

LAW AND GOSPEL

“The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”
John 1:17

I was given years ago a “bobble head” Martin Luther. I was also given one of the Play Mobil Luther’s that came out in 2015 in anticipation of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017. Play Mobil is a German company. When it released the Luthers, they flew off the shelves so quickly that they were the fastest selling toy in their 40-year history. Many were given as gifts to Lutheran pastors like me. It is not the first time that Luther has been in the center of a collision between demand, expectation, and gift. Today those stakes aren’t so high—for toys. But the same cannot be said about what Luther taught.

A few years ago the University of Pennsylvania, in response to a spate of suicides on campus, put together a task force to study students’ mental health.

The pressures engendered by the perception that one has to be perfect in every academic, co-curricular, and social endeavor can lead to stress and in some cases distress. This can manifest itself as demoralization, alienation, or conditions like anxiety and depression. For some students, mental illness can lead to suicide.

Added to this are all the pressures put on by the Covid pandemic—having to take classes on-line, inflation, and real uncertainty about the future. There is pressure to perform, to make something of oneself, to become acceptable, to make a difference, to justify one’s existence. The result is that things are thrown on us. It is up to us to perform.

That would lead us to believe that the Reformation that Luther started is hardly over. Don’t we believe that we are saved by God’s grace through faith in Christ Jesus? The short answer appears to be no.

The popular perception of the Bible is that it is a book of rules—“Do this, and don’t do that.” Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount” may be beautiful, but if we really read that we see how high Jesus raises the stakes to be true followers of God. It is not enough to refrain from physical adultery. Even lust in the mind is evil. It is not enough to not harm others, but we need to help them when they are in need. It is not enough to like people being friendly to us; we have to love our enemies. The reaction to that is to pretend we can really do that by thinking we are better than

others, despair because we know we cannot come close to that, or to dismiss it as irrelevant.

But behind this is our insistence on performing. Why? Because then we can convince ourselves that we are in control. Then it is about “me,” I can do it. Because if I don’t do it for me, who will?

Of course that all goes back to the Garden of Eden and what Adam and Eve did. “Do this, and you will live,” Satan told them. Sin entered into the world. It is that sin that puts all that pressure on us. “It is all up to me.” I don’t know about you, but “me” fails so miserably. That sin makes us even take the Bible, God’s Word, and see it as a list of “Do’s and don’ts.”

If you don’t know the story of Luther, he was overwhelmed by the pressure to perform. He was a smart student, so he was expected by his father to do well in school which his father paid for and become a lawyer. But he left that because he felt he could only perform well enough for God by being a monk. But try as he did, he only saw himself further and further from what he was supposed to do.

By God’s grace Luther was given the task by his church superior to study the Bible. But even then it took the Holy Spirit through that Word to open up Luther’s eyes to look at God’s Word in a way that directed him from himself to Christ Jesus. He put it this way:

I regarded both God’s law and the Good News of Jesus as the same thing and that there was no difference between Christ and Moses except they lived in different times and Jesus was perfect. When I realized the law was one thing and the Gospel another, I broke through and was set free.

The distinction between law and Gospel—those are the “eyeglasses” that help us put God’s Word in the right perspective and realize that it is not all about me—but God. God’s Word both accuses us (law) and forgives us (Gospel). That may sound so simple, but as sinners it is something we struggle with every day. Luther said that someone who could distinguish between law and Gospel should immediately be given a doctorate without research, a thesis, and a review committee that you need to provide special snacks for. Without those “eyeglasses” it is so easy to turn God’s Word into something outdated or which separates people from God by its harsh demands.

For example—so much of what Jesus taught was law. No one in the Bible describes hell more than Jesus. But if we only look at what Jesus taught, then we miss the Gospel about what He did by becoming one of us, dying with our sins on the cross, and rising from the dead. We can see John 3:16 as Gospel, “Whosoever believeth has eternal life.” But what if I don’t believe? Or by “believeth,” does that mean it is up to us to believe—and thus it is all on us. That’s law, not Gospel. Law and Gospel is not some academic exercise like a math formula. It is about engaging a living God. It is about seeing God’s Word not as a set of rules written thousands of years ago, but as God speaking to us right now, right here in our situation.

Distinguishing between law and Gospel shows that the Scriptures don’t just sit there; they reach out and grab us, shake us, transform us, free us—kill us and make us alive.

The problem we face increasingly today is getting God’s Word to “stick” to people in their lives. How can God’s Word impact their lives when there are so many other things that bombard our lives and when we are so often in a rat race that makes it hard for us to sit down and listen to anything? One way people have tried to make God’s Word is by “pressing it” hard on peoples’ lives. This is the legalism that so often is seen as the main part of Christian teaching. Maybe in our culture the emphasis is on personal freedom, but many are pulled into following a strict path that makes all the decisions for them. This is what pulls people to Islam and fundamentalism. But it also puts a great barrier between us and God’s grace.

“Law and Gospel” gives the real ways for God’s Word to “stick” to our lives, not by forcing it into us, but by penetrating deep into our lives so that what pulls us to God are not fear and guilt, but forgiveness and love.

Our former pastor, Richard Osslund, observed that Lutheranism is not so much a denomination, but a movement to always push for law and Gospel because that so clearly directs us to Jesus. So we keep on sharing “law and Gospel” so that Christians all over can be the people who by word and action direct people to Christ Jesus.