

## The Law of God

Therefore if the adversaries press the Scriptures against Christ,  
we urge Christ against the Scriptures.

If one of them had to be parted with, Christ or the Law,  
the Law would have to be let go, not Christ. (Martin Luther)

The authority of Holy Scripture is grounded in the confessional distinction  
between the Law and the Gospel. We require this distinction for the sake of  
the gospel because

**The Law is not and can never be “good news.”**

Because the good new of the resurrection of Jesus is truly news

- It is absolute
- It cannot change or be changed
- It happened in history – by his resurrection he alone is revealed as Messiah
  - He is the final and saving judge.
  - He and not death will have the last word (Pastoral last words)
- **It will always be news...and it will forever have this content.**

## The Law of God

Two major factors which distinguish the Law as law from the Gospel.

1. The Law – even when it is understood as the Law of God, is not limited to behavioral codes in the Bible.
  1. The Christian Gospel is the Bible's Gospel, and nothing else is the Gospel.
  2. But the Law is not only the Bible's Law, and perhaps not even primarily the Bible's Law.
2. The Law as a code of some kind which is directed toward the regulation of human behavior is usually enforced by some kind of coercive power - is and has been adaptable.
  1. Even if it is proclaimed as the Law of God, it is adaptable.
  2. The Gospel is absolute. The Law is not absolute.
    1. Gospel as Good News refers to historical events which are locked in history **and because of that...are unchangeable.**
    2. The Law does not refer to historical events **and because of that...the Law is changeable.**

## Some Definitions of the term “Law”

- **Laws of Nature**
  - The way the physical world works. Natural science seeks to describe these.
  - These laws are *predictable and dependable*.
  - We ignore the laws of nature at our peril
    - Gravity pulls – fire burns – tobacco smoke causes lung cancer
- **Natural Law**
  - These have a theological content and moral purpose.
  - ...seeks to understand the intended purpose of aspects & functions of the human body, (for example: sexual organs)
  - The ethical system based on “natural law” views the intended purpose as the *divine* purpose.
    - as a purpose built into our bodily functioning by a divine creator
    - Interference with the intended purpose is therefore regarded as contrary to divine will
    - EXAMPLE: Sexual intercourse is necessary for the conception of human beings – its intended/divine purpose.
      - Therefore, any attempt to prevent conception in sexual intercourse is – contrary to the divine will

## Some Definitions of the term “Law” (continued)

- **Moral Law**
  - Code of prescriptions designed to govern individual and societal behavior.
  - In many societies, they arise in the service of justice & the care of life.
  - It defines behaviors as *right* or *wrong*.
  - The content of moral law can vary from community to community, from age to age, from society to society.
    - Suicide – honored in some – morally wrong in another
    - Women are to be rejected or even killed if they are raped or have their reputations compromised.
    - Some societies view women as property
    - The rule of silence in the Mafia etc.
- **Legislation**
  - Codes enacted by legislators or decreed by authorized individuals/groups – for the good of the common life of a political society.
  - There are penalties if violations occur
    - No intrinsic “right” or “wrong”
      - EX: red = stop, green = go.
      - But once it is codified...there is a right and a wrong.

## Some Definitions of the term “Law” (continued)

- **Apostolic Exhortation**
  - New Testament passages that describe & urge behaviors which both identify Christians and serve Christian witness to the Reign of God.
    - Colossians 3, Ephesians 4-6, Romans 12-15
- **Existential Encounter with Finitude**
  - Death – is not only a “law of Nature,” (all things die)
  - Death – is also an evaluative experience.
    - Death is a psychological & theological experience as well as natural
    - Human beings can anticipate death. (my cats anticipate food when the bag is unfolded)
    - As infants unable to care for ourselves, we look to adults to care for us.
      - We look to adults for approval as we move toward independence
      - Thus we live evaluated lives and we experience our unavoidable death as an evaluation
  - Our encounter with mortality drives us to justify our existence
  - This driven-ness to justify ourselves is in direct opposition to entrusting the justification of our selves to Christ...
    - Who is no longer subject to death and therefore is able to be the **justification** of all living beings.
    - **THIS** is one of the most profound meaning behind the distinction of and antithesis between the **“law”** and the **“gospel.”**

## The Law of God in the Lutheran Confessional Writings

- Article IV of the Apology defines the Law as the Decalogue.
  - The 10 commandments
  - Luther believed that these (except for “honor Sabbath”) are implanted in all human beings by nature.
  - Philip Melancthon referred to them as “the righteousness of reason.”
    - He would go so far as to say these include whatever laws are necessary to deal with “the lawless and disobedient” + laws that extend beyond the Bible
      - Monarchical or representative democracy, tax laws, speed limits,
      - The problem: the Bible doesn't directly tell us if these need be followed or resisted
- In the Smalcald Articles, Part III
  - The law reveals “inherited sin and its fruits”
  - Shows humans into what utter depths their nature has fallen and completely corrupt it is.
  - Melancthon writes: *The Law always accuses.*
  - What we regard as most important in life becomes our “god” - but they lack the power of finality – they cannot have the last word.
  - Thus we must be defender of our gods...so they will not be exposed as false.
  - Our “Bondage to sin” – we cannot admit to ourselves that they are false.
  - The Decalogue always accuses – it is the negative side of “You shall love...”

## The Law of God in the Lutheran Confessional Writings

- **The Small Catechism**
  - Luther starts the catechism with the 10 commandments.
  - In the middle ages they taught: Creed, Lord's Prayer, Decalogue
  - Luther intends that we hear that the "law always accuses"
  - The creed then tells us what God does for us and gives to us.
  - But...Luther also uses the Decalogue as a kind of ethical manual for Christians.
    - **Through the Creed "we come to love and delight in all the commandments of god because we see here in the Creed how God gives himself completely to us, with all his gifts and power, to help us keep the Ten Commandments"**
- **The Large Catechism**
  - Everyone has a god, but what one's god really is may be revealed only in "crunch" situations, where one's true and highest commitment is disclosed.
  - The name of God is abused when it is used to lie and deceive.
    - We violate the commandment against killing **when we have the opportunity to do good to our neighbor and to prevent, protect and save them from suffering bodily harm or injury but fail to do so.**
    - In writing about stealing Luther writes of "armchair bandits" (money lenders) who steal under the cloak of legality.

## The Law of God in the Lutheran Confessional Writings

- **The Formula of Concord**
  - *The law has been given to people for three reasons*
    - *That through it external discipline may be maintained against the unruly and the disobedient;*
    - *That people may be led through it to a recognition of their sins;*
    - *After they have been reborn – since nevertheless the flesh still clings to them – that precisely because of the flesh they may have a sure guide, according to which they can orient t and conduct their entire life.*
  - *See this as*
    - *Order public life*
    - *Confront humans with their sinfulness*
    - *Guide Christian conduct.*

## The Law of God Is Adaptable

- **A word as opposed to *the Word*** – James Nestingen
  - *The gospel of God's love for sinners in Christ Jesus doesn't change – it is the first and last word. But when the gospel promise is spoken, declaring the forgiveness of sins, deliverance, and resurrection, the law appears in an entirely different light. It is reduced to its proper proportions, becoming a word as opposed to **the Word**.*
- **For example – “what number is that?”**
  - The list in Exodus 20:1-17 & Deuteronomy 5:6-21 differ from Luther's catechism.
  - Luther followed the medieval tradition and eliminated #2 and in order to keep 10, he divided #10 on coveting into two commandments
  - This is a significant adaptation – no images of God
    - And yet...we are filled with them: paintings, statues, Sistine chapel...
  - This happens because of the Second Council of Nicea (787AD) – images can be restored into churches...the western churches gradually accepted it.

## The Law of God Is Adaptable (continued)

- **For Example – “What about the Sabbath?”**
  - Commandment 4 (Luther) is applicable to the Jews only.
  - Luther changed it to “hallow the day of rest” – as honoring preaching and the Word of God.
    - 2 changes
      - The day is changed from Saturday to Sunday
      - The command not to work – is changed to hallowing the day through worship
- **For Example – “What about adultery?”**
  - The only reference to sexual behavior (Ex. 20:14)
  - It had to do with women as *property* of their husbands, not about faithfulness of both husband and wife to each other.
  - Jesus does not repudiate this (Matt.22:23-33)
  - Husband could have sex with women other than his spouse(s): concubines, slaves, other women providing they weren't wives of other men. (**this is a property issue**).
  - N.T has a different conception – vision of **both** husband & wife is faithfulness, love and mutual care based on Christ's love of the Church (Ephesians 5:25)

## The Law of God Is Adaptable (continued)

- **What about commandments from the rest of the Torah?**
  - **Holiness code:** Leviticus 17 – 26
  - The origins are obscure: pre-dating the Exile (586 BC) but coming into it own at the time of Ezra (400 BC)
    - Returning exiles were a minority
    - Jews developed institutions & traditions - to protect ethnic & religious ID.
    - Torah & Synagogue became vitally important.
    - Strict commands against intermarriage
    - Jews were identified by their obedience to “Torah”
  - **Holiness code** – “holy” is primarily a religious term not “moral.”
    - Refers to belonging to JHWH – Israel’s God.
    - So the people would not defile the land & it will be preserved
    - “Abominations” defile the land...people must be “clean” & “pure”
    - The behaviors distinguish them from other peoples
  - Some changes even in the **Code**
    - No animal sacrifices, no death penalty for many offenses. (cf. Midrash)
    - But...Torah & obedience to it still plays a prominent role.

## What about the Messianic Movement - Church

- **The first crisis – what do we do with the Gentiles!?!**
  - The book of Acts – jumps right into this issue.
    - Cornelius (Acts 10:1 – 11:18)
- **Clean and Unclean**
  - Has to do with not only food & circumcision
    - but also sexual relationship
    - Church will obey some dietary & sexual prohibition but no more circumcision to converts to Church.
    - **Torah is being ADAPTED – and this is a major adaption**
    - Eventually all dietary prohibitions removed.
    - A DIFFERENT SET OF IDENTIFYING BEHAVIORS
      - **Not ritually clean or dirty**
      - But...*righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit*
      - *Torah is no longer binding.*

## What about the Messianic Movement - Church

- Martin Luther: **How Christians Should Regard Moses**
  - No longer binding on us because it was given only to the people of Israel.
  - Yet – “*I want to keep Moses and not sweep him under the rug.*”
  - Luther liked several things in the Torah.
    - Proportional taxation – ie. Tithing
    - Levirate marriage – obligation of brother to marry his brother’s widow.
  - Also there are the promises of God which sustain faith & the beautiful examples of faith, of life, and of the cross.
  - Compare impact on authority of Bible to authority of Declaration of Independence
    - Some things are “embarrassing” – sexism, slaveholding, racism.
- **How sexism becomes a concern**
  - Late 20<sup>th</sup> century – there are many scholars pointing out ways the bible is full of sexism.
  - The N.T. - embodies a vision which subverts sexism.
    - The church today acting on this vision opposes racism, slavery, sexism. (Gal. 3:28)

## What about the Messianic Movement - Church

- **Divorce**
  - There is a fluidity here
    - Jesus forbids – except on grounds of unchastity (Matt.19:3-9).
    - Paul says a believing spouse may accept divorce from an unbelieving spouse (1 Cor. 7:12-16)
  - Divorce is accepted in most Christian churches
  - Most Protestant churches permit divorced persons to remarry and continue to be church members in good standing.
- **Christians and Violence**
  - The N.T. opposition of Christian participation in violence is unanimous.
  - Jesus teaches against O.T. adage ...“An eye for an eye...”
  - Paul Says, “do not anyone evil for evil...live peaceable with all...don not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”
  - 1 Peter: Writing of Jesus who “did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten”
  - The vision of the Reign of God – a refusal for himself and his followers to participate in violence.
    - Remember, Jesus is identified as Messiah through the violence of the cross against him to which he doesn’t resist even though the charges were false on all accounts

## What about the Messianic Movement - Church

- **Christians and Violence** (continued)
  - Until **Constantine** (d.337) Christian teaching continued to oppose the participation of Christians in the military.
  - As Christians became a majority & occupied leadership roles – concerns about the horrors of the barbarian invaders had influence on the change
  - **Abrose of Milan** develops the **Just War Doctrine**
    - This would also help to defeat Arians (followers of a leading heretic) because the invaders tended to be Arians.
  - **Augustine of Hippo** – had a pessimistic view of human nature – so Christians could go to war to avenge injuries to others.
  - **St. Thomas Aquinas** (d.1274) – self-defense comes into the fore.
- By the high middle ages – Characteristics of the **just war** are in place as they are known today.
  - **This was not to be used to “justify” war – but how to limit its violence.**
  - **This is rarely honored at all today – few people speak up to defend even this way of dealing with violence...let alone forbid warfare completely.**

## What about the Messianic Movement - Church

- For the sake of the Bible's gospel the church must trust the gospel against the condemnations of the Bible.
- For the sake of the Bible's gospel the church must reject some of the Bible, and it must adapt some of the Bible's teaching
- **The Law as Guide for Christians**
  - **The purpose of Torah**
    - To define behaviors which would identify Israel as the people of JHWH.
  - **The Torah of the New Testament** –has a similar function
    - Mathew 5-7, Romans 12-15, Ephesians 4-6, Colossians 3:1-4:6
- **Vocation of Christians**
  - To be a witness to Jesus as Messiah & to the coming Reign of God
  - **What kind of witness serves that witness?**
    - This is what is at issue in identifying a Christian sexual ethic.
    - The question with regard to Christians with a homosexual orientation is the same as the question with regard to Christians with a heterosexual orientation.
    - What kind of sexual behaviors serve their witness to the Kingdom of God?

**NEXT WEEK:** The Doctrine of Creation in the Lutheran Confessional Writings