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# Law and Gospel: The Hermeneutical and Homiletical Key to Reformation Theology and Ethics

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Evangelicals should actively appropriate a central theme from the Protestant Reformation that provides a unified structure for faith, life and proclamation: the nuanced relation between law and gospel. A largely unified (but not woodenly identical) perspective can be learned from a comparison of Martin Luther (1483–1546) with John Calvin (1509–1564). Their significant similarity on these questions established patterns for quality teaching and preaching in the Protestant tradition.

The relationship between law and gospel is a hermeneutical/homiletical key to Reformation theology and ethics, both *historically* to understand the Reformation itself and *normatively*, setting a pattern to appropriate today. This complementarity offers evangelicals a proven tool for understanding the Bible, for proclamation in church and society, for balanced and authentic pastoral care, and for relating the Christian faith to questions of culture and politics.

## I. Differences between Luther and Calvin

There are theological differences between Luther and Calvin, but differences of literary style and personality seem larger. Calvin labours for elegance of expression and an orderly arrangement. The table of contents of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* offers an overview of how he connects the various themes in Christian proclamation.

Calvin finds repetition inelegant; in his commentaries he refers the reader to a previous book if he has already given a satisfactory exposition of a text or theme. He also distinguishes theology from biblical exegesis, representing the Renaissance care for precision in dealing with historical texts. To get Calvin's complete perspective on a topic, one must read his *Institutes*, not only his commentaries.

Luther does not clearly distinguish exegesis from theology. In his *Lectures on Galatians*, he often digresses from the text of Galatians to other texts and generally tells his students all they

should know relative to the themes before him. His *Lectures on Galatians* describe faith and life in light of Galatians, not merely exegeting the Pauline book. Luther had a tremendously systematic mind, but his love of the gospel constantly breaks his orderly presentation. This makes Luther repetitive though never monotonous.

Behind the difference in literary style between Luther and Calvin lay a difference in personality so great that one can mistake it for a difference in core theology. Lewis Spitz commented:

Calvin and Luther were temperamentally quite different. The younger man [Calvin] was shy to the point of diffidence, precise and restrained, except for sudden flashes of anger. He was severe, but scrupulously just and truthful, self-contained and somewhat aloof. He had many acquaintances but few intimate friends. The older man [Luther] was sociable to the point of volubility, free and open, warm and cordial with people of all stations of life. But in spite of their differences in personality, Calvin and Luther retained a mutual respect for each other that was rooted in their confessional agreement.<sup>1</sup>

A 'confessional agreement' deeper than their disagreements is what we find on law and gospel, though it is disguised by differences in terminology. Luther and Calvin have remarkably similar convictions, especially that the relationship between law and gospel is central for the Chris-

tian faith, for Christian proclamation, and for ethics, including social ethics. Luther's key text is his 1535 *Lectures on Galatians*. Calvin's 1548 *Galatians Commentary* is convenient for comparison; it must be supplemented by his *Institutes* because of his literary method.

## II. The Centrality of the Law/ Gospel Relationship

For Luther, the relationship between law and gospel is the centre of true Christianity; the ability to distinguish properly between law and gospel qualifies one as a theologian. '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.'<sup>2</sup>

The real problem in theology through Luther's time was the failure to articulate this distinction:

You will not find anything about this distinction between the law and the gospel in the books of the monks, the canonists, and the recent and ancient theologians. Augustine taught and expressed it to some extent. Jerome and others like him knew nothing at all about it. In other words, for many centuries there has been a remarkable silence about this in all the schools and churches. This situation has produced a very dangerous condition for consciences.<sup>3</sup>

This distinction is no mere theoretical abstraction. It is an existential reality

1 Lewis W. Spitz, *The Renaissance and Reformation Movements*, 2 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), vol. 2: *The Reformation*, 412.

2 Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed. and trans. Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 26: *Lectures on Galatians*, 1535 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), 115.

3 Luther, *Galatians*, 313.

of the highest import; it is the heart of the Christian faith; it is the key to keeping the gospel pure and distinguishing authentic Christianity from distorted faiths and religions. 'Let every Christian learn diligently to distinguish between the law and the gospel.'<sup>4</sup>

Without this distinction people either fall into despair, finding that they cannot earn God's favor by law-keeping, or they fall into false confidence, presuming that they can earn God's favor. However, the proper distinction is not a matter of memorizing proper terms or using certain words; it is more an art than a science. It must be made in the midst of life experience. Luther confessed, 'I admit that in the time of temptation I myself do not know how to do this as I should.'<sup>5</sup>

Calvin appropriates a clear distinction between law and gospel from Luther, but he understands it to really come from the Bible: '[Paul] is continually employed in contrasting the righteousness of the law with the free acceptance which God is pleased to bestow.'<sup>6</sup> Because Calvin avoids repetition, one such statement suffices to show that Calvin sees this contrast as central to the faith. But he thinks it is prominent in the entire Bible.

When discussing Abraham, Calvin notes, 'For faith,—so far as it embraces the undeserved goodness of God, Christ with all his benefits, the testimony of our adoption which is

contained in the gospel,—is universally contrasted with the law, with the merit of works, and with human excellence.'<sup>7</sup> He echoes Luther: 'We see then that the smallest part of justification cannot be attributed to the law without renouncing Christ and his grace.'<sup>8</sup>

### III. What Is the Gospel?

For Luther, justification by faith alone (not faith plus anything else) is the centre of the gospel. By faith a person is united with Christ and received by Christ so that Christ's righteousness becomes one's own and the believer is declared righteous by God. While the legal status of being justified is an enduring condition in relation to God, a person's faith remains dynamic; one may only be aware of the status of justification to the extent one presently trusts the gospel.

If it is true faith, it is a sure trust and firm acceptance in the heart. It takes hold of Christ in such a way that Christ is the object of faith, or rather not the object of faith but, so to speak, the one who is present in the faith itself.<sup>9</sup>

But the work of Christ, properly speaking, is this: to embrace the one whom the law has made a sinner and pronounced guilty, and to absolve him from his sins if he believes the gospel. 'For Christ is the end of the law, that everyone who has faith may be justified' (Rom 10:4).<sup>10</sup>

4 Luther, *Galatians*, 120.

5 Luther, *Galatians*, 115.

6 John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1854; rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 67. Modernized spelling and punctuation.

7 Calvin, *Galatians*, 85.

8 Calvin, *Galatians*, 151.

9 Luther, *Galatians*, 129.

10 Luther, *Galatians*, 143.

Calvin uses slightly different language. Salvation is accomplished solely by the work of Christ; salvation is received solely by faith. About Galatians 2:15–16, Calvin observed:

Since the Jews themselves, with all their advantages, were forced to betake themselves to the faith of Christ, how much more necessary was it that the Gentiles should look for salvation through faith? Paul's meaning therefore is: 'We ... have found no method of obtaining salvation, but by believing in Christ: why, then, should we prescribe another method to the Gentiles? ... We must seek justification by the faith of Christ, because we cannot be justified by works.'<sup>11</sup>

The Reformers understand the gospel in contrast to the law. Believing the gospel is the opposite of seeking to achieve a proper relationship with God by following the law or performing 'works'.

#### IV. Faith and Works

From the start of the Reformation, Luther was misunderstood to say that if people do not need to earn their eternal salvation by doing good works, then people are free from all moral restraint and free to sin. This antinomian misunderstanding threatened to contribute to the widespread social chaos of the time, an outcome Luther feared.

In his 1520 treatise *The Freedom of the Christian*, Luther rejects antinomianism with his ear-catching irony that, in addition to being a perfectly free lord of all, each Christian is also a perfectly dutiful servant of all. Luther

claims that true faith in Christ moves people to love and serve within the everyday social structures without any rejection of the moral law. Faith leads to good works, and if real faith is present, good works can be expected.

Therefore we, too, say that faith without works is worthless and useless. The papists and the fanatics take this to mean that faith without works does not justify, or that if faith does not have works, it is of no avail, no matter how true it is. That is false. But faith without works—that is, a fantastic idea and mere vanity and a dream of the heart—is a false faith and does not justify.<sup>12</sup>

Luther interprets the representatives of the Roman Catholic Church of his day to say that works were necessary in order to be justified, the central problem of the 'papists'. Luther also thinks that the 'fanatics', his term for some Anabaptists, follow the papists at this crucial point—a claim not always noticed. Luther teaches that good works will always follow any justification that is authentic, but such good works do not contribute to justification.

In addition to holding a different view of the relation between faith and works, Luther also claims to teach a different view of an appropriate 'good work'. As a papist he performed works that were explicitly religious in nature; he entered a monastery, fasted, took pilgrimages, and spent long hours confessing sins.<sup>13</sup> After coming

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<sup>12</sup> Luther, *Galatians*, 155.

<sup>13</sup> This is what later scholars often call 'extra-mundane asceticism' in contrast with the 'intra-mundane asceticism' taught by Luther and Calvin.

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<sup>11</sup> Calvin, *Galatians*, 66, 67.

to the Reformation faith, he taught that good works are primarily in the everyday world:

For such great blindness used to prevail in the world that we supposed that the works which men had invented not only without but against the commandment of God were much better than those which a magistrate, the head of a household, a teacher, a child, a servant, etc., did in accordance with God's command.<sup>14</sup>

The good works resulting from justification by faith are those commanded by God in the Word within the everyday created order:

Surely we should have learned from the Word of God that the religious orders of the papists, which alone they call holy, are wicked, since there exists no commandment of God or testimony in Sacred Scripture about them; and, on the other hand, that other ways of life, which do have the word and commandment of God, are holy and divinely instituted ... , on the basis of the Word of God we pronounce the sure conviction that the way of life of a servant, which is extremely vile in the sight of the world, is far more acceptable to God than all the orders of monks. For God approves, commends, and adorns the status of servants with his Word, but not that of the monks.<sup>15</sup>

For Luther, works do not contribute to justification before God. One is

justified by faith alone, meaning that nothing one does contributes to justification. But real justifying faith necessarily leads to obedience to God's command in the Word.

Calvin's doctrine of faith and works resembles Luther's. Though some have misperceived Calvin to be a stern legalist, in his time the French-speaking Reformation was perceived to be antinomian in a manner that contributed to social chaos and wanton vice. This was similar to Luther's problem, a result of saying that good works and the moral law do not contribute to our salvation. From the 'Prefatory Address to King Francis' in the *Institutes*, Calvin clarifies his doctrine of the relation of faith to good works, partly to teach his people but partly as an apologetic response to this continuing allegation against the Reformation.

Using Galatians 5:6, Calvin defines these matters: 'It is not our doctrine that the faith which justifies is alone; we maintain that it is invariably accompanied by good works; only we contend that faith alone is sufficient for justification.'<sup>16</sup>

From Luther to Calvin, there is a small development in the terminology of good works. Whereas Luther talks about loving service within the created orders of everyday life in obedience to the command of God, Calvin usually talks about obedience to the law of God as the standard for good works. This is a tiny change in terminology, not a substantial development in content. Like Luther, Calvin describes good works as love for others within the framework of everyday life:

<sup>14</sup> Luther, *Galatians*, 212.

<sup>15</sup> Luther, *Galatians*, 213. For Luther, the fact of these biblical commands indicates that being a servant is a proper way of serving God.

<sup>16</sup> Calvin, *Galatians*, 152.

But we must inquire into the reason why all the precepts of the law are included under love. The law consists of two tables, the first of which instructs us concerning the worship of God and the duties of piety, and the second instructs us concerning the love of neighbor .... Piety to God, I acknowledge, ranks higher than love of the brethren; and therefore the observance of the first table is more valuable in the sight of God than the observance of the second. But as God himself is invisible, so piety is a thing hidden from the eyes of man. ... God therefore chooses to make trial of our love to himself by that love of our brother, which he enjoins us to cultivate.<sup>17</sup>

Calvin uses the term *law* to describe the function of Holy Scripture in guiding the life of gratitude and good works, whereas Luther uses the term *commandment*. This difference in terms is based on a deep agreement—real faith leads to good works that are practiced in everyday life according to the commands or law of God in Scripture.

## V. The Gospel and the Old Testament

Throughout Christian history, the relationship between the two testaments has been a recurring issue. Some, such as the group that disturbed the churches in Galatia in the first century, minimize any transition from the Old to the New Testament. Others, such as Marcion in the second century, minimize any continuity between the testaments, believing

that the Old Testament contains only law while the New Testament only preaches the gospel. Against such extremes, with small differences, Luther and Calvin fundamentally agree on seeing both law and gospel in both the Old and the New Testament. Neither obliterates all distinctions between the two testaments; both see substantial continuity.

Luther loved to describe Moses as the preacher of righteousness by law:

Moses does not reveal the Son of God; he discloses the law, sin, the conscience, death, the wrath and judgment of God, and hell. ... Therefore only the gospel reveals the Son of God. Oh, if only one could distinguish carefully here and not look for the law in the gospel but keep it as separate from the law as heaven is distant from earth.<sup>18</sup>

Representing the apostle Paul, Luther writes, 'You have not heard me teach the righteousness of the law or of works; for this belongs to Moses, not to me.'<sup>19</sup>

If this were all Luther said, one might imagine an absolute antithesis between the two testaments. However, with no sense of self-contradiction, Luther notes, 'The patriarchs and all the Old Testament saints were free in their conscience and were justified by faith, not by circumcision or the law.'<sup>20</sup> It is true that 'Moses, the minister of the law, has the ministry of law, which he [the apostle Paul] calls a ministry of sin, wrath, death, and damnation',<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Luther, *Galatians*, 72.

<sup>19</sup> Luther, *Galatians*, 73.

<sup>20</sup> Luther, *Galatians*, 85. By the term 'free in their conscience', Luther means awareness of a status of full acceptance before God.

<sup>21</sup> Luther, *Galatians*, 147.

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<sup>17</sup> Calvin, *Galatians*, 159, 160.

yet Moses preached justification by faith alone.

The gospel in the Old Testament, Luther claims, is also about Jesus Christ. The faith of the patriarchs was a faith that looked to the future acts of God for their salvation. 'The sound of the promise to Abraham brings Christ; and when he has been grasped by faith, then the Holy Spirit is granted on Christ's behalf.'<sup>22</sup>

Though the promises related to the gospel were especially given to Abraham, these promises were also available to whoever believed. In discussing how the Roman centurion (Acts 9) was righteous *before* he heard the gospel from Peter, Luther claimed:

Cornelius was a righteous and holy man in accordance with the Old Testament on account of his faith in the coming Christ, just as all the patriarchs, prophets, and devout kings were righteous, having received the Holy Spirit secretly on account of their faith in the coming Christ.<sup>23</sup>

The main contrast between the gospel in the Old Testament and in the New Testament is that 'the faith of the patriarchs was attached to the Christ who was to come, just as ours is attached to the One who has already come.'<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the book of Genesis was primarily a book of gospel:

In Jewish fashion Paul usually calls the first book of Moses 'law'. Even though it has no law except that which deals with circumcision, but chiefly teaches faith and testifies that the patriarchs were pleasing

to God on account of their faith, still the Jews called Genesis together with the other books of Moses 'law' because of that one law of circumcision.<sup>25</sup>

Just as Luther claims that the Old Testament is full of gospel, so he finds law in the New Testament, although the New Testament is pre-eminently gospel:

The gospel, however, is a proclamation about Christ: that he forgives sins, grants grace, justifies, and saves sinners. Although there are commandments in the gospel, they are not the gospel; they are expositions of the law and appendices to the gospel.<sup>26</sup>

Calvin's distinction between the testaments is similar to that of Luther. At the beginning of his Galatians commentary, he complains that the false apostles disturbing the churches removed the distinction between the two testaments, which is the distinction between law and gospel. 'It is no small evil to quench the light of the gospel, to lay a snare for consciences, and to remove the distinction between the Old and the New Testament.'<sup>27</sup>

Like Luther, Calvin regards the Old Testament as largely law, whereas the New Testament is largely gospel:

That office which was peculiar to Moses consisted in laying down a rule of life and ceremonies to be observed in the worship of God, and in afterwards adding promises and threatenings. Many promises, no doubt, relating to the free

22 Luther, *Galatians*, 255.

23 Luther, *Galatians*, 210.

24 Luther, *Galatians*, 239.

25 Luther, *Galatians*, 433.

26 Luther, *Galatians*, 150.

27 Calvin, *Galatians*, 14, 15.



mercy of God and of Christ, are to be found in his writings; and these promises belong to faith. But this is to be viewed as accidental.<sup>28</sup>

Though Calvin agrees with Luther that Moses is primarily a writer of law, Calvin's statements about Moses are more positive than Luther's. Calvin genuinely loved the Law of Moses and wrote a multi-volume study on the last four books of the Pentateuch. Luther chose to write more on the book of Genesis than on the other Mosaic books, probably because he saw Genesis as containing more gospel.

For Calvin, the way of salvation was the same under the old covenant as it is under the new, i.e. justification by faith alone:

Abraham was justified by believing, because, when he received from God a promise of fatherly kindness, he embraced it as certain. Faith, therefore, has a relation and a respect to such a divine promise as may enable men to place their trust and confidence in God.<sup>29</sup>

Calvin explains why Moses added the law so many years later if the gospel had already been given to Abraham. His comment would have pleased Luther—to show people their sin and need for the gospel. 'He means that the law was published in order to make known transgressions, and in this way to compel men to acknowledge their guilt. ... This is the true preparation for Christ.'<sup>30</sup>

Like Luther, Calvin hears the gospel throughout the Old Testament,

making the difference between the two testaments one of degree and place in the history of redemption:

The doctrine of faith, in short, is attested by Moses and all the prophets: but, as faith was not then clearly manifested, so the time of faith [Galatians 3:23] is an appellation here given, not in an absolute, but in a comparative sense, to the time of the New Testament.<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, the Old Testament ceremonies spoke of Christ and served as a schoolmaster to lead people to the coming Christ:

Beyond all doubt, ceremonies accomplished their object, not merely by alarming and humbling the conscience, but by exciting them to the faith of the coming Redeemer. ... The law ... was nothing else than an immense variety of exercises, in which the worshippers were led by the hand to Christ.<sup>32</sup>

The Reformers agree in seeing continuity of development from the Old Testament to the New Testament. Old Testament believers looked forward to the redemption in Christ, whereas New Testament believers look back to Christ, but all believers are justified by faith alone in the promise of the gospel. Although the New Testament is pre-eminently a book of gospel, that gospel is properly understood only in relation to the moral law contained in both testaments.

Whether in the time of the Old or the New Testament, Luther and Calvin see the biblical message as always having two distinct but inseparable dimensions: command and promise,

<sup>28</sup> Calvin, *Galatians*, 99.

<sup>29</sup> Calvin, *Galatians*, 84.

<sup>30</sup> Calvin, *Galatians*, 100.

<sup>31</sup> Calvin, *Galatians*, 107.

<sup>32</sup> Calvin, *Galatians*, 109.

law and gospel. This is the continuous structure of the biblical divine-human encounter.

## VI. Reason and Law

'Reason cannot think correctly about God; only faith can do so.'<sup>33</sup> Such statements give Luther the reputation of being opposed to reason. Some view him as irrational. Calvin, meanwhile, is sometimes presented as an unfeeling rationalist. Neither interpretation is accurate, because they assume no differentiation in terms of the object to which reason must be applied.

Both Luther and Calvin see reason as properly pertaining to the law; when reason is used within this realm, it is a tremendous gift of God. But when reason exceeds its proper bounds, going into the realm of gospel, then reason becomes an enemy of faith.

For Luther, the primary problem with reason is its claim that people can be justified by works of the law, rejecting the gospel:

Human reason and wisdom do not understand this doctrine [the gospel]. Therefore they always teach the opposite: 'If you want to live to God, you must observe the law; for it is written (Matthew 19:17), "If you would enter life, keep the commandments."' <sup>34</sup>

Let reason be far away, that enemy of faith, which, in the temptations of sin and death, relies not on the righteousness of faith or Christian righteousness, of which it is completely ignorant, but on its own righteousness or, at most, on the

righteousness of the law. As soon as reason and the law are joined, faith immediately loses its virginity. For nothing is more hostile to faith than the law and reason.<sup>35</sup>

For Luther, faith is not merely affirming religious propositions, though Luther accepts such classical Christian credal statements as the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. Faith is personal reliance on the gospel. But during assaults on the soul (German *Anfechtungen*), or temptations to doubt God's grace, believers are prone to move from trusting in the gospel to trusting in obedience to the law, and *sinful reason supports this tendency*. During spiritual assaults, fallen reason confuses law and gospel, so believers fall either into despair of pleasing God or else into false confidence, assuming that they please God without the gospel:

When it comes to experience, you will find the gospel a rare guest but the law a constant guest in your conscience, which is habituated to the law and the sense of sin; reason too supports this sense.<sup>36</sup>

Reason rarely overcomes the tendency to forget the gospel and rely on the law. Luther does not think that people should become irrational. The solution is to employ reason to its fullest in its proper realm: everyday, practical affairs. Reason is properly applied in the realm of the 'orders'—the realm of the civil use of the law. Discussing a popular proverb, 'God does not require of any man that he do more than he really can', Luther tightly connected reason to everyday

33 Luther, *Galatians*, 238.

34 Luther, *Galatians*, 156.

35 Luther, *Galatians*, 113.

36 Luther, *Galatians*, 117.

affairs:

This is actually a good statement, but in its proper place, that is, in political, domestic, and natural affairs. For example, if I, who exist *in the realm of reason*, rule a family, build a house, or carry on a government office, and I do as much as I can or what lies within me, I am excused.<sup>37</sup>

With this understanding of the proper realm of reason, Luther could praise Greek political philosophy and Roman law, though he also describes reason and philosophy very negatively. Of itself, reason knows nothing about the gospel and tends to confuse law and gospel; nevertheless, reason can know much about the moral law and its application in everyday life. In this realm reason must be treasured. The knowledge of the moral law possessed by reason is the result of God's revelation through creation. Because of sin and unbelief, this reasonable knowledge of the moral law will need to be corrected by the command of God in the Scriptures; nevertheless, reason can know the law. Therefore, by reason, civil righteousness is possible for many who do not know the gospel:

The sophists, as well as anyone else who does not grasp the doctrine of justification, do not know of any other righteousness than civil righteousness or the righteousness of the law, which are known in some measure even to the heathen.<sup>38</sup>

Calvin's doctrine of reason is simi-

lar to Luther's with a subtle shift. After celebrating the ability of human reason in the natural realm, the result of God's general grace and general revelation, Calvin asked what reason knows of God:

We must now analyze what human reason can discern with regard to God's Kingdom and to spiritual insight. This spiritual insight consists chiefly in three things: (1) knowing God; (2) knowing his fatherly favor in our behalf, in which our salvation consists; (3) knowing how to frame our life according to the rule of his law. In the two first points—and especially in the second—the greatest geniuses are blinder than moles!<sup>39</sup>

Calvin distinguished knowing what God is like (point 1 above) from knowing how God relates to man in the gospel (point 2). Though reason is not always completely wrong about God's being, statements on this topic by philosophers 'always show a certain giddy imagination'.<sup>40</sup> But unaided reason is 'blinder than moles' in regard to understanding God's fatherly care and the gospel. To properly trust in God's fatherly care, the gospel, Scripture, and the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit are needed.

Though reason is worthless in the realm of the gospel, Calvin emphasizes reason in area 3, 'how to frame our life according to the rule of his law'. This is the realm of the civil use of God's moral law, the natural moral law, and civil righteousness.

<sup>37</sup> Luther, *Galatians*, 173, 174. Emphasis added.

<sup>38</sup> Luther, *Galatians*, 261.

<sup>39</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), II, ii, 18.

<sup>40</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, II, ii, 18.

There remains the third aspect of spiritual insight, that of knowing the rule for the right conduct of life. This we correctly call the 'knowledge of the works of righteousness.' The human mind sometimes seems more acute in this than in higher things. For the apostle testifies: 'When Gentiles, who do not have the law, do the works of the law, they are a law to themselves ... and show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their thoughts accuse them among themselves or excuse them before God's judgment' [Rom. 2:14–15]. If Gentiles by nature have law righteousness engraved upon their minds, we surely cannot say they are utterly blind as to the conduct of life. There is nothing more common than for a man to be sufficiently instructed in a right standard of conduct by natural law.<sup>41</sup>

Reason often knows right and wrong based on the natural (God-given) moral law, and this knowledge can provide 'a right standard of conduct'. Calvin never suggests that this knowledge equips people to earn God's favour. Even though people often know the good and are able to attain civil righteousness, they are still sinful; the natural knowledge of right and wrong received by reason renders people blameworthy before God.

Calvin carefully qualifies what reason knows about the moral law. Sin darkens our knowing process. We do not always in fact know what we should in principle know by reason. The written moral law is extremely

important:

Now that inward law [the natural moral law], which we have above described as written, even engraved, upon the hearts of all, in a sense asserts the very same things that are to be learned from the two Tables [the Ten Commandments]. For our conscience does not allow us to sleep a perpetual insensible sleep without being an inner witness and monitor of what we owe to God, without holding before us the difference between good and evil and thus accusing us when we fail in our duty. But man is so shrouded in the darkness of errors that he hardly begins to grasp through this natural law what worship is acceptable to God. ... Accordingly (because it is necessary both for our dullness and for our arrogance), the Lord has provided us with a written law to give us clearer witness of what was too obscure in the natural law, shake off our listlessness, and strike more vigorously our mind and memory.<sup>42</sup>

There is a difference between how Luther and Calvin understand the influence of sin on our perception of the natural moral law. Calvin emphasizes the way in which the content of our knowledge is darkened, while Luther emphasizes the way in which people misuse this knowledge to earn God's favour. They agree that knowledge of God's natural moral law is available to reason and allows people to know right and wrong, but unaided reason cannot know how to relate properly to God. And the Bible is needed to know more fully what kinds of good

41 Calvin, *Institutes*, II, ii, 22.

42 Calvin, *Institutes*, II, viii, 1.

works should follow faith.

## VII. The Uses of the Law

Some see a large difference between Luther and Calvin regarding the proper uses of the law. The evidence shows a difference in terminology, literary style, and personality-driven reactions to the moral law within a substantially similar perspective. Calvin may have taken Luther's doctrine and refined the terminology, though Luther might have been dissatisfied with some aspects of this development.

If the moral law is not to be used to earn God's favour, what are its proper uses or functions? Luther speaks of two proper uses of the law, the civic and the theological, with the theological use being primary. While discussing Galatians 3:19, Luther claims:

One must know that there is a double use of the law. One is the civic use. God has ordained civic laws, indeed all laws, to restrain transgressions. Therefore, every law was given to hinder sins. Does this mean that when the law restrains sins, it justifies? Not at all. When I refrain from killing or from committing adultery or from stealing, or when I abstain from other sins, I do not do this voluntarily or from the love of virtue but because I am afraid of the sword and of the executioner. This prevents me, as the ropes or chains prevent a lion or a bear from ravaging something that comes along. ... The first understanding and use of the law is to restrain the wicked. ... This is why God has ordained magistrates, parents, teachers, laws, shackles, and

all civic ordinances.<sup>43</sup>

Though the civic use of the law is important to make civic righteousness possible, it is not the most important use of the law. The ultimate use of the law is to show us our sin and need for the gospel:

The other use of the law is the theological or spiritual one, which serves to increase transgressions. ... Therefore the true function and the chief and proper use of the law is to reveal to man his sin, blindness, misery, wickedness, ignorance, hate, and contempt of God, death, hell, judgment, and the well-deserved wrath of God.<sup>44</sup>

At this point Luther waxes eloquent about the value of God's law, but his point is clear—there are two uses of the moral law that must be distinguished from each other. In the civic use, the law restrains sin to make civilization possible, whether the law comes directly from God or indirectly through human laws, civic authorities, or other humane influences. The theological use leads a person to despair and prepares him for hearing the gospel. Because of its close relation to the gospel, the theological use of the law is primary.

Calvin speaks about three uses of the law, but he does not discuss all three uses in relation to Galatians because he does not think that Paul discussed all three uses there. In discussing Galatians 3:19, Calvin offers a rare criticism of Luther:

For many, I find, have fallen into the mistake of acknowledging no other advantage belonging to the

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<sup>43</sup> Luther, *Galatians*, 308, 309.

<sup>44</sup> Luther, *Galatians*, 309.

law, but what is expressed here. Paul himself elsewhere speaks of the precepts of the law as profitable for doctrine and exhortations (2 Tim 3:16). The definition here given of the use of the law is not complete, and those who refuse to make any other acknowledgment in favour of the law do wrong.<sup>45</sup>

Calvin agrees that Galatians teaches Luther's two proper uses of the law. Calvin insists that the rest of the Bible teaches a third use.

Calvin calls his first use of the law the primitive function of the law, similar to Luther's theological use:

Let us survey briefly the function and use of what is called the 'moral law'. Now, so far as I understand it, it consists of three parts.

The first part is this: while it shows God's righteousness, that is the righteousness alone acceptable to God, it warns, informs, convicts, and lastly condemns, every man of his own unrighteousness. For man, blinded and drunk with self-love, must be compelled to know and to confess his own feebleness and impurity.<sup>46</sup>

Calvin compares the law to a mirror; as a mirror shows the spots on one's face, so the law shows sin, though with different results among believers and unbelievers. Unbelievers are terrified; believers flee to God's mercy in Christ. Calvin and Luther use different language to describe this use, reflecting differences in personality. Luther seems to have gone through a two-step process, dropping into despair before turning away

from the law and toward the gospel. The continuing, repeated assaults on his soul are echoed in his language about the law. Calvin seems to have gone through a one-step process, immediately turning from the law to the gospel without intermediate despair; his language about the law does not usually contain echoes of terror.

Calvin's second use of the law is Luther's first use—the civic or political use:

The second function of the law is this: at least by fear of punishment to restrain certain men who are untouched by any care for what is just and right unless compelled by hearing the dire threats in the law. But they are restrained not because their inner mind is stirred or affected, but because, being bridled, so to speak, they keep their hands from outward activity, and hold inside the depravity that otherwise they would wantonly have indulged.<sup>47</sup>

The differences between Luther and Calvin are small but noteworthy. Luther understands the moral law in its civic use as largely mediated through societal orders, whether the state, the family, the school or the church. Calvin conceives of the civil use of the law as being largely unmediated, in the direct encounter of an individual with God. Of course, Calvin believes the civil magistrate had to prevent societal chaos, which he regards as the worst of evils. But when he turns to his second use of the law, he first considers each person's direct encounter with God.

Calvin says the third use of the law is primary:

45 Calvin, *Galatians*, 99, 100.

46 Calvin, *Institutes*, II, vii, 6.

47 Calvin, *Institutes*, II, vii, 10.

The third and principal use, which pertains more closely to the proper use of the law, finds its place among believers in whose hearts the Spirit of God already lives and reigns. For even though they have the law written and engraved upon their hearts by the finger of God (Jer 31:33; Heb 10:16), that is, have been so moved and quickened through the directing of the Spirit that they long to obey God, they still profit by the law in two ways.<sup>48</sup>

Calvin's two ways in which the law helps believers are teaching the will of God, which believers desire to follow, and exhorting believers to continued obedience. Though Calvin does not use this terminology, they could be called 'Use 3A' and 'Use 3B'. Concerning Use 3A, Calvin claims the law 'is the best instrument for them to learn more thoroughly each day the nature of the Lord's will to which they aspire, and to confirm them in the understanding of it'.<sup>49</sup> He uses vivid language about Use 3B: 'by frequent meditation upon it to be aroused to obedience, be strengthened in it, and be drawn back from the slippery path of transgression'.<sup>50</sup>

Lest one think the desires of believers are all negative, Calvin explains:

For the law is not now acting toward us as a rigorous enforcement officer who is not satisfied unless the requirements are met. But in this perfection to which it exhorts us, the law points out the goal toward which throughout life we are

to strive.<sup>51</sup>

For Calvin, the law is a friend in a way Luther did not imagine. Calvin knows, like Luther, that the law always accuses believers, but for Calvin this accusation is in light of a deep, continuing assurance of God's fatherly care, so the threats and harshness can be removed from the believer's experience of the law. Like Luther, Calvin fully affirms the principle of *simul justus et peccator*, that the believer is simultaneously justified and sinful; therefore, the believer needs the law of God as a guide to life. But the new obedience to the law is an expression of gratitude for the gospel without any hint of using the moral law as a tool for self-justification.

Was Calvin's gentle criticism of Luther correct, assuming the validity of Calvin's threefold use? The answer is 'probably not,' because Luther's view of the uses of the law is closer to Calvin's than Calvin may have recognized, even though Luther does not use the term 'third use'. The reason for this claim is that the content of Calvin's Use 3B, that believers 'be drawn back from the slippery path of transgression', is included in Luther's civic use of the law, restraining sin. Luther and Calvin both think the sin of believers needs to be restrained. The difference in terminology is only where this theme appears in the outline.

Then there is the question of knowing the will of God, to which believers should aspire; Calvin calls this third use of the law 'primary', which Luther does not. But for Calvin this use of the moral law is 'primary' in an ideal sense if God's people were all

48 Calvin, *Institutes*, II, vi, 12.

49 Calvin, *Institutes*, II, vi, 12.

50 Calvin, *Institutes*, II, vi, 12.

51 Calvin, *Institutes*, II, vi, 13.

walking by faith and merely questioning what they should do. In practice, Calvin makes the theological, condemning use of the law very important. In his *Institutes*, the insightful discussion of the Decalogue is included in the section analysing the human predicament, prior to his discussion of the gospel. Calvin is using the law in its theological function to show sin. If Calvin had emphasized only the 'third' use of the law, he would have discussed the law only after his discussion of Christology and justification. In practice, Calvin's use of the law is close to Luther's recommendations about which use is primary.

At the same time, Luther's notion of the 'command of God' found in Scripture as the norm for the Christian life resembles Calvin's Use 3A, showing how Christians should live in gratitude for the gospel. The first problem with the works Luther had done as a monk was that they were intended to deserve or earn God's favour; the second problem was that his works were the wrong works. True good works have to be done in obedience to God's word in the Scriptures and flow from faith in the gospel, not substitute for faith in the gospel. This teaching of Luther approximates Calvin's Use 3A.

Luther made negative statements about the law. In the preface to his study on Galatians, he claimed:

The highest act and wisdom of Christians is not to know the law, to ignore works and all active righteousness, just as outside the people of God the highest wisdom is to know and study the law, works and active righteousness.<sup>52</sup>

Nevertheless, Luther also says, 'the works of the law must be performed either before justification or after justification.'<sup>53</sup>

When outward duties must be performed, then, whether you are a preacher, a magistrate, a husband, a teacher, a pupil, etc., this is not time to listen to the gospel. You must listen to the law and follow your vocation.<sup>54</sup>

Luther teaches that the works of obedience to the moral law not only follow justification in a chronological manner; obedience to the law is a fruit of faith:

Anyone who wants to exert himself toward righteousness must first exert himself in listening to the gospel. Now when he has heard and accepted this, let him joyfully give thanks to God, and then let him exert himself in good works that are commanded in the law; thus the law and works will follow hearing with faith. Then he will be able to walk safely in the light that is Christ; to be certain about choosing and doing works that are not hypocritical but truly good, pleasing to God, and commanded by him; and to reject all the mummery of self-chosen works.<sup>55</sup>

After contrasting the righteousness of the law with the righteousness of faith, Luther declares:

When he [Christ] has been grasped by faith, then the Holy Spirit is granted on Christ's account. Then God and neighbor are loved, good works are performed, and the

53 Luther, *Galatians*, 123.

54 Luther, *Galatians*, 117.

55 Luther, *Galatians*, 214, 215.

52 Luther, *Galatians*, 6.



cross is borne. This is really keeping the law ... . Hence it is impossible for us to keep the law without the promise.<sup>56</sup>

Luther elaborates:

Moses, together with Paul, necessarily drives us to Christ, through whom we become doers of the law and are accounted guilty of no transgression. How? First, through the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of righteousness, on account of faith in Christ; secondly, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, who creates a new life and new impulses in us, so that we may keep the law.<sup>57</sup>

Luther teaches that law-keeping by believers had three important purposes:

What is the purpose of keeping it [the law] if it does not justify? The final cause of the obedience of the law by the righteous is not righteousness in the sight of God, which is received by faith alone, but the peace of the world, gratitude toward God, and a good example by which others are invited to believe the gospel.<sup>58</sup>

Like Calvin, Luther teaches that keeping the moral law of God is the proper expression of gratitude for the gospel. There are differences in terminology regarding the proper uses of the law, with differences of personality behind those differences in terminology, but the massive agreement between Luther and Calvin sets

a standard for discussions of the use of God's law.

## VIII. Comments

Luther and Calvin agree that the relationship between law and gospel is central to the Christian faith for several reasons. They see this relation as central in the Bible, in *both* the Old and New Testaments; in other words, the biblical interpreter is not properly examining the Scriptures if this relation between law and gospel is not perceived. This consideration must not be forgotten. Following directly from this, the ability to clearly distinguish and relate law and gospel is regarded as central to recognizing a person as an evangelical theologian. This ability enables a person to apply the biblical message to human experience in a balanced manner that flows from a central structure of the biblical proclamation.

Closely related is the apprehension that the biblical relationship between law and gospel addresses one of the deepest existential dynamics within human beings. People will always respond to the moral law in some way, whether in despair because of inability to keep the law, in false confidence because of supposed earned righteousness, or by turning to the gospel. Others may turn to a deficient gospel, because believing a gospel is hard to avoid. This existential relation to law and gospel is constant and dynamic throughout a lifetime. For this reason, it is wise to address these issues continually in preaching and pastoral care. We should see law (in its multiple uses) and gospel as truly central to the application of the biblical message and central to the divine-human

<sup>56</sup> Luther, *Galatians*, 255.

<sup>57</sup> Luther, *Galatians*, 260.

<sup>58</sup> Luther, *Galatians*, 273. The term 'final cause' was a way of talking about purpose inspired by the terminology of Aristotle.

encounter.<sup>59</sup>

Some weaknesses in evangelicalism can be strengthened by Reformation teaching on law and gospel. One weakness has been forgetting the connection between the moral law and God's general revelation.<sup>60</sup> Forgetting this connection can cause us to miss the way in which people without the gospel already encounter God's law in both its theological and civic uses, thus weakening our approach to social ethics, culture, and missions. In social ethics, we should assume that all people already encounter God's moral law through creation and conscience; therefore, moral claims rooted in the Bible clarify and strengthen moral knowledge that people already have, though this knowledge is darkened or misused.

In missions, we can expect that people will normally have questions and anxieties arising from their encounter with the moral law in its theological use, proclaimed by God's general revelation; this is the cause of the correlation or question/answer relation between the gospel and human experience.<sup>61</sup> In relation to culture, each of the uses of the moral law, as well as the gospel, implies a distinct relationship of the biblical message to culture.

Another weakness has been a fail-

ure to distinguish how the moral law relates to reason from how the gospel relates to reason. The claim that we are justified in Christ is purely a statement of faith in the gospel, whereas the claim that murder is wrong is based on reason as well as on faith. This leads to more differentiation in our discussions of faith and reason. This differentiation can strengthen how we discuss integrating evangelical theology and ethics with learning in the various academic fields.

A further weakness has been forgetting the civil use of the moral law. This makes it more difficult for evangelicals to develop social ethics that do not sound like either an attempt to flee the world (ethics of holy community) or an attempt to take over the world (ethics of theocratic domination). There is a distinct and proper relation of the moral law, given by God, to human experience, reason and society, which we must learn to use in our civic ethics. This will enable us to talk and act as responsible citizens contributing to the public good, being open about our Christian faith, without adopting a fight-or-flight relationship to society.<sup>62</sup>

Therefore, it is wise to see the relation between law and gospel as a hermeneutical and homiletical key in a twofold sense. Historically, this is the key to the Reformers' hermeneutics and homiletics, needed to understand the Reformation. Normatively, we should see the relation between

<sup>59</sup> The second question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) clearly used this framework for preaching the Reformation faith.

<sup>60</sup> Unfortunately, Karl Barth did much to promote this problem by his rejection of general revelation.

<sup>61</sup> It is proper to use the term 'correlation' in Reformation-based theology without intending everything that Paul Tillich meant by that term.

<sup>62</sup> I have addressed these topics in *Natural Law Ethics: An Evangelical Proposal* (Bonn: VKW, 2005) and in 'Biblical Principles in the Public Square', MBS Text 108, available at [www.bucer.eu](http://www.bucer.eu). This forms the background for my *Human Rights: A Christian Primer* (World Evangelical Alliance, 2008).

law and gospel as a hermeneutical/homiletical key to interpret, apply and proclaim the biblical message in a balanced and full manner in late mo-

dernity. This distinction gives a substantial and unified structure to our hermeneutics, theology, social ethics, practical theology and homiletics.