

Walther's Theses on Law and Gospel

Thesis I: The doctrinal contents of all Holy Scripture, both of the Old and the New Testament, consist of two doctrines that differ fundamentally from each other. These two doctrines are Law and Gospel.

Thesis II: If you wish to be an orthodox teacher, you must present all the articles of faith in accordance with Scripture, yet [you] must also rightly distinguish Law and Gospel.

Thesis III: To rightly distinguish Law and Gospel is the most difficult and highest Christian art—and for theologians in particular. It is taught only by the Holy Spirit in combination with experience.

Thesis IV: Understanding how to distinguish Law and Gospel provides wonderful insight for understanding all of Holy Scripture correctly. In fact, without this knowledge Scripture is and remains a sealed book.

[TWENTY-ONE WAYS TO CONFUSE LAW AND GOSPEL]

[Improperly Making Christ a Lawgiver]

Thesis V: The most common way people mingle Law and Gospel—and one that is also the easiest to detect because it is so crude—is prevalent among Papists, Socinians, and Rationalists. These people turn Christ into a kind of new Moses or Lawgiver. This transforms the Gospel into a doctrine of meritorious works. Furthermore, some people—like the Papists—condemn and anathematize those who teach that the Gospel is the message of the free grace of God in Christ.

[Incorrect Preaching]

Thesis VI: You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel in the Word of God if you do not preach the Law in its full sternness and the Gospel in its full sweetness. Similarly, do not mingle Gospel elements with the Law or Law elements with the Gospel.

Thesis VII: You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel in the Word of God if you first preach the Gospel and then the Law, or first sanctification and then justification, or first faith and then repentance, or first good works and then grace.

Thesis VIII: You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel in the Word of God if you preach the Law to those who are already in terror on account of their sins or the Gospel to those who are living securely in their sins.

[Wrongly Directing People toward Salvation by Works]

Thesis IX: You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel in the Word of God if you point sinners who have been struck down and terrified by the Law toward their own prayers and struggles with God and tell them that they have to work their way into a state of grace. That is, do not tell them to keep on praying and struggling until they would feel that God has received them into grace. Rather, point them toward the Word and the Sacraments.

Thesis X: You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel in the Word of God if you preach that “dead” faith can justify and save in the sight of God—while that believer is still living in mortal sins. In the same way, do not preach that faith justifies and saves those unrepentant people because of the love and renewal it produces in them.

[Improper Understanding of Contrition]

Thesis XI: You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel in the Word of God if you only want to comfort those with the Gospel who are contrite because they love God. You also need to comfort people with the Gospel who are only contrite because they fear His wrath and punishment.

Thesis XII: You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel in the Word of God if you teach that the reason our sins are forgiven is because we both believe and are contrite.

[Improper Understanding of Faith]

Thesis XIII: You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel in the Word of God if you explain faith by demanding that people are able to make themselves believe or at least can collaborate toward that end. Rather, preach faith into people’s hearts by laying the Gospel promises before them.

Thesis XIV: You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel in the Word of God if you demand that faith is a condition for justification and salvation. It would be wrong to preach that people are righteous in the sight of God and are saved not only by their faith, but also on account of their faith, for the sake of their faith, or in view of their faith.

[Improper Understanding of Conversion and Repentance]

Thesis XV: You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel in the Word of God if you turn the Gospel into a preaching of repentance.

Thesis XVI: You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel in the Word of God if you claim that people are truly converted when they get rid of certain vices and, instead, engage in certain works of piety and virtuous practices.

[Improper Presentation of New Obedience]

Thesis XVII: You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel in the Word of God if you describe believers in a way that is not always realistic—both with regard to the strength of their faith and to the feeling and fruitfulness of their faith.

[Improper Understanding of the Sinful Human Condition]

Thesis XVIII: You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel in the Word of God if you describe the universal corruption of mankind so as to create the impression that even true believers are still under the spell of ruling sins and sin deliberately.

Thesis XIX: You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel in the Word of God if you preach about certain sins as if they were not damnable but only venial.

[Improper Understanding of Church, Word, and Sacrament]

Thesis XX: You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel in the Word of God if a person's salvation is made to depend on his association with the visible orthodox Church and if you claim that salvation is denied to every person erring in any article of faith.

Thesis XXI: You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel in the Word of God if you teach that the Sacraments save *ex opere operato*, that is, merely by their outward performance.

[False Understanding of Conversion and Human Will]

Thesis XXII: You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel in the Word of God if a false distinction is made between a person's being awakened and being converted; moreover, when a person's inability to believe is mistaken for not being permitted to believe.

[Improper Uses of the Law]

Thesis XXIII: You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel in the Word of God if you use the demands, threats, or promises of the Law to try and force the unregenerate to put away their sins and engage in good works and thus become godly; and then, on the other hand, if you use the commands of the Law—rather than the admonitions of the Gospel—to urge the regenerate to do good.

[Improperly Preaching on the Unforgivable Sin]

Thesis XXIV: You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel in the Word of God if you claim the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit cannot be forgiven because of its magnitude.

[Failing to Let the Gospel Predominate]

Thesis XXV: You are not rightly distinguishing Law and Gospel in the Word of God if you do not allow the Gospel to predominate in your teaching.

Recommended Further Reading on the Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel

The Lutheran Study Bible. St. Louis: Concordia, 2009.

Apocrypha: The Lutheran Edition with Notes. St. Louis: Concordia, 2012

Lutheran Service Book. St. Louis: Concordia, 2006.

Giertz, Bo. *The Hammer of God (Revised Edition).* Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1960, 2005.

Pless, John T. *Handling the Word of Truth: Law and Gospel in the Church Today.* St. Louis: Concordia, 2004.

Koehler, Edward. *A Christian Pedagogy.* St. Louis: Concordia, 1930.