

# The Law & The Gospel

by Michael S. Horton  
© 1996 The White Horse Inn

In order to recover the sufficiency of Scripture we must once again learn to distinguish the Law and the Gospel as the "two words" of Scripture. For the Reformers, it was not enough to believe in inerrancy. Since Rome also had a high view of Scripture in theory, the Reformers were not criticizing the church for denying its divine character. Rather, they argued that Rome subverted its high view of Scripture by the addition of other words and by failing to read and proclaim Scripture according to its most obvious sense.

At the heart of the reformation's hermeneutics was the distinction between "Law" and "Gospel." For the Reformers, this was not equivalent to "Old Testament" and "New Testament;" rather, it meant, in the words of Theodore Beza, "We divide this Word into two principal parts or kinds: the one is called the 'Law,' the other the 'Gospel.' For all the rest can be gathered under the one or other of these two headings." The Law "is written by nature in our hearts," while "What we call the Gospel (Good News) is a doctrine which is not at all in us by nature, but which is revealed from Heaven (Mt. 16:17; John 1:13)." The Law leads us to Christ in the Gospel by condemning us and causing us to despair of our own "righteousness." "Ignorance of this distinction between Law and Gospel," Beza wrote, "is one of the principal sources of the abuses which corrupted and still corrupt Christianity."[1](#)

Luther made this hermeneutic central, but both traditions of the Protestant Reformation jointly affirm this key distinction. In much of medieval preaching, the Law and Gospel were so confused that the "Good News" seemed to be that Jesus was a "kinder, gentler Moses," who softened the Law into easier exhortations, such as loving God and neighbor from the heart. The Reformers saw Rome as teaching that the Gospel was simply an easier "law" than that of the Old Testament. Instead of following a lot of rules, God expects only love and heartfelt surrender. Calvin replied, "As if we could think of anything more difficult than to love God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our strength! Compared with this law, everything could be considered easy...[For] the law cannot do anything else than to accuse and blame all to a man, to convict, and, as it were, apprehend them; in fine, to condemn them in God's judgment: that God alone may justify, that all flesh may keep silence before him."[2](#) Thus, Calvin observes, Rome could only see the Gospel as that which enables believers to become righteous by obedience and that which is "a compensation for their lack," not realizing that the Law requires perfection, not approximation.[3](#)

Of course, no one claims to have arrived at perfection, and yet, Calvin says many do claim "to have yielded completely to God, [claiming that] they have kept the law in part and are, in respect to this part, righteous."<sup>4</sup> Only the terror of the Law can shake us of this self-confidence. Thus, the Law condemns and drives us to Christ, so that the Gospel can comfort without any threats or exhortations that might lead to doubt. In one of his earliest writings, Calvin defended this evangelical distinction between Law and Gospel: All this will readily be understood by describing the Law and describing the Gospel and then comparing them. Therefore, the Gospel is the message, the salvation-bringing proclamation concerning Christ that he was sent by God the Father...to procure eternal life. The Law is contained in precepts, it threatens, it burdens, it promises no goodwill. The Gospel acts without threats, it does not drive one on by precepts, but rather teaches us about the supreme goodwill of God towards us. Let whoever therefore is desirous of having a plain and honest understanding of the Gospel, test everything by the above descriptions of the Law and the Gospel. Those who do not follow this method of treatment will never be adequately versed in the Philosophy of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

While the Law continues to guide the believer in the Christian life, Calvin insists that it can never be confused with the Good News. Even after conversion, the believer is in desperate need of the Gospel because he reads the commands, exhortations, threats, and warnings of the Law and often wavers in his certain confidence because he does not see in himself this righteousness that is required. Am I really surrendered? Have I truly yielded in every area of my life? What if I have not experienced the same things that other Christians regard as normative? Do I really possess the Holy Spirit? What if I fall into serious sin? These are questions that we all face in our own lives. What will restore our peace and hope in the face of such questions? The Reformers, with the prophets and apostles, were convinced that only the Gospel could bring such comfort to the struggling Christian.

Without this constant emphasis in preaching, one can never truly worship or serve God in liberty, for his gaze will always be fastened on himself--either in despair or self-righteousness--rather than on Christ. Law and Gospel must both ever be preached, both for conviction and instruction, but the conscience will never rest, Calvin says, so long as Gospel is mixed with Law. "Consequently, this Gospel does not impose any commands, but rather reveals God's goodness, his mercy and his benefits."<sup>6</sup> This distinction, Calvin says with Luther and the other Reformers, marks the difference between Christianity and paganism: "All who deny this turn the whole of the Gospel upside down; they utterly bury Christ, and destroy all true worship of God."<sup>7</sup>

Ursinus, primary author of the Heidelberg Catechism, said that the Law-Gospel distinction has "comprehended the sum and substance of the sacred Scriptures," are "the chief and general divisions of the holy scriptures, and comprise the entire doctrine comprehended therein."<sup>8</sup> To confuse them is to corrupt the Faith at its core.<sup>9</sup> While the Law must be preached as divine instruction for the Christian life, it must never be used to shake believers from the confidence that Christ is their "righteousness, holiness and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30). The believer goes to the Law and loves that Law for its divine wisdom, for it reveals the will of the One to whom we are now reconciled by the Gospel. But the believer cannot find pardon, mercy, victory, or even the power to obey it, by going to the Law itself any more after his conversion than before. It is still always the Law that commands and the Gospel that gives. This is why every sermon must be carefully crafted on this foundational distinction.

As he watched the Baptist Church in England give way to moralism in the so-called "Down-grade Controversy," Charles Spurgeon declared, "There is no point on which men make greater mistakes than on the relation which exists between the law and the gospel. Some men put the law instead of the gospel; others put gospel instead of the law. A certain class maintains that the law and the gospel are mixed...These men understand not the truth and are false teachers."<sup>10</sup>

In our day, these categories are once again confused in even the most conservative churches. Even where the categories of psychology, marketing and politics do not replace those of Law and Gospel, much of evangelical preaching today softens the Law and confuses the Gospel with exhortations, often leaving people with the impression that God does not expect the perfect righteousness prescribed in the Law, but a generally good heart and attitude and avoidance of major sins. A gentle moralism prevails in much of evangelical preaching today and one rarely hears the Law preached as God's condemnation and wrath, but as helpful suggestions for a more fulfilled life. In the place of God's Law, helpful tips for practical living are often offered. (In one large conservative church in which I preached recently, the sermon was identified in the program as "Lifestyle Perspectives." Only occasionally was one reminded that it was a church service and not a Rotary meeting.) The piety and faith of the biblical characters are often preached as examples to imitate, along with Thomas Jefferson and Ben Franklin. As in Protestant liberalism, such preaching often fails to hold Christ forth as the divine savior of sinners, but instead as the coach whose play-book will show us how to achieve victory.

Sometimes it is due less to conviction than to a lack of precision. For instance, we often hear calls to "live the Gospel," and yet, nowhere in

Scripture are we called to "live the Gospel." Instead, we are told to believe the Gospel and obey the Law, receiving God's favor from the one and God's guidance from the other. The Gospel--or Good News--is not that God will help us achieve his favor with his help, but that someone else lived the Law in our place and fulfilled all righteousness. Others confuse the Law and Gospel by replacing the demands of the Law with the simple command to "surrender all" or "make Jesus Lord and Savior," as if this one little work secured eternal life. Earlier this century, J. Gresham Machen declared, "According to modern liberalism, faith is essentially the same as 'making Christ master' of one's life...But that simply means that salvation is thought to be obtained by our obedience to the commands of Christ. Such teaching is just a sublimated form of legalism."[11](#) In another work, Machen added, "What good does it do to me to tell me that the type of religion presented in the Bible is a very fine type of religion and that the thing for me to do is just to start practicing that type of religion now?...I will tell you, my friend. It does me not one tiniest little bit of good...What I need first of all is not exhortation, but a gospel, not directions for saving myself but knowledge of how God has saved me. Have you any good news? That is the question that I ask of you. I know your exhortations will not help me. But if anything has been done to save me, will you not tell me the facts?"[12](#)

Does that mean that the Word of God does not command our obedience or that such obedience is optional? Certainly not! But it does mean that obedience must not be confused with the Gospel. Our best obedience is corrupted, so how could that be good news? The Gospel is that Christ was crucified for our sins and was raised for our justification. The Gospel produces new life, new experiences, and a new obedience, but too often we confuse the fruit or effects with the Gospel itself. Nothing that happens within us is, properly speaking, "Gospel," but it is the Gospel's effect. Paul instructs us, "Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ..." (Phil. 1:27). While the Gospel contains no commands or threats, the Law indeed does and the Christian is still obligated to both "words" he hears from the mouth of God. Like the Godhead or the two natures of Christ, we must neither divorce nor confuse Law and Gospel.

When the Law is softened into gentle promises and the Gospel is hardened into conditions and exhortations, the believer often finds himself in a deplorable state. For those who know their own hearts, preaching that tries to tone down the Law by assuring them that God looks on the heart comes as bad news, not good news: "The heart is deceitful above all things..." (Jer. 17:9). Many Christians have experienced the confusion of Law and Gospel in their diet, where the Gospel was free and unconditional when they became believers, but is now pushed into the background to make room for an almost exclusive emphasis on exhortations. Again, it is not that exhortations

do not have their place, but they must never be confused with the Gospel and that Gospel of divine forgiveness is as important for sinful believers to hear as it is for unbelievers. Nor can we assume that believers ever progress beyond the stage where they need to hear the Gospel, as if the Good News ended at conversion. For, as Calvin said, "We are all partly unbelievers throughout our lives." We must constantly hear God's promise in order to counter the doubts and fears that are natural to us.

But there are many, especially in our narcissistic age, whose ignorance of the Law leads them into a carnal security. Thus, people often conclude that they are "safe and secure from all alarm" because they walked an aisle, prayed a prayer, or signed a card, even though they have never had to give up their own fig leaves in order to be clothed with the righteousness of the Lamb of God. Or perhaps, although they have not perfectly loved God and neighbor, they conclude that they are at least "yielded," "surrendered," or "letting the Spirit have his way"; that they are "living in victory over all known sin" and enjoying the "higher life." Deluding themselves and others, they need to be stripped of their fig leaves in order to be clothed with the skins of the Lamb of God. Thus, Machen writes, A new and more powerful proclamation of law is perhaps the most pressing need of the hour; men would have little difficulty with the gospel if they had only learned the lesson of the law. As it is, they are turning aside from the Christian pathway; they are turning to the village of Morality, and to the house of Mr. Legality, who is reported to be very skillful in relieving men of their burdens... 'Making Christ Master' in the life, putting into practice 'the principles of Christ' by one's own efforts--these are merely new ways of earning salvation by one's obedience to God's commands. And they are undertaken because of a lax view of what those commands are. So it always is: a low view of law always brings legalism in religion; a high view of law makes a man a seeker after grace.[13](#)

We must, therefore, recover Law and Gospel, and with such preaching, the Christocentric message of Scripture, or no good will come of our work, regardless of how committed we are to inerrancy. We cannot say that we are preaching the Word of God unless we are distinctly and clearly proclaiming both God's judgment and his justification as the regular diet in our congregations. To recover Scripture's sufficiency we must therefore, like the Reformers, recover the distinctions between Law and Gospel.

#### NOTES:

[1](#) Theodore Beza, *The Christian Faith*, trans. by James Clark (Focus Christian Ministries Trust, 1992), 40-1. Published first at Geneva in 1558 as the *Confession de foi du chretien*.

[2](#) Calvin, 2.7.5 -1536 *Institutes*, trans. by F. L. Battles (Eerdmans, 1975), 30-1; cf. 1559 *Institutes* 2.11.10.

[3](#) Calvin, 1559 *Institutes*, 3.14.13.

[4](#) Ibid.

[5](#) Battles edition of 1536 edition, op. cit., 365. Delivered by Nicolas Cop on his assumption of the rectorship of the University of Paris; there is a wide consensus among Calvin scholars that Calvin was the author.

[6](#) Ibid., p. 366.

[7](#) Ibid., p. 369.

[8](#) Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (Presbyterian and Reformed, from Second American Edition, 1852), p. 2.

[9](#) Ibid, p. 2.

[10](#) Charles Spurgeon, *New Park Street Pulpit*, vol.1 (Pilgrim Publications, 1975), p. 285.

[11](#) J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity & Liberalism* (Eerdmans, 1923), p. 143.

[12](#) J. Gresham Machen, *Christian Faith in the Modern World* (Macmillan, 1936), p. 57.

[13](#) J. Gresham Machen, *What is Faith?* (Macmillan, 1925), pp. 137, 139, 152.