

Q: Law and Gospel

“Can you explain in laymen’s terms the concept of ‘Law and Gospel’?”

Answer:

- Law and Gospel are key categories for understanding Scripture. In principle, *Law* is wherever God commands us to do something and *Gospel* is wherever God promises to do something for us. The same principle can be drawn by use of the terms *imperative* and *indicative*: an imperative is something we are to do, an indicative is something God tells us he has done. For Christian living, we base the imperative on the indicative – i.e., we obey God’s law because of the gospel message of what God has done (and is doing).
- Zacharius Ursinus, who wrote the *Heidelberg Catechism*, said in his commentary on it:
“The doctrine of the church consists in two parts: the Law and the Gospel; in which we have comprehended the sum and substance of the sacred Scriptures. The law is called the Decalogue, and the gospel is the doctrine concerning Christ the mediator, and the free remission of sins, through faith....The law and gospel are the chief and general divisions of the holy Scriptures, and comprise the entire doctrine comprehended therein. ...We have in the law and gospel, the whole of the Scriptures, comprehending the doctrine revealed from heaven for our salvation”
- We also should recognize that gathered regular worship in the Old Testament seems to have de-emphasized emotional and physical outbursts. New Testament worship was centered on prayer, Bible teaching, and the sacraments (Acts 2:42). 1st Cor. 14:40 says, “all things should be done decently and in order,” in order to promote the teaching and learning of the Bible.
- While Law and Gospel are important and helpful distinctions, there are problems with the “Law/Gospel Hermeneutic,” i.e. an approach to interpret all Scripture based on this rule:
 - Not all Scripture can be neatly placed in one or the other category. For instance, the judgment of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5. This passage does not command us to do anything, so it is hard to see how it is Law. But can it therefore be called Gospel, when they are put to death for lying to the Holy Spirit? In short, Law/Gospel is too reductionistic as a hermeneutic.
 - Law/Gospel does a good job *distinguishing* between works and faith but does not do a good job of *relating* works and faith. In practice, the Law/Gospel hermeneutic is often used to promote a practical antinomianism. Exponents of this hermeneutic often say, “Law is something that we cannot do, so we have Gospel to tell us what God has done for us.” The problem is that the NT tells us that having been born again and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we are able to keep God’s law (Rom. 8:4). Take 1 John 5:3 – “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.” Law/Gospel hermeneutics is used to argue that this verse does not command us to do anything; the reason that law is not burdensome is that we do not do it. Yet the text says, “we keep his commandments.” So Law/Gospel makes the text mean the opposite of what it says.
- The Law/Gospel Hermeneutic is not employed in the Westminster Confession of Faith, which instead employs covenant theology, which both distinguishes between Law/Gospel and Works/Father and also relates them under the Covenant of Grace.