not Christians. In a sermon on the Parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15,1-10) Luther said:

..Moses must be allowed to have absolute rule over those who are not Christians, and burden them both outwardly and inwardly, so that he may force and torment them to do what is right and omit what is wrong, although they do it not gladly.¹

..the others, who only ought to feel it (the Law), do not concern themselves about it at all; yes, the more you try to terrify them with the Law and the wrath of God, the harder they become. Therefore, they need another master, namely, the hangman and sheriff to teach them..²

A specific instance which illustrates Luther's belief on this phase is found in a sermon on the text of

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1. Lenker, op.cit., Vol.IV, p.78.
2. Ibid.

Romans 6,19-23, which contrasts the life of servitude to sin with that of freedom in Christ. Luther shows the effect of the secular sword upon the actions of one who has committed wrong. He states:

In affairs of temporal government...it is understood that he who asks for pardon confesses himself guilty, acknowledges his error, and promises to reform, to transgress no more...Suppose now the thief continues in wrong-doing and boasts, 'Now that I am under grace I may do as I please, I have no Law to fear;' who would tolerate him? For though the Law is indeed cancelled for him and he receives not merited punishment...life is not granted him that he may continue to steal...he is under increased obligation to avoid occasions of falling under condemnation of the Law. ¹

Thus Luther considered the maintenance of the Law as a distinct civil function. The state is to uphold general peace and convict those who would harm God, themselves, and each other by enforcing the Law.

2. In Conviction of Sin.

Before a man may attain a right relationship with God, he must have a correct estimation of himself; he must see himself as God sees him. The verdict of God upon all humanity is to be experienced as a personal one, for only then can God begin to deal with an individual. Luther repeatedly emphasized this, and he maintained that it was the "first work" of God. In a sermon on John 20, 19-31 Luther wrote:

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1. Lenker, op.cit., Vol.IX, p.157.

This now is the first work of God, that we know ourselves, how condemned, miserable, weak and sickly we are. It is then good and God's will, that a man desponds and despairs of himself, when he hears: This shalt thou do and that shalt thou do. For everybody must feel and experience in himself, that he does not and cannot do it. The Law is neither able nor is it designed to give you this power of obeying it; but it effects what St. Paul says: 'The Law worketh wrath,' Rom. 4, 15, that is, nature rages against the Law, and wishes the Law did not exist.¹

In a sermon on the text of Matthew 22, 34-46, in commenting on the great commandment of the Law, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind," Luther states:

It thus requires you to give yourself wholly and entirely to him in all your life and conduct. From this you can conclude there is no human being who is not condemned, inasmuch as no one has kept the commandment... There we stand in the midst of fear and distress, unable to help ourselves, and the first knowledge of the Law is, that we see our human nature is unable to keep the Law... When you realize this, the Law has accomplished its work. This is what Paul means when he says in Rom. 3, 20, 'Through the Law is the knowledge of sin.'²

But the work of the Law is not merely to condemn. It is also to point to the remedy for the sense of sin which it inspires, namely, Jesus Christ. In a later part of the sermon referred to above, Luther explains this emphasis of the Law:

We have now heard what the Law is, and how through the Law we come to the knowledge of sin; but this is not enough, another has a work to do here, whose name is Christ Jesus... He delivers us from the Law, for when

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1. Lenker, op.cit., Vol. XI, p. 369.
2. Ibid., Vol. XIV, p. 180.

the Law says, Love God with all thy heart...or thou wilt be damned...Then Christ says: Come to me, take me and cling to me by faith, then you shall be rid of the Law.¹

This, therefore, is the primary office of the Law, to make man despair of and look outside of himself for his salvation. For this reason, the Law must be taught in all its severity, as Luther summarized in a sermon on the Good Shepherd (John 10,1-11):

Where the Law is so taught that man, threatened by the wrath and punishment of God, is outwardly held under good discipline, and restrained from presumption and carelessness, and is inwardly urged by fear and terror to feel his helplessness and misery and to recognize his own inability, where the Law is so taught, the fold is rightly closed and guarded, and the sheep cannot run away into error and thus become a prey to wolves. ²

Luther also treated the relation of the Christian to human laws and ordinances. He defined this relationship in detail in explanation of the story of the man healed of the dropsy on the Sabbath. No law, said Luther, may interfere with the great law of love. He states:

Therefore we conclude that all Law, divine and human, treating of outward conduct, should bind any further than love goes. Love is to be the interpreter of Law. ...The reason for enacting all laws and ordinances is only to establish love, as Paul says, Rom.13,10: 'Love therefore is the fulfillment of the Law.' ³

Consequently, the Christian is to test all Law by love. If laws do not serve love, they may be abrogated,

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1. Lenker, op.cit., Vol.XIV, p.181.
2. Ibid., Vol.XII, p.387.
3. Ibid., Vol.XIV, p.161.

whether they are from God or man. Thus Luther summarizes this sermon:

The sum of this Gospel then is: Love and necessity control all Law; and there should be no Law that cannot be enforced and applied in love...All this is intended to help and strengthen our hearts and consciences. In this way our Lord himself teaches us how we should humble ourselves and be subject one to another. ¹

In commenting on the text of John 10,1-11, Luther quoted a Pauline passage ² as corroboration of this view. He interpreted Christ's figure of the freedom of the sheep to go in and out as representing Christian liberty. He states:

Here Christ speaks of the Christian liberty, which means that Christians are now free from the curse and tyranny of the Law, and may keep the Law or not, according as they see that the love and need of their neighbor requires. ³

3. In the Christian Life.

Luther believed that the Christian life is not to be a matter of enforced morals, but rather a life which transcends any set of commandments. This he makes clear in a sermon on the Parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15,1-10):

For through Christ and his baptism we are to be so highly exalted and liberated that our conscience according to faith may know no Law, but simply remain unmastered and unjudged by the same, that nothing else may be so cheerful to us according to the internal experience of conscience, than as though no Law had ever

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1. Lenker, op.cit., Vol.XIV, p.168.
2. I Corinthians 9,19-23.
3. Lenker, op.cit., Vol.XII, p.381.

appeared, either of God, or the pope, or the emperor..1

This is not to say that the Law has no relevance for the Christian, but that the higher spiritual law of life in Christ Jesus enables the believer to live on a plane above that of the demands of the Law. Therefore, it may be concluded that the Law is of secondary importance to the Christian. It no longer is to hold terror for the conscience, but it serves as a guidepost at best. Later in the sermon quoted above Luther states:

For Christians he (Moses or the Law) cannot thereby make either pious or righteous; but of course he does this, namely, he shows them their duty, which according to the Spirit they gladly do, and much more besides, except that the flesh does not willingly follow nor obey the Spirit, so that on this account they still need not be admonished and urged. But at the same time the conscience must remain free, for the Law has no right here before God to accuse and condemn.²

E. The Function of the Gospel

1. In Conversion-Justification.

The application of the justifying message of the Gospel was the focal point of Luther's preaching. After the demonstration of the Law to reveal man's helplessness, he would then bring to troubled hearts the saving Gospel. In a sermon on Christ as the Good Shepherd (John 10, 1-11), which dates from 1523, Luther states:

..Christ comes and makes a lamb out of the sheep,

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1. Lenker, op.cit., Vol.IV, p.71-72.
2. Ibid., p.77.

feeds it with his Gospel and directs it how to regain cheer for the heart so hopelessly troubled and crushed by the Law. 1

The message of the Gospel is one of grace, and it is received with joy by those who know the Shepherd's voice. Luther States:

But when the Gospel comes, the voice of the shepherd, it says: 'God gave to the world his only Son, that all who believe on him should not perish, but have everlasting life.' Then is the heart happy; it feeds upon these words and finds them good. The lamb has found its satisfying pasture; it wants none other.²

This is the soothing balm which Luther himself experienced and then gave out to others. It is evangelical preaching at its best, with a balance of purity of doctrine and emotional appeal evident throughout.

Involved in this work of the Gospel in individual experience is the forgiveness of sins. This is the primary impact of the Gospel as Luther describes it in a sermon on the raising of Jairus' daughter (Matt.9, 18-26):

If now I accept what is preached I have a comfort that my sins are forgiven before God and before the world. If I at heart hold fast to this, then I am a Christian, and for this I thank God through Christ, who at all times gives me his Holy Spirit and grace, that sin may not harm me either here or at the day of judgment.³

In a sermon on Easter Tuesday, Luther spoke further of the blessedness of the Gospel (Luke 24,36-47):

..the Gospel is a testimony of the resurrection of

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1. Lenker, op.cit., Vol.XII, p.377.
2. Ibid., p.378.
3. Ibid., Vol.XIV, p.331.

Christ, which serves to comfort and refresh the poor, sorrowing, and terrified consciences...As soon as a man knows and understands this, and believes the Gospel, his heart finds peace and says: If Christ, my Lord, has overcome my sin, and trodden it under foot by his resurrection, wherefore should I fear, and of what should I be afraid? Why should not my heart rejoice and be of good cheer? 1

Finally, there is an excellent passage which illustrates Luther's method of presenting the Gospel as the means of salvation in a sermon on Christ's resurrection appearance to the disciples on the text of John 20,19-31:

But what is the Gospel? It is this, that God has sent His Son into the world to save sinners, and to crush hell, overcome death, take away sin and satisfy the Law. But what must you do? Nothing but accept this and look up to your Redeemer and firmly believe that he has done all this for your good and freely gives you all as your own, so that the terrors of death, sin and hell you can confidently say and boldly depend upon it, and say: Although I do not fulfill the Law, although sin is still present and I fear death and hell, nevertheless from the Gospel I know that Christ has bestowed upon me all his works.²

In this way Luther preached the Gospel, concisely and cogently, with the conviction that its message had the power to lift a soul from death to life.

2. In the Christian Life-Sanctification.

For Luther the power of the Gospel served not only to justify man before God, but its influence extended into every subsequent phase of life. Justification was not merely a perfunctory act; its influence must be felt

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1. Lenker, op.cit., Vol.XI, p.304-305.
2. Ibid., p.371.

in a continuous process of sanctification. In substantiation of this, Luther stated in a sermon on Christ's words to the disciples concerning repentance (Luke 24,36-47):

..to repent in his (Christ's) name is done thus: in those who believe in Christ God through the same faith works a change for the better, not for a moment, not for an hour, but for their whole life. For a Christian is not instantaneously or suddenly cleansed perfectly, but the reformation and change continue as long as he lives. 1

The question arises of how this process of change is effected. The manner in which a believer received continued assurance of forgiveness of sins in the Gospel is depicted by Luther later in the same sermon:

But now forgiveness is so great and powerful, that God not only forgives the former sins you have committed, but looks through his fingers and forgives the sins you will yet commit. He will not condemn us for our daily infirmities, but forgives all, in view of our faith in him, if we only strive to press onward and get rid of sin. 2

The Gospel maintains a perfect balance between false security and troubled despair in that it impresses upon the believer the need for both humility and strengthening grace. Luther likened the healing oil used by the Samaritan on the wounded man (Luke 10,23-37) to the preaching of the Gospel:

..it (the preaching of the Gospel) keeps the penitent conscience in the knowledge of its sins and wickedness, that it neither becomes secure nor ceases to long for grace, and besides he comforts the conscience by grace

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1. Lenker, op.cit., Vol.XI, p.315.
2. Ibid., p.317.

and forgiveness..¹

In addition, the Gospel is the motivating power in the Christian's life for good works. That which was once commanded by the Law now becomes a part of life. In a sermon on I Cor. 15, 1-10 Luther stated:

By its power God's Law begins to live in man's heart; he loves it, delights in it, and enters upon its fulfillment. ²

This is because the believer has been imbued with a new power to become a servant of righteousness. Luther preached on Romans 6, 19-23, the well-known passage of Paul where he contrasts lives yielded to sin and those given over to sanctification. He revealed the role of the Gospel in this situation in the following manner:

The Gospel teaches first how sin in ourselves is, through Christ, slain and buried. Thus we obtain a good conscience, a conscience hating and opposing sin, and become obedient to another power. Being delivered from sin we would serve God and exert ourselves to do his pleasure.... Since we are free from sin and converted to God, we must in obedience to him do good and live no more in sin. ³

Thus the Gospel is the basis for the ethics of the Christian life. Its power enables the Christian not only to refrain from sin, but also to perform that which is pleasing in the sight of God. It is that which makes a truly good man.

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1. Lenker, op.cit., Vol. XIV, p. 54.
2. Ibid., Vol. IX, p. 244.
3. Ibid., p. 163.

F. Summary

The sermons of Luther reveal the same emphases upon the Law and Gospel as do his other works. Here, of course, they are depicted in more dramatic form, but essentially the doctrine is the same.

The Law shows man that he is a sinner before God. It is necessary both for the Christian and non-Christian. To the former the Law constantly sets forth God's will; upon the latter it forcefully imposes God's will. The Law is the leveler which reduces man to nothingness before God's holiness. This was Luther's first emphasis in his sermons.

29422 Following this stress upon the Law, Luther then applied the solace of the Gospel, the means whereby man must be saved. The Gospel is Jesus Christ and all that He has done for humanity. Belief in the Gospel is necessary for man's salvation. Through it man is offered every blessing. The outward sign of this blessing is the Sacrament of Baptism ordained by God. The Gospel is to interpret the Law. If a Christian finds that the Law interferes with helping his neighbor, he is to follow the dictates of the Gospel of love. The Christian is in a position to shun evil and perform works acceptable to God; he is now able to live a truly fruitful life. This is the second main division of Luther's preaching.

Thus Luther confronted men in his sermons with

the Law and Gospel. On the one hand he presented the holy and righteous will of God, and on the other he set forth His good and gracious will.

CHAPTER V

THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL IN LUTHER'S
TABLE TALK

LUTHER'S DOCTRINE OF THE LAW
AND GOSPEL IN SELECTED WORKS

CHAPTER V

THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL IN LUTHER'S
TABLE TALK

A. Introduction

The Table Talk of Martin Luther comprises a volume of 6,596 entries of varying length, most of them no longer than a paragraph or two.¹ The subject matter has a wide range. As Bainton succinctly remarks, "Pigs, popes, pregnancies, politics, and proverbs jostle one another." 2

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1. Schwiebert, op.cit., pp.119-120: "Copied by twelve table companions over a period of twenty-some years the "Table Talks" are often unreliable, of uneven quality, and written at varying periods of time. Certainly, little, if any, of the material was copied in the Reformer's presence. Rather, the copyists later recorded in their rooms their recollections of the evening's conversation. These recordings, purporting to be the exact words of Luther, were often invented and embellished, and additional errors crept in later when the table companions began to copy conversations from each other. In time it was difficult to know by whom and when the original might have been made. Melancthon on one occasion warned some of the table companions as to the hazardous nature of such practice, realizing that posterity would read meaning into these conversations that Luther had never intended. Furthermore, where every topic imaginable was discussed and the conversation was spontaneous, it is difficult to distinguish jest from serious statement. It is hardly fair, therefore, to hold Luther responsible for all that has come to us in the 'Table Talks.' Obviously, a careful checking against evidence from Luther's own writings and additional sources is absolutely essential."

2. Bainton, op.cit., p.295.

As to the doctrine of the Law and Gospel, there are twenty-one consecutive entries which deal specifically with this, besides scattered references throughout the remainder of the volume . This chapter will be an attempt to discover the salient points of Luther's doctrine in the absence of any extended development of thought concerning the Law and Gospel. Unlike his other works, the language of the "Table Talks" is generally terse and epigrammatic, and it does not readily lend itself to interpretation.

B. The Nature of the Law

At times Luther, as St. Paul before him, was accused of disparaging the Law so that he could establish his own standard of morality. When Luther spoke of the Christian's freedom in Christ, his detractors insisted that this was licence rather than liberty. But Luther never swayed from the belief that the Law was the perfect expression of God's will for man. It was an absolute standard, not diminished by the fact of Christ's coming, but rather fulfilled by Him. There is a section in his "Table Talks" which deals with the role of the Catechism in Christian education, and one paragraph especially summarizes the teaching of the Catechism concerning the Law. This is Luther's description:

First, there are the ten commandments of God, 'Doctrina Doctrinarum,' the doctrine of all doctrines, by which God's will is known, what God will have of us,

and what is wanting in us.¹

Furthermore, the Law is not merely an individual matter, but it includes all social relations in its sweep. This inclusive scope of the Law is pictured in this way:

The Decalogue, that is, the ten commandments of God, are a looking glass and brief sum of all virtues and doctrines, both how we ought to behave towards God and also towards all mankind. There never was at any time written a more excellent, complete, or compendious book of virtues.²

However, by reason of the fact that the Law does reveal God's will, it is a condemnatory weapon, for it reveals also man's sinfulness. Therefore, man can simultaneously say that the Law is divine and good, and also that it afflicts and torments him continually.

Thus Luther states:

Moses with his Law is most terrible; there never was any equal to him in perplexing, affrighting, tyrannizing, threatening, preaching, and thundering; for he lays sharp hold on the conscience, and fearfully works it, but all by God's express command.³

Perhaps all this would not be so bad if the Law would provide a way out for the stricken sinner, but it offers no solace whatever. It is simply a cold, mechanical code, with no 'heart', as it were, announcing to man that he must perform these things or suffer the consequences. The Law cannot justify man before God, as

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1. William Hazlitt: The Table Talk of Martin Luther, p.125.

2. Ibid., p.126.

3. Ibid., p.133.

Luther said:

When we are affrighted, feeling our sins, God's wrath and judgments, most certainly in the Law is no justification...the Law can do nothing that is vivifying, saving, celestial, or divine; what it does is altogether temporal; that is, it gives us to know what evil is in the world, outwardly and inwardly.¹

In a very apt figure Luther illustrated the inability of the Law to justify:

The Law, with its righteousness, is like a cloud without rain, which promises rain but gives none; even so does the Law promise salvation but gives it not, for the Law was not assigned to that end, as St. Paul says, Gal.3, 2

Thus the Law, by its very nature, reveals God's will, man's sin, and leaves man dangling in the void of hopelessness in regard to salvation.

C. The Nature of the Gospel

In his "Table Talks" Luther intimately connects his discovery of God's Word as Law and Gospel with that of the true meaning of the righteousness of God (Rom.1,17). He could find only the accusing Law in the Scriptures until he discovered the Gospel. He said:

..I made no distinction between Law and Gospel; I considered it all to be of one, and I said that Christ did not differ from Moses except in time and perfection. But when I discovered the distinction, that one was Law, the other Gospel, then I broke through (I freed

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1. Hazlitt, op.cit., p.133.
2. Ibid., p.136.

myself.) 1

This was the release which Luther experienced from the relentless pursuing of the Law. The Gospel lifted Luther from the despair aroused by the Law to a living hope. Again using a figure from nature he likened the Gospel to a cooling summer breeze:

The Gospel is like a fresh, mild, and cool air in the extreme heat of summer, a solace and comfort in the anguish of the conscience. 2

The reason for the comfort the Gospel offers is that those who believe in its message realize the forgiveness of sins. The Gospel is the sure evidence that the sins of men will be forgiven if they but accept it. Luther states:

God has given signs and tokens enough, that our sins shall be forgiven; namely, the preaching of the Gospel, baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the Holy Ghost in our hearts. 3

All that the Law demands is comprehended in the Gospel. The sins which it exposes and with which it threatens and torments man's conscience are not imputed to man because of the Gospel. Thus Luther states:

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1. Luthers Werke: Achter Band, p.317; "...ich kein discrimen inter legem et euangelium machet, hielt es alles vor eines et dicebam Christum a Mose non differe nisi tempore et perfectione. Aber da ich das discrimen fande, quod aliud esset lex, aliud euangelium, da risz ich her durch (machte ich mich frei.)

2. Hazlitt, op.cit., p.139.

3. Ibid., p.114.

4. Ibid., p.120.

From all...snares and horrors we are now delivered and freed by Jesus Christ and His Gospel, and are called to the true righteousness of faith.¹

D. The Function of the Law

1. In Restraining Evil.

Luther held that the administration of the civil law was an absolute necessity. He identified the civil law with the Law of God because he maintained that God ordained both. The temporal or outward use of the Law was for the purpose of restraining sin. Luther explains its function in this respect:

The Law is used in two ways: first, for this worldly life, because God has ordained all temporal laws and statutes to prevent and hinder sin. But here some one may object: If the Law hinders sin, then it also justifies. I answer: Oh! no, this does not follow; that I do not murder, commit adultery, steal, etc., is not because I love virtue and righteousness, but because I fear the hangman, who threatens me with the gallows... Therefore this is the first point concerning the Law, that it must be used to deter the ungodly from their wicked and mischievous intentions...wherefore God has ordained magistrates, elders, schoolmasters, laws and statutes, to the end, if they can do no more, that at least they may bind the claws of the devil, and hinder him from raging and swelling so powerfully in those who are his, according to his will and pleasure.

In another place Luther cites again the source of secular authority:

Temporal government is preserved not only by laws and rights, but by divine authority...God maintains govern-

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1. Hazlitt, op.cit., p.139.
2. Ibid., p.130-131.

ments, otherwise the greatest sins in the world would remain unpunished. 1

The Law therefore, in its temporal use, prevents disorder from obtaining upon earth. It is ordained by God, and although it cannot remove sin and forgive men, yet it can and does restrain evil from running rampant. It is to be noted that this function of the Law is particularly concerned with the Second Table of the Commandments, or those which deal with human relations.

2. In Conviction of Sin.

The conviction of sin is the primary purpose of the Law. It is what Luther called the spiritual function of the Law, or that which magnifies individual sin within the heart of man. Luther outlines this purpose as follows:

Secondly, we use the Law spiritually, as thus: To make transgressions seem greater, as St. Paul says, or to reveal and discover to people their sins, blindness, and ungodly doings, wherein they were conceived and born; namely, that they are ignorant of God, and are his enemies, and therefore have justly deserved hell, God's judgments, his everlasting wrath and indignation.²

In another place Luther stated this much more emphatically, limiting the use of the Law to the conviction of sin. He did this because even in restricting the wanton impulses of the ungodly or in aiding the Christian to estimate his life before God, the Law essentially is

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1. Hazlitt, op.cit., p.309.

2. Ibid., p.131.

revealing sin that it may be acknowledged. Luther states:

The particular and only office of the Law is, as St. Paul teaches, that transgressions thereby should be acknowledged; for it was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come, to whom the promise was made.¹

Used in this way, the Law has a penetrating effect upon man, and it strips him of the veneer of self-righteousness. Anyone who considered himself as a model of perfection had only to be struck by the hammer of the Law and his pride would collapse with him. Luther showed the necessity of the use of this aspect of the Law in the following manner:

It is exceeding necessary for us to know this use of the Law. For he that is not an open and a public murderer, an adulterer, or a thief, holds himself to be an upright and godly man; as did the Pharisee, so blinded and possessed spiritually of the devil, that he could neither see nor feel his sins, nor his miserable case, but exalted himself touching his good works and deserts. Such hypocrites and haughty saints can God by no better means humble and soften, than by and through the Law; for that is the right club or hammer, the thunder-clap from heaven, the axe of God's wrath, that strikes through, beats down, and batters such stock-blind, hardened hypocrites.²

The Law therefore properly places man in humility before God. It reaches down into the depths of the heart, exposing the thoughts and motives which otherwise would remain untouched by the outward or temporal law.

3. In the Christian Life.

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1. Hazlitt, op.cit., p.130.
2. Ibid., p.131.

In his own spiritual experience, Luther was continually plagued by the insistent and perfect demands of the Law. Even after he had known the justification which comes only through the Gospel, the Law harassed his mind, and this probably had much to do with his "Anfechtungen," or attacks. The Law burdened his conscience with thoughts of sin which made him feel unworthy of salvation, and because he realized that all Christians have this experience to a greater or lesser degree, he provided his followers with the advice that they should flee to Christ. Therefore he states:

The conscience must have regard to nothing but Christ; wherefore we must, with all diligence, endeavor to remove Moses with his Law far from us out of sight, when we intend to stand justified before God. ¹

As far as the believer's justification is concerned, he is to have nothing to do with the Law, for it can only drive him to despair. On the other hand, the Law should have a high place in the Christian's life, since it still mirrors God's will. These two emphases are illustrated in this paragraph:

When you feel the terror of the Law, you may say thus: Madam Law! I have no time to hear you speak; your language is very rough and unfriendly; I would have you know that your reign is over, therefore I am now free, I will endure your bondage no longer. When we thus address the Law, we shall find the difference between

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1. Hazlitt, op.cit., p.133.

the Law of grace and the Law of thundering Moses; and how great and divine and celestial gift it is to hope against hope, when there seems nothing to hope for; and how true the speech of St. Paul is, where he says: 'Through faith in Christ we are justified, and not through the works of the Law.' When, indeed, justification is not the matter in hand, we ought highly to esteem the Law, extol it, and with St. Paul, call it good, true, spiritual, and divine, as in truth it is. ¹

The Law is good for the Christian in that it reveals sin, whether apparent or hidden, and shows him that his life needs improvement. The Law makes one keenly aware of shortcomings and opens the eyes of the sinner to his sin. Luther shows how this takes place through the work of the Holy Spirit as follows:

..when the Law is taught, and the Holy Ghost comes thereunto, touches the heart, and gives strength to the word, and the heart confesses sin, feels God's wrath, and says: Ah! this concerns me; I have sinned against God, and have offended. Then the Law has well and rightly finished its work and office. ²

Thus the Law has a vital place in the life of the believer. By means of the Law he sees his sin and is led to repentance, whereas without the Law he may continue to live in sin and false security.

E. The Function of the Gospel

1. In Conversion-Justification.

The distinction between the Law and the Gospel is nowhere as strong as when Luther contrasts the Law with

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1. Hazlitt, op.cit., p.134.
2. Ibid., p.131.

the Gospel of justification. What Christ has done for the sinner cannot be compared with any work of the Law. immediately after describing the use of the Law in conviction of sin, Luther said of the Gospel:

The light of the Gospel is a far different manner of light, enlightening affrighted, broken, sorrowful, and contrite hearts, and reviving, comforting, and refreshing them. For it declares that God is merciful to unworthy, condemned sinners, for the sake of Christ, and that a blessing thereby is presented unto them who believe; that is, grace, remission of sins, righteousness, and everlasting life. ¹

Thus the Gospel accounts for the sin of man and places him in a right relationship with God. This justification is accomplished without any self-effort on the part of the sinner. God in Christ has done all that is needed for salvation. This led Luther to exclaim:

Oh! how excellent and comfortable a Gospel is that, in which our Saviour Christ shows what a loving heart he bears towards us poor sinners, who are able to do nothing at all for ourselves to our salvation. ²

The justifying Gospel is available for all who would hear and accept its message. For this purpose Christ came into the world. With Christ as an object of faith, the believer is totally freed from the penalty of sin. Thus Luther states:

Christ's own proper work and office is to combat the Law, sin, and death, for the whole world; taking them all upon himself, and bearing them, and after he has laden himself therewith, then only to get the victory, and utterly overcome and destroy them, and so release the desolate from the Law and all evil. ³

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1. Hazlitt, op.cit., p.132.
 2. Ibid., p.122.
 3. Ibid., p.92.

In contradistinction to the Law, the Gospel offers salvation to men, requiring nothing but faith in what the Lord Jesus Christ accomplished in His redemptive work.

2. In the Christian Life-Sanctification.

Many of Luther's contemporaries charged that he cared little or not at all whether a converted believer lived a life of good works. However, this accusation was not valid. Besides abundant testimony from his other works, the "Table Talks" also confirm the fact that Luther considered good works a necessary adjunct to the Christian life.

Luther did not limit the work of the Gospel to the conversion experience. He described the characteristics of a Christian through conversion and after in the following paragraph:

..those that acknowledge their sins and God's merited wrath, feel themselves conceived and born in sin, and therefore deserving of perdition, but, notwithstanding, attentively hearken to the Gospel, and believe that God, out of grace, and for the sake of Jesus Christ, forgives sins, and so are justified before God, and afterwards show the fruits of their faith by all manner of good works.¹

This continuing dynamic of the Gospel is effective for the believer as long as he continues to look to the Gospel, or the Word of God, for divine guidance. The Christian is to trust in the Gospel and in nothing else

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1. Hazlitt, op.cit., p.161.

if his life is to be holy. Against the onslaughts of Satan the Gospel is the only adequate defense. Luther states:

Oh! how great and glorious a thing it is to have before one the Word of God! With that we may at all times feel joyous and secure; we need never be in want of consolation, for we see before us, in all its brightness, the pure and right way. He who loses sight of the Word of God falls into despair; the voice of heaven no longer sustains him; he follows only the disorderly tendency of his heart, and of world vanity, which lead him on to his destruction. ¹

Luther made it plain that the Christian life under the power of the Gospel was no life of ease. The believer must not only combat sin, but he must also produce good works as the fruit of faith. There is a conflict in the life of faith which was non-existent in the former life of sin. This is not an enforced morality, but rather a morality which flows from vital faith in the living Word. After the Gospel has calmed the conscience aggravated by the ministry of the Law, there is danger that the believer may lapse into quiescence. As an antidote to this state, Luther said:

Now, when the mind is refreshed and quickened again by the cool air of the Gospel, then we must not be idle, lie down and sleep. That is, when **our** consciences are settled in peace, quieted and comforted through God's Spirit, we must prove our faith by such good works as God commanded. But so long as we live in this vale of misery, we shall be plagued and vexed with flies, with beetles, and vermin, that is, with the devil, the

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1. Hazlitt, op.cit., p.9.

world, and our own flesh; yet we must press through, and not suffer ourselves to recoil. ¹

Therefore the Christian discovers in the Gospel not only life, but also the means of living that life. He finds comfort when his conscience is overcome by sin, and he is able to overcome sin. Also he now has the ability to perform good works because he has been justified by the Gospel. He is enabled to live a fruitful life governed by the Word of God.

F. Summary

Despite the unreliability of the "Table Talks" in many places, they nevertheless present a consistent doctrine of the Law and Gospel. In comparison with his other works, there is no variation in Luther's teaching on this subject.

The Law is depicted as revealing God's will to man and condemning man before God. This is as far as the Law can go, however, for it is unable to justify man. The uses of the Law are threefold, namely, to maintain civil order and frighten men by threat of punishment, to expose the sin of man both inwardly and outwardly, and to reveal the areas of the Christian's life which need to be improved.

The Gospel offers all men salvation and justification by faith through the forgiveness of sins. It is the good news that Christ died for sinners that they might

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1. Hazlitt, op.cit., p.139.

live everlastingly. Furthermore, the Gospel has sanctifying power. It is the foundation of Christian morality, both in guarding against sin and in motivating the believer to a fruitful life. The Gospel is the final answer to Satan who continually attempts to disturb the conscience.

Thus the "Table Talks" are illustrative of Luther's uniform doctrine of the Law and Gospel, and they serve all the more to strengthen previous impressions made by his other works.

CHAPTER VI
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

LUTHER'S DOCTRINE OF THE LAW AND GOSPEL IN SELECTED WORKS

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

A. Summary

A study of Luther's doctrine of the Law and Gospel has revealed certain salient points.

The Word of God comes to man in the form of Law and Gospel, but there is a sharp distinction between the two. It is the mark of the true theologian to distinguish correctly these offices of the Word.

The Law comprises God's divine will for man, and it is the established moral standard. However, since the Law is absolutely perfect in its demands, there is no hope for even partial fulfillment on the part of man. The Law is condemnatory in its nature, and in revealing man's sinfulness it also reveals God's wrath. The Law produces a conflict within man, for while exposing innate sin, it plagues the conscience which realizes its inability to equal God's holiness. Furthermore, the Law cannot justify man before God, rather it is a hindrance to seek justification from the Law because of its impossible demands. Thus the primary function of the Law is to reveal sin. This is true in the life of the Christian as well as the non-Christian.

The Law is necessary to maintain order in the world, and it is administered by the secular government. The temporal use of the Law is to restrain externally non-Christians from allowing their impulses to run wild. Christians are to keep the external Law only in so far as these laws are in accord with the Law of love. If the Law interferes with helping a neighbor in need, then the Law is to be set aside.

On the other hand, the Law is also necessary in the Christian life. In this sphere, the Law is to be ignored as far as the conscience is concerned; it must never be permitted to overwhelm the believer with accusations of guilt. However, the Law is a perfect mirror for the spiritual life in that it shows whether or not the Christian's works are up to par. It is the province of the Law to force the believer to examine his life continually.

Therefore, the Law is to restrain and magnify sin, and it must be applied with these functions in mind. Misapplication of the Law is not only distortion of doctrine, but it will also lead to perversion of life.

The Gospel offers comfort and consolation to the sinner stricken by the Law. Here any man may find justification and forgiveness of sins. Those who accept the message of the Gospel by faith come into a right relationship with God. They no longer need be troubled by the Law when it attempts to attack the conscience.

One who has fled to Christ is under grace and not under the Law's condemnation. The believer is now under the Law of love. He loves God because God first loved him and gave His Son whose work as the Redeemer of mankind is the heart of the Gospel.

The Christian has other assurances of his salvation besides that of the Word of the Gospel. They are the Sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Baptism is the sure token of the conversion experience by which the believer knows he has passed from death to life. The Lord's Supper, which is the "true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ," benefits believers in that forgiveness of sins is offered, and this is evidence of salvation.

In the Christian life, the Gospel is the source of sanctification. The Gospel enables sinners to perform God's will, and it is the motivating power to good works. Whereas the Law is the divine standard of morality, the Gospel transcends the Law, and under grace it is now possible to do good works which are pleasing to God. Thus the Gospel gives where the Law takes away, and it offers man salvation which the Law can only demand.

It is necessary to keep in mind the fact that Luther's doctrine of the Law and Gospel was derived from vital personal experience. The oppressive burden of the Law was lifted from his conscience by the grace and love of God revealed in the Gospel. Luther then saw the

heavens open, as it were, and his life became an evidence of the power of the redeeming Christ who gave Himself for humanity.

B, Conclusion

The views of Luther concerning the Law and Gospel underwent no appreciable change as revealed in his works over a long period of time. He was consistent in his application of this doctrine, and he never deviated in later life from the position he held circa 1520, or from the time of his conversion experience. There is, of course, a change in emphasis in certain works, but this is to be expected since certain topics required different emphases. For instance, his treatise on "Secular Authority" would naturally deal primarily with the civil function of the Law, and the treatise on "Good Works" would emphasize the Gospel as the motivating force in the Christian life.

Most important is the fact that Luther's interpretation of the Word of God as Law and Gospel provides a Biblical foundation for justification and sanctification which has vitality for every age. He presents man with the divine standard of morality, and the also sets forth the means whereby that standard may be satisfied. Luther's doctrine cuts deep into the heart of man and exposes his true condition before God at the same time showing how that condition may be changed. He has related the will of

man to the will of God and has shown how the gulf may be spanned.

In preaching and teaching the Law and Gospel as presented by Luther, there is a satisfying answer to the problems of humanity, both individually and collectively. The divine Law of God written into the heart of man is perceived by man through the faculty of conscience. The Law shows man that he is living in a moral universe, and that any transgression of the Law has a profound moral effect. The Law reveals the wrath of God against sin in man. This is a necessary emphasis for mankind.

But the will of God is also manifested in another way. The Gospel tells man that God loves him in spite of his sin, that He loves man deeply enough to enforce His holy and righteous will on Jesus Christ who suffered death for sin. In this Gospel lies man's only satisfying and enduring answer for salvation and happiness.

Both the Law and the Gospel have a place in the communion of saints. At times it is necessary to use the Law in dealing with fellow-believers; at other times, the Gospel must be applied. In any case, however, whether the emphasis is on Law or Gospel, the Christian is to do all things in love, for love is the fulfillment of the Law and the true spirit of the Gospel. Such an attitude over against the Law and Gospel will guard the Christian against the two extremes of pride and false humility.

Because God confronts man at all times both by His holy and righteous and by His good and gracious will, He desires that man recognize clearly at all times what his relation to God is when measured by either will. This seems to be a mechanical operation intellectually, but in order to carry out this task in the world demands constant application on the part of the Christian.

In closing, there is an apt quotation from Watson which summarizes Luther's emphasis on the Law and Gospel:

We must preach both the Law and the Gospel as the two-fold Word of the Living God, whereby He summons all men to repent and believe. ¹

1. Watson, op.cit., p.160.

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