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Two Kinds of Authority: Law and Gospel

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STUDIES COMMISSIONED BY CHURCHES on the authority of Scripture like those underway in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) are as close to an admission of emptiness as one can get. It is like the emperor who had no clothes commissioning a special royal panel to investigate whether clothes in fact exist at all. If one could successfully doubt the existence of clothes, then perhaps being a naked emperor would not be such an embarrassment—it would simply be a sign of the times. Being naked, then, might make me cold in inclement weather, but at least I would be “relevant” and fit with my time and context, would I not?

When Scripture’s authority needs to be authorized by the church, then all is lost, since church is the child of the Word, not its mother. Even the Lutheran Confessions begin to signal this problem of trying to authorize its own authority when they included Martin Chemnitz’s suggestion for a preface (but not yet an article!) to the *Formula* called “The Binding Summary, Basis, Rule and Guiding Principle, How All Teaching Is to Be Judged in Accord with God’s Word and How the Errors That Have Arisen Are to Be Explained and Decided in Christian Fashion.” Scripture is the sole authority concerning errors in teaching and all theological judgments,
and so a forming norm that has no norm. But such statements seem to belie the situation that persons and church constantly find themselves in when disagreements arise—the Scripture is used by both sides and claimed as the basis for whatever position is argued, and so this issue of Scripture’s authority alone is proved unworkable in reality—a good theory and bad practice. At this point we normally laugh at the slogan Scripture Alone and wink, since we all seem to know that Scripture is never alone, it always has an interpreter, and whoever wins the current interpretation war wins over Scripture. That would actually, and frighteningly, be true, if it were not for the very surprising rug that God pulls out from under our feet as we attempt to become our own lords and gods over Scripture. To our surprise God has not one, but two kinds of authority. One is called Law that shapes the world and our work within it, and the other that permanently interrupts the law’s order, called Gospel, by means of uncontainable and unpredictable forgiveness of sin. That means that everything about authority hinges upon whether or not one has a preacher and that preacher actually gives two words, not one.

The Problem

My thesis in this essay is simple: our single biggest problem when it comes to understanding and using Scripture is the loss of the art of distinguishing law and gospel. At least in bygone days preachers were trying to make the distinction, even when they could not, but today law and gospel is a laughing stock in the church and unknown in the world. Lutherans in particular line up to make fun of this old dinosaur of a past age, exulting in the fact that they have evolved beyond their meager Reformation beginnings to a more enlightened age of ecumenical church unity.

Lutherans presently have awakened to the reality that they can actually base a greater unity of churches on the simple rejection of the distinction of law and gospel, and in doing so discover what was the
problem with the Augsburg Confession in the first place. Why did so many reject this most Christian and ecumenical confession of the faith, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, so that it came to be viewed as the cause of disagreement rather than its solution? Melanchthon observed that “the opponents single out the law (because to some extent human reason naturally understands it since reason contains the same judgment divinely written on the mind), and through the law they seek the forgiveness of sins and justification.” Instead the evangelical teaching asserts that “All Scripture should be divided into these two main topics: the law and the promises.”

Law and gospel is now widely considered a discredited model for preaching or perhaps a failed form of exegesis or even simply a bad “theology.” So the only current teaching is to explain why it doesn’t “work” anymore—if it ever did. In the middle of the ridicule of the one bright light brought by the evangelical preachers, Rome is burning and teachers are fiddling to some other tune, and the only other tune beside law and gospel is the law alone.

Consequently consciences are terrorized and the big blueprints for building new and better “united” churches go painfully unrealized. Since the very beginning of law and gospel’s rediscovery, Lutherans themselves have expressed fear for what the distinction would do to church and world. It was like pure uranium that could unleash either the greatest good or the greatest harm to humankind, who knew exactly what it would be used for if it fell into the wrong hands? So it was safeguarded and hid immediately by those nearest to it. One did not have to wait for the orthodox century to make law and gospel into an abstract idea, or the Pietists to make it into a feeling and process, or the enlightened to make it into a limit that human reason could not surpass—and so we had to content ourselves with earthly matters of human reason, which is to say, the law alone. One could listen to what happened in the second generation of Lutherans according to the fifth article of the Formula of Concord:

“The distinction between law and gospel is a particularly glorious light. It serves to divide God’s Word properly and to explain correctly and
make understandable the writings of the holy prophets and apostles. Therefore, we must diligently preserve this distinction, so as not to mix these two teachings together and make the gospel into a law. For this obscures the merit of Christ and robs troubled consciences of the comfort that they otherwise have in the holy gospel when it is preached clearly and purely. With the help of this distinction these consciences can sustain themselves in their greatest spiritual struggles against the terror of the law."

Then immediately upon making the great confession the Formula tells the rest of the story, "A dispute occurred in this regard among some theologians of the Augsburg Confession." The way ahead once dispute arose in the church is either to blunt this distinction and hope that some basic reforms could be established in churches, such as the marriage of clergy and reception of the sacrament in both kinds, or proceed to preach "a more radical gospel."

**Distinguishing Properly: The Church’s Greatest Day**

What is this distinction of law and gospel and how does it work? Let me tell you a little story. The greatest day that the church ever knew was one of its earliest. It was hardly a generation old, a mere adolescent, when its great pillar Peter came for an ecumenical visit to Antioch with its new preacher Paul. There Peter ate hotdish with the Gentiles in the basement after service since the church was full of them, until "certain people came from James" and then Peter withdrew, "keeping himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction" (Galatians 2). Peter played the perfect church politician working like a bishop at making sure all sides had their say, fearing the consequences of disunity and seeking not to displease the other pillars of the church. So the grand old man made a little concession to the law by adding to the Gospel the prestigious tradition and divine command given to the Jews. Peter separated himself from the Gentile Christians so that he would remain clean, and the church back in Jerusalem would be pacified.
The day Paul learned of this he marched to Peter and "opposed him to his face" (Gal 2:11)—and what a church assembly it was! No vote was taken; only two attended but it was something to behold. Paul made a confession into the face of church authority by calling Peter out on the carpet, and Paul forced the equivocator into the true confession concerning how the church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. In other words, Paul forced Peter to make the distinction between law and Gospel in a time of suffering and trial, and to quit mixing the two for the pacification of the church. Peter had made a small concession for the sake of church unity, and, thereby, cut off an undesirable part of the church for the sake of better part. After all, if you had to choose between Jews and Gentiles it was an easy decision to make. Yet Paul knew something bigger was at stake than agreement with Jerusalem. If Peter willingly added a bit of law to the mixture of Gospel he preached, then the Gospel itself was lost. Paul confronted Peter to his face with the proper distinction of law and gospel by which we have all we need for understanding the authority of Scripture, the authority of the church, the authority of the apostles, and what happens when church authority misunderstands itself and overthrows the Gospel for a law. Paul recognized that if you add just a little bit of arsenic to an otherwise delicious meal eating is just not the same anymore.

Martin Luther rehearsed this story for his own seminary students at the University of Wittenberg in his great lectures on Galatians, saying "This is a wonderful story to tell about very great men and pillars of the churches. Paul is the only one who has his eyes open wide and sees the sin of Peter..." Paul has his eyes wide open. Peter has his eyes wide shut. The sin of Peter was to confuse law and gospel, and, thereby, lose the gospel:

For, although they were preaching the Gospel, still by their pre-tense, which could not stand with the truth of the Gospel, they were establishing the Law. But the establishment of the Law is the abrogation of the Gospel. Therefore, whoever knows well how to distinguish the Gospel from the Law should give thanks to God and know that he is a real theologian.
The authority of Scripture, the authority of the church, and the authority of the apostolic proclamation depends on this distinction—it always has and it always will. Luther is not very hard on Peter in this instance, saying that he seems to have accepted Paul’s condemnation graciously, since it was the pure gospel, and even though Peter could not seem to carry the tune very long, he knew Christ’s voice when he heard it, and so must have said something like, “Oh, yes, Paul, I don’t know what got into me, when I hear you say it, I know my Lord Christ is speaking to me, forgive me, let’s go eat with Gentiles!”

Luther knew that the distinction of law and gospel has an aspect of science about it, in that one learns to identify keys in the grammar for distinguishing law and gospel such as when one is dealing with an imperative or an indicative. Yet one of Luther’s own moments of enlightenment was that grammar is not the main thing. It is the function or effect or work done in the hearer’s life that finally distinguishes law and gospel.

Moreover, the real test of distinguishing law and gospel occurs “in a time of temptation” such as Peter’s, when he was sitting in the great new mission start of the Antioch church surrounded by foolish Gentiles when suddenly he got a visit from the Mother ship in Jerusalem telling him that he must mind his P’s and Q’s and obey the law’s command that a Jew not eat with Gentiles. When the church council from Jerusalem is putting pressure on you, it is difficult to distinguish properly, nevertheless that is when distinguishing is crucial. How does one do this, especially when the political pressure is on?

The way to distinguish the one from the other is to locate the Gospel in heaven and the Law on earth, to call the righteousness of the Gospel heavenly and divine and the righteousness of the Law earthly and human, and to distinguish as sharply between the righteousness of the Gospel and that of the Law as God distinguishes between heaven and earth or between light and darkness or between day and night. Let the one be like the light and the day, and the other like the darkness and night. If we could only put an even greater distance between them!
So we learn to distinguish this way. When you are "busy on earth . . . let the ass work, let him serve and carry the burden that has been laid upon him, that is, let the body and its members be subject to the Law." Luther took the old story of Abraham who had been commanded to sacrifice Isaac and noted how Abraham used the ass to haul the sticks for the sacrifice until they reach the mountain, then they left the beast in the valley below and ascended to the holy place. So Luther continued,

But when you ascend into heaven, leave the ass, with his burdens on earth; for the conscience has no relation to the Law or to works or to earthly righteousness. Thus the ass remains in the valley; but the conscience ascends the mountain with Isaac, knowing absolutely nothing about the Law or its works but looking only to the forgiveness of sins and the pure righteousness offered and given in Christ.7

In the political and social life, where hands and feet and the "members" of the body are busy, the law is "strictly required," just as Paul had observed in the seventh chapter of Romans. Yet in the conscience, in heaven, with the new creature made by Christ in baptism, only the Gospel is heard with its strict freedom from the law in the form of the forgiveness of sin. Luther concluded,

Peter had confused this distinction between the Law and the Gospel, and thus he had persuaded the believers that they had to be justified by the Gospel and the Law together. This Paul refused to tolerate. Therefore, he rebuked Peter . . . There is a time to hear the Law and a time to despise the Law. There is a time to hear the Gospel and a time to know nothing about the Gospel. Let the Law go away now, and let the Gospel come; for this is the time to hear the Gospel, not the Law. But you have nothing good; in fact, you have sinned gravely. Granted. Nevertheless, "I have the forgiveness of sins through Christ on whose account all my sins are forgiven." But in a matter apart from conscience, when outward duties must be performed, then, whether you are a teacher, a pupil, etc., this is no time to listen to the Gospel. You must listen to the Law and follow your vocation. Thus the Law remains in the valley with the ass, and the Gospel remains with Isaac on the mountain.8
By What Authority?

Of course, people can fail at the distinction of the law and gospel, and use it badly. The devil works twenty-four hours a day to confuse the two, and it should not surprise us that this happens even in the churches. The greatest confusion of all comes when love and faith are lumped together, when in fact those two are "exact opposites." Where love yields in the smallest trifles, faith never yields even to the strongest cosmic evil.

Peter likely thought he was doing the loving act both for the church in Jerusalem and Antioch. But this was no time for love, it was the time for faith alone! Sympathy is no excuse for attempting to discard the distinction and take up some other form of the authority of Scripture —like the bromide that Scripture's authority really resides in the community of the church at worship, or in the teaching authority of the church with its episcopacy and papacy, or that the authority resides in the immaculate conception of a Holy Book by the Holy Spirit—a book without flaw or historical error. Of course the book is thoroughly inspired and so written by the Holy Spirit, and of course Scripture's authority is exercised in the community of the church at worship, with or without the bishops. But the real issue of Scripture and its authority is the freeing reality that the word of Scripture, when preached purely, establishes two very different authorities in life that are marked by the biggest distinction known to humankind: life and death.

As long as people in the church insist on approaching Scripture without any sense about law and gospel, they will ruin preaching and the church created by the word. Confusers will come with one issue after another of what constitutes true justice and how the Bible either misses the point or can be used as a kind of manifesto for a righteous cause to liberate the oppressed. What else can you do when you function with only the authority of the law and by it seek to be made righteous? You have to adjust the law to your preferences for the best holy group you can assemble.

Group after group, person after person, comes knocking on the door of Scripture demanding to know what it wants, and demanding to be vindicated. Yet, when Scripture opens its door, lo and behold two
things come flooding out: one is the law and the other the gospel. Both end up destroying all efforts to justify oneself, and only the gospel makes a brand new life by justification through Christ alone, faith alone, the word alone. This is why the gospel belongs in heaven, since it alone has a future. Down in the valley of the old world where the ass sits there is only the past and an uncertain present. The law only preserves—to some extent—the past which is even now coming to an end in Jesus Christ. That is why we need the gospel.

Two Kinds of Authority: Law and Gospel

There are two kinds of authority, not one. Everyone who comes upon this truth is shocked and awed by it. Jesus, all the gospels say, amazed people with this announcement, “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God” (Mark 1:14). Paul was undone by this second, new authority, coming to him as it did by ripping apart the heavens in the form of revelation that ended his old life and began the new:

For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not man’s gospel. For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. (Galatians 1:11-13 RSV)

Even if we are not zealous for the first and old authority, as Paul was, we nevertheless find one old, well-known authority better than two since we can at least accustom ourselves to the law’s predictable expectations. That God has two kinds of authority is unsettling, surprising and unavailable to our knowledge or experience except when normal authority is breached by a previously unknown authority that we do not really have a name for, except that we call it “new,” or “Gospel.”
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Once the new authority breaks in upon us, the normal authority immediately becomes old. And what is most frightening about this is that both kinds of authority remain in their places and times, but we find our own selves transferred—violently—from one to the other. The law and the gospel are two worlds with death between them. Being transferred from one to the other means we die to the law and live only to the Gospel who is Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, once we have been translated from old to new authority, we describe this death to the old as “freedom”—true, evangelical freedom, “for freedom, Christ has set us free” (Galatians 5:1). Hence, the normal authority of the law that we experienced simply as demand is given its proper name and called “law.”

The two kinds of authority are, therefore, properly named law and gospel.

Christians are the ones who describe these two authorities, neither of which the world adequately fathoms since it can only think of the law alone as authority and, therefore, law is its only possibility for a pro-
longed life. The world, not having the gospel, must place its hope in the law, karma, living a good life, contributing to society, etc., because there isn't any other place to put hope. On the other hand, Christians not only know of two kinds of authority, but they seek to keep these two utterly distinct. To law belongs obedience, to the gospel hope. Otherwise the second, eternal and heavenly authority is lost altogether. We make this distinction by using a peculiar, eschatological dialectic that teaches us why the law, which is God's greatest and most salutary gift to the world, nevertheless does not avail unto salvation—in fact the law actually hinders us there.

That means the Christian goal for doing theology is to identify these two kinds of authority and then keep them distinguished so that the second authority, along with the translation from one to the other is actually accomplished by preaching. Without preaching only the one authority of law exists, since no preacher is necessary for you to have God's divine law at work. God can work very well through gravity, parents and the public schools to execute authority by law. The gospel kind of authority, however, is revealed, announced, created and breaks into the old through the bestowal of Jesus Christ and this requires a preached promise given to particular people and particular places and times. When the promises are delivered well, they open an eternal future based entirely on Christ's giving or favor rather than our doing and earning.

Christian preachers must spend their time learning the science and art of distinguishing these two kinds of authority, law and gospel, so that every now and then they can help create the new authority and effect the transfer of people into it. To do this they must themselves be taken into the Gospel's authority and used for its purpose by the Holy Spirit so that preachers are not manipulators and controllers of the new authority, but its servants or slaves, which is simply another way of saying in the old language of authority that they are masters over the old by being free of it.

These preachers of the new authority are given their words, they do not generate them by themselves, and the words they are given come
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from previous preachers called Apostles, notably the Apostle Paul, though also Peter and the Jerusalem group when they are not confused about the Torah, who got their words from the first preacher of the Gospel, Jesus Christ himself. It is true Christ gave these also to the prophets of old and so the gospel was promised already to Adam and Eve and expected ever more immanently as the Scripture drives toward the coming of the Father's Son and Messiah. Yet Christ arrived in the flesh and was publicly announced by Him in the preaching of Jesus Christ, and what a stir he made whenever he preached it and wherever he went! As Luther once noted, this new authority, this new announcement of who holds the future should never have been written down, but because of sin, which stubbornly resists and hates the second and final authority, even this Gospel came to be written so that preachers following the Apostles would be given their words rather than take them or attempt to create them out of their own selves.

That means that in order to fight the temptation of the devil himself in the form of enthusiasm (drawing the words of preaching from within) we needed not only to have the promise of the gospel written so our preachers would have their proper words, but we needed the gospel itself to be given to us through hearing it preached for us. A written gospel remains the dead letter which actively kills (2 Cor 3) unless one thing is added in the form of a living, vocal preaching “for you.” Even the written gospel in the condensed form of Paul's sermon kernel, “Jesus Christ was handed over for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Romans 4:25) needs a living preacher announcing promise face to face with its intended sinners. Gospel authority is thus tied to the authority of written Scripture because of sin. Even dear old Peter needed a preacher that great and famous day when Paul made the true Church and united it in the Gospel alone. Peter needed Paul to preach the law and Gospel to him, and so Paul did, and so Peter heard it—again—and the Church was united.
Now the default authority of life is the first authority, the voice of demand, or law which comes to us in its purest form on Moses’ written tablets of stone. Most people don’t get such tablets, they are thus mere Gentiles, but they, nevertheless, have the “code” or requirement in their consciences as Paul points out in Romans 1. The law’s authority is everywhere present. It is there with or without a preacher, by God’s own will and plan. It is as ever-present as gravity, and so is simply overlooked until one tries to act contrary to it. I could deny the law has any authority over me, but that would not let me leap off a tall building and fly. This authority is so dominant that it becomes synonymous with the word “authority,” which is then experienced as the relation between a master and slave.

A master commands; a slave obeys. One person is in control the other is controlled. What would appear to be freedom and happiness in this singular arrangement is to become a master and not a slave. Sometimes we hear people say, “It’s all right to be poor, but better to be rich.” So this authority divides up all relations to people, creatures of the world, and Divinity itself into relations of dominance. It always asks, Who is on top and who is on the bottom? The problems with this authority start in relation to creation: What does it mean to have authority over all creatures like that given to Adam and Eve? The problem increases when considering relations to other people—what does it mean to have authority over another person such as a parent has over a child? The problem becomes acute when it comes to God: What does it mean to be controlled by God and yet to want nothing more than to be in control over God?

Authority really should mean to be authored, as in what it is like to be made a brilliant character in a book like Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*. Huck was not there until penned in by Twain, and once written he has a type of presence that is nearly ubiquitous—if only fictional. Yet the problem when thinking of authority according to the first, legal sense, is that it drives toward one final goal: to become one’s own author. That is what it means to be “free.” So the fictional, written character seeks to
have his own life like Pinocchio who gets tired of being a wooden puppet and wants to be a real boy. We seek to be our own autobiographer. Any other authority would seem to fall short of freedom since it demands that I serve the law of another instead of my own inner law.

As long as the first, legal authority of life is the only one functioning it knows no end or limit. In that case it seeks infinity, limitlessness, and the only way it can become eternal is to curl up upon itself like a Scandinavian pastry under the assumption that if I am both my own master and my own slave, at least I will be gentler with myself than a foreign master would be. I cannot be a terror to myself can I?

Second and Final Authority: Gospel in the Form of Forgiveness

Even when a new, second authority breaks in by proclamation of Christ crucified, a revulsion emerges since this gospel authority makes me perfectly passive—doing nothing and being done unto. How else can this be understood than as the worst form of imposition by a harsh master controlling me against my will? For someone clinging to life in the form of autobiography, how could getting a new Author of life be anything other than the worst form of death? The Gospel's new authority is to be authored, rather than to be my own author. Isn't this death itself?

If two kinds of authority were not bad enough one of the worst realities is that Christians hold that these two authorities, law and gospel, overlap for a short time. This results in the rather absurd claim that I have two authors, two stories of my life being told at the same time—and the two contradict one another. Sometimes we call this the *simul iustus et peccator*. One is the story of my own life that I am intent upon writing/living by myself. It is the story of how others attempt to dominate and control me, but how I, over time, manage to throw off these false masters one after the other until I am my own master and write my own tale of victory over the dominators. Everyone is trying to control me, but in the end I win out over them all and control myself.
The other story has Christ as author or authorizer. He tells my story differently, as the story of his pursuit of me until he inevitably possesses me like a lost lamb who has wandered off from the ninety-nine. Strangely these two concurrent tales of my life overlap precisely at the point of Jesus Christ's own crucifixion. I personally tell the story of Christ in my life as the overcoming of a foreigner's attempt to grab and control me—one might say from the point of view of a lamb who has left the ninety-nine not because she is lost, but because she is finding her own self. Then when Christ tries to grab me, and the preacher tries to convert me, and the church tries to brainwash me, and the law tries to tell me what someone else's idea of perfection is, I resist and break free and start my own flock of exactly one with my own story of how I narrowly escaped the clutches of a Savior who wanted nothing but Himself and was ready to consign my life to oblivion. Ridding myself of Christ is then my moment of freedom. His death is my life. So the murder of Christ, if it enters my story at all, is told by me as a story of self-defense.

When Christ tells this story of me, and he gets to the part of his own death on the cross, he sees that even the very best thing in life, the authority of the law itself, is used against him in the vain attempt by sinners of trying to become their own author. Christ saw this story repeated so often that the inevitability of its end made him step out of a mere story and into history itself with his actual, bodily crucifixion. So we remember how Jesus told the story of the man who owned a vineyard and the workers in the vineyard were not tending it. The owner then sent representative after representative of his interests, each "master" killed by the servants in order to protect their freedom, until finally the son of the owner was sent, and he, of course, was killed in the same miserable repetition of sin's attempt to authorize itself according to the law.

To illustrate this conundrum of authority, Paul describes the situation of what it means to be translated away from one authority to the next, from the law to the gospel as if you were a little child in school. He says that prior to the Gospel's second authority arriving for you, you were a
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minor according to the law—bound to become an heir, but not yet able to live any different life from any other slave in this old world. That is the child of a wealthy man was treated like any other—until the date set by the father when the child should inherit the estate and come into his new authority—even over the teachers and disciplinarians of his youth:

Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. . . . My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. . . .” (Galatians 3 and 4 NRSV)

Christians, made so by the promise of Christ and thereby adopted by him, are heirs but as long as the law remains are treated like slaves.

Sinners seek to keep only one authority in life, which must then be the law. They know that authority; they know its rules and ways and though they chafe, they accept the process and dream that they can win at the game of master and slave if given enough time to fulfill the law by using their free will. To complete this task they cannot have others dominating, controlling and telling them what to do, including Christ with his funny ideas about love, peace, and forgiveness because those all end with Christ being the Lord of His own new kingdom and us being mere servants in it. Children who are heirs of a great kingdom would be foolish indeed to be made masters in the old world because then at most they become teachers, disciplinarians of others who know nothing of the freedom of the Gospel from the law itself. There is nothing better than to be a slave of the law in this old world as long as one has the promise of being an heir in the new kingdom since it is far greater than simply moving from slave to master. To be free of the law, rather than master under it, is the second form of authority—and when it is tasted in faith itself there is nothing sweeter, more real and deeply beloved than this: For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything (Galatians 6:15).
Nevertheless, Paul continually came upon people like Peter who wanted to add the law to the gospel. The desire to be rid of the second authority of the gospel is so strong that one must call it the original sin itself, and it usually comes in the form of accepting the gospel, and then trying to improve on it with a little bit of law. The confusion of these two results then leads people to rid themselves of the distinction of law and gospel altogether, since it becomes a merely formal matter and is not believed to be written by the Holy Spirit into the Scripture and God’s own way of working with sinners in the world. Refusing the distinction then appears to get rid of a Lord—even Christ—other than myself. It appears like some kind of freedom from a harsh master. It gets rid of a preacher whom I cannot help but think is one more control freak trying to dominate me by telling me her story rather than my own. It gets rid of Scripture as well, turning it into words of advice to people occupied with writing their own stories of triumph.

Just as we told the story of Peter and Paul, the whole history of the Christian church could be written as the attempt to reject the two distinct authorities by trying to return to the single authority of the law. To lay out that tale of how the church itself repeatedly rejects its own best light would require more than this essay can provide, but suffice it to say that by the time of Luther’s entrance into the monastery and his taking up of Scripture as a teacher, the distinction of law and gospel needed “rediscovery.” Better yet, it had to be revealed to Luther as it was revealed to Paul and as it is revealed to each person who has ears.

This distinction then became the bright light of the Reformation, and the second generation of evangelical preachers recognized it, even though the attempts to blow out the light were immediate among the Protestants. What is the threat of law and gospel? It is that if gospel authority is given freely to actual sinners then they have no motivation to improve, and, furthermore, their past efforts to be righteous according to the law will
be counted as nothing. Worse yet, the church will not be united, but will fly apart hither and yon wherever preachers take it and appear among the most unsavory kinds of people like those Antiochenes who don't even know the most basic rules of religious life—that Jews do not eat with Gentiles. God's law could not have been wrong about that, could it? That at least must be eternal, right? Consequently, there is one historical wave of condemnation for this distinction of law and gospel after another, and one misuse after another of how to work with the authority of Scripture so that preaching both the law and the gospel is produced in the present.

Lutherans ruined their best light by making law and gospel dogmatic, as if it were a distinction of ideas. Then they made it experiential, as if it had nothing to do with the text and preaching and everything to do with the human heart. Then the very tools for distinguishing law and gospel were turned against the distinction and came to form what is presently called "historical-critical" method. This method thought it could actually overcome the forms of resistance to law and gospel that resulted in confessionalizing or denominational differences (all coming out of the original rejection of the Augsburg Confession by one "denominational" schismatic after another), which led to bloodshed all over Europe that eventually ended only by reducing law and gospel to a mere fallible "tradition" of certain wild-eyed hyper-Lutherans who could safely be caged by making theirs only one more method among others that could be discarded by a higher "objective" and "scientific" method that refused mere subjective points of view.

Here I am characterizing the attempt by the enlightenment to flatten out the various religions and their points of view precisely by getting rid of law and gospel and so getting rid of preachers themselves. Once you turn "preachers" into imparters of the one and only authority of the law they become easily dispensable, and so you bring "unity" and "peace" among the churches, the religions, and the whole earth by agreeing that there is only one authority, the law alone. Then there is, as Lessing saw, only waiting for the course of history to run and we shall see which group has the best, eternal law.
The promise of historical-critical method was to deal in facts of history that could be distinguished from the pious beliefs of the church—along with the recognition that the church housed many kinds of perspectives at any one time. That is, the church was really "the churches," and so you have not just one account of Jesus' life called a Gospel, but four, that each has a "point of view" along with the occasional observations of the maverick Paul. Matthew had a theology, Luke did, so did Mark and John, and Paul also with his negative references to the authority of law and his excessive remarks about a new, gospel authority.

The promise of historical-critical method as a theological enterprise was meant to get rid of preachers and restore unity to Europe and the church, but the attempt failed. Historians can't agree on much of anything as it turns out. When they do they are found to be using the same old authority of the law everyone else does—that is, they tell the story of the Bible and Christ in the way that gives them advantage over others, and what was supposed to be science that tells the truth about Jesus Christ as "the historical Jesus," and the truth about the church as people who somehow became convinced that Jesus miraculously rose from the dead, simply became one more form of autobiography and dominance. When this was finally realized by its greatest practitioners, we entered a post-liberal, post-historical age that most called "post-modern."

Now we deal with fragments of truths, which at most seek to point out the falsehood of dominant "master stories," and the end result for the churches and their preachers is that the story of Christ becomes the story of how each person seeks to throw off those who try to dominate them as slaves, and how each triumphs over such authority to become his or her own Lord.

First this comes out in the form of subgroups who believe they are marginalized, then these fracture and break until each person realizes that all other groups will marginalize them in their unique, particular, personal and private identities, and so the world really does become what the most negative thought it was all along—we are each fighting against
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each, each a master seeking to have slaves, and slaves seeking to rid themselves of their masters. Meanwhile, the Scripture becomes one more source of dominance that must be used differently by myself than those who preceded me in order to tell my own story of victory and mastery rather than to be dominated and used by others.

For now this means church groups are toying with the idea that there are two different, opposite and, nevertheless, true "interpretations" of Scripture when it comes to how the law applies to women, men, homosexuals, and various other group interests.

The odd person out in this process is Christ since he must become acted upon, rather than the one who acts upon us, otherwise he is experienced as a master, a harsh school teacher, who controls and limits rather than frees us. In other words, Christ simply becomes one more oppressive law-giver to me who is not telling me what I want to hear in order to be free. The problem with the ELCA presently is that the last dying embers of the old historical-critical method, a method begun on certain principles of the very Lutherans who taught us how to use law and gospel, are being trusted as the means to unity by means of getting rid of law and gospel.

The method has become the thing itself in which we put our hope. A method is just that, a method, and can never overcome the distinction of law and gospel or the actual preaching of the word, and chiefly it cannot take the place of Jesus Christ himself. The secret behind this moment when the method of critical examination of Scripture became the object of hope is that the method reveals natural law as a fraud. While natural law is routinely misconstrued and abused by people who wanted to dominate others, it is not true that law is whatever a particular community, nation or group wishes to make it. Law is never reduced to what is merely "posited," and so is effected by new "democratic" votes on what applies or does not apply. Working with law and gospel will never let law be treated so sanguinely as if it were our group puppet. The law remains a harsh disciplinarian in this old life until we are freed entirely and completely from it, and that awaits not an alter-
ation in the law but its end in Christ himself and alone. Law cannot be made soft and amenable, even when it comes in the form of love.

The Word Remains Forever

Despite all efforts to the contrary the distinction of law and gospel continues to be made in the preaching office and so works in the real lives of people. This is not due to heroic efforts by churches, clergy, the royal priesthood or even the text of Scripture itself, but because the Holy Spirit will not have it any other way. The letter kills; the Spirit gives life. A church group or institution in this old world can, however, foster better preaching than we have right now. It does this by organizing its teaching institutions and its oversight of local preaching so that the proclamation of law and gospel is the highest art and science.

This is very hard, as teaching any art and science is hard. It is especially hard when we find ourselves as Peter did in some kind of churchly fight and the temptation of fostering unity by law comes bearing down upon us. Preaching can only proceed effectively when the two kinds of authority are identified and recognized as God’s own double work with sinners, and this means that law and gospel remain God’s own way of working rather than one more historical tradition invented by humans and used to oppress others. The distinction of law and gospel is truly the fount of diversity. It is the only teaching and art that recognizes more than one authority, and an actual end to the oppression of the harsh disciplinarian that we have come to see as our hope in life: the law itself.

This diversity comes, however, from the One God who works both kinds of authority, and so is the origin—or better yet the future of true unity. Foolish characterizations of law and gospel as not having meaning in the present, or otherwise not contributing any longer to discussions about authority of Scripture will fail in the end. So will churches that decide that various interpretations are possible while ignoring
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both the natural law of God planted in this old world and the new authority of the gospel alone as making us right with God by Christ's death on the cross.

It is hard for the sinner to admit there are two such authorities in life, and yet being transferred from the law to the gospel is not coming under another disciplinarian; it is to be adopted as God's own child by the Spirit of the Son who puts into our hearts the cry, "Abba, Father!—and lo we are no longer slaves, but heirs of the heavenly kingdom with the law behind us once and for all.