



ASK THE PASTOR

EPISODE 2 – SEPT 6, 2023

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.

Amillennialism vs. Postmillennialism

Q: What are the fundamental differences between amil and postmil eschatology? Which do you agree with and what are the proof text that convince you?”?

Answer:

- Both Amillennialism and Postmillennialism are postmillennial eschatological positions (i.e. both believe that Jesus returns *after* the millennium, in contrast with premillennialism). They differ in that Amillennialism believes that the millennium includes the entire church age, while Postmillennialism anticipates a “Golden Age” when Christians and the church will conquer world culture, after which Christ will return.
- I hold the Amillennial position for these reasons:
 - The conditions described in Rev. 20:2-3 are the result of the first coming of Christ: “He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, So that he might not deceive the nations any longer, until the thousand years were ended.” (See also Rev. 12:7-11).
 - In Titus 2:13, Paul says we are “waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,” meaning that the next great redemptive event is the Second Coming, not a Golden Age.
 - Under Postmillennialism, Christians labor to spread godly culture and to politically conquer in pursuit of the Golden Age. But Jesus’ Great Commission does not command us to politics, cultural victory, etc., but to evangelism. This fits the Amil understanding of our age.
 - 2 Thess. 2:3-9 describes Christ returning not after the church has achieved cultural conquest but with the church afflicted under the Antichrist. Jesus returns not to receive the world from his church but to save his church from the world.

Christians in the Public Square

Q: What is the Christians duty in the public square? How are we to vote for a leader in an environment that is seemingly filled with corruption and deception??

Answer:

- Christians should be Christians in the public square: we must speak the truth, obey God and not man, and bear testimony to the gospel.
 - This is contrary to the “Two Kingdoms Theology,” which holds that there is no place for Christian civil activity.
- Whereas the church is an institution strictly of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, Christians are citizens of both heaven and the world. We therefore should be engaged in civic life as we are called and have opportunity. This means that Christians will be on the PTA, will run for office, will be active in political groups, will protest abortion, and will run adoption agencies, etc.
- As for voting, Christians are not surprised by a corrupt and deceitful world and its politics. So we vote our conscience using good judgment. In America, we have had two parties, both of which can be called corrupt. One of them, however, has the destruction of a biblical worldview as their primary platform. The other generally defends a biblical worldview, although it hypocritically fails to keep its promises. Most Christians have chosen to vote for the latter party, although they are not always happy doing so.

Christians in the Public Square

Question: “In Ex. 34:6-7 and Dt. 5:9, God speaks of “visiting iniquity of the father to the third and fourth generation.” But in other passages we are assured that the children will not be punished for the iniquity of their father (Dt. 24:16; 2 Ki. 14:6).

Answer:

- God’s view of human relations includes the idea that we bear guilt for sins committed by our forefathers (see 2 Sam. 21). We find numerous examples of children suffering at least temporal judgment because of their fathers’ sins (Josh. 7:23-25; 2 Sam. 12:16-23).
 - The two passages cited speak *principally*: God does not abate in judgment wicked peoples.
- The Bible also denies that offspring are *necessarily* judged for the sins of their father. Dt. 24:16 therefore restricts parents/children from being *automatically* punished in this way. Moreover, the Bible rejects this principle as a complaint for generations who are judged for their own sin (Eze. 18:1-9).
- Repentance and pleas for mercy always are answered by God with grace and forgiveness. This is why you have members of “cursed” races in the Old Testament entering Israel (Ruth, for instance).
- Some people speak today about families having a “generational curse.” This is not helpful language. What these families have is a legacy of unbelief and sin that works evil and suffering. Members of such families can and do find salvation and blessing. Therefore, it is not God who bears the blame for generations of evil and suffering in certain families.

What became of the Hittites?

Answer:

- The Hittites were a great nation/empire from Anatolia and in the time of Abraham they had a great deal of influence in Palestine. Theologians have noted that the covenant-making ritual seen in Genesis 15 bears similarity to what has been discovered among the Hittites.
- Later in the 2d Millennium B.C., the Hittites waned, especially as the Assyrian Empire grew in strength. Tutankhamen's wife was a Hittite princess. But they were defeated by Egypt in the Battle of Kadesh in the 13th c. and then sacked by the Kaskas (a sea-faring tribe) until their civilization was simply absorbed by the Assyrians.

Dreams and Visions?

Q: In the OT, God sometimes revealed His will through dreams and visions? Does God still do this today?

Answer:

- Dreams and visions were so common in the OT that prophets were called “seers.” Much of the OT involves dreams and visions.
- With the completion of the canon, we believe that God no longer provides this kind of revelation.
- Does mean that the Lord cannot and necessarily does not communicate with individuals through dreams and/or visions. I am not prepared to say this. However, I do not see how such a mode of communication could be *authoritative*. Very often, people speak of dreams and they try to make them authoritative, but there is no basis for doing this.
- There are often reports of Jesus appearing in visions during break-through missions works. I see no reason why this would not be possible. But it is not normal and it cannot be normative. Claiming dreams and visions will always be the tactic of charlatans.
- If you believe that God has spoken to you in a dream, be careful. How do you know it was God? And make sure to compare it to God’s written Word. God is never inconsistent. The Bible is sufficient for life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3). Always “test the Spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 Jn. 4:1).

Wine in Communion?

Q: Since we as a church are careful to be biblical in worship, we do we not use wine in communion, when this is what Jesus did? Can wine be offered during communion?

Answer:

- I believe that the practice of using grape juice arises from our cultural history and concerns over alcohol in general.
- I do not believe that alcoholic wine is necessary to be biblical. Scripture speaks of “the fruit of the vine,” which is grapes. Moreover, I personally do not know the relationship between today’s wine vs. the wine of Jesus’ time.
- I imagine that many Christians have reservations about their children drinking alcohol, and also that the church wants to avoid being controversial in this manner.
- Yes, the Session is free to consider offering some wine in communion.

Mark and John the Baptist

Q: “In Mark 1:2-3, Mark cites OT passages that he says prophesy about John the Baptist. Would someone at the time be able to know this?”

Answer:

- It seems that Jesus expected that they would recognize John the Baptist as the Elijah to come (Mal. 3:1; 4:5). It seems that John himself connected some of these dots (see Jn. 1:27; 3:22-36).
- Moreover, the connection of John the Baptist to these prophecies seems to have been most “useful” after disciples had started following Jesus and he explained it. I.e., we don’t see people believing in Jesus strictly because of John – they believed Jesus during his ministry and he explained John.
- Mark’s theological perspective almost certainly comes from Peter, and Peter’s theology comes from his 40 day seminar with Jesus. It is clear from Acts that Jesus showed in great detail how the OT prophecies were fulfilled in his life.

David and the Showbread

Q: “So, in Mark 2:26, did Jesus think that David was sinning when he ate the consecrated bread?”

Answer:

- No, since Jesus was defending his disciples against sin charges by citing David’s example.
- Jesus said that David’s action was “unlawful,” which I believe refers to a breach of procedure. Ancient scholars prior to Christ often raised questions about why David was never criticized for doing this.
- The question was what gave David the right to do this. The answer is that he was God’s appointed king over Israel and also a prototype of the Messiah. David was correctly applying the law in his situation and he (uniquely in his time) had the authority to make such a decision. The parallel is Jesus’ authority over the Sabbath: “The Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath” (Mk. 2:28).

Baptized for the Remission of Sins?

Q: “When the Nicene Creed says that we believe in baptism for the remission of sins, does that mean that baptism = salvation?”

Answer:

- It is a quotation from Acts 2:38. We do not believe that it means that we are saved by being baptized, but that this means that we are baptized “with respect to” forgiveness of our sins (i.e. as a symbol thereof).
- Since this is not the way that we would put it today, why do we say it the way the Nicene Creed does? Because we are a church that is historically rooted in the one catholic faith (there I go again – not that *catholic!*). The Nicene Creed is the first ecumenical council of the ancient church – we think it is important for us to manifest our connection to it. So instead of ignoring ancient wording, we explain it.

God Incited David?

Question: “In 2 Sam. 24:1, God “incited David” to command a census because “the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel.” Did God make David sin?

Answer:

- A key to this passage is that we read in the parallel account that “Satan stood against Israel and incited David” (1 Chron. 21:1). So God intended to judge Israel and he used Satan to incite David. A fairly classic case of God employing sin sinlessly.
- David’s sin was that he was so willing to be incited.
- James 1:13: “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.”

Pagan Wives Put Away

Q: Ezra 3:10 speaks of the Israelites being guilty of intermarriage, so they pledged to put their wives (and the children) away. What became of them?

Answer:

- Ezra was not messing around with idolatry! He commanded: “Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives” (Ez. 10:11).
- How did it go with the former wives and children? I suspect badly. (The Bible has no comment).

Using Unrighteous Wealth?

Q: How do you interpret Luke 16:1-9, the Parable of the Dishonest Manager, especially Jesus' final comment: "make friends of yourself by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings?"

Answer:

- This is a difficult and interesting parable. "Unrighteous wealth" in this context simply means earthly riches. Here is what I wrote in my book on the parables:

"How is this done? According to verse 9, we are to *use money to gain friends*. It is hard to tell to whom this refers; it may point to needy persons who will go ahead of us into heaven and receive us with gratitude. It may also refer to God himself, whom we befriend with our good and generous stewardship of the resources he gave us to use.

Does this, therefore, teach that salvation is gained by works, by the wise use of money? No. Jesus simply says that those who wish to anticipate eternity in heaven, and who would be shrewd and diligent in preparation for it, will certainly use their money with an eternal end in mind, gladly and enthusiastically giving it for the spread of the gospel and the relief of the poor and suffering. We are saved by faith, not by money or good works; yet our use of money and our works demonstrates whether or not we have real faith and they secure for us "treasure in heaven" (Mt. 19:21). Some people think that a pursuit of heavenly gain is an unworthy motive for godliness in this world, but Hebrews 11:6 assures us that believers who seek to please God do so because they "believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."

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First and Second Resurrections?

Q: What are the “first” and “second” resurrections in Revelation 20?

Answer:

- The “first resurrection” is the believer’s transition from this life into heaven at death.
 - In Revelation, the “thrones” are in heaven, so these are believers in heaven. The passage clearly speaks of “the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus,” etc. “They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. . . This is the first resurrection.” This is the souls of believers in heaven.
 - Premillennialists see this as the bodily resurrection of believers, arguing that “resurrection” and “brought to life” are always used to speak of bodies (which is not true – Eph. 2:4). Their view holds that there is a thousand years between the bodily resurrection of believers and non-believers (which conflicts with Mt. 25:31-32; John 5:25-29).
 - The “thousand years” in which these souls reign is the church age.
- The “second resurrection” is in Rev. 20:5: “The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.” This is the general resurrection at the Second Coming of Christ, when all who have died will be joined to their bodies for the Final Judgment.
 - It is noteworthy that John does not use the expression “second resurrection,” which suggests a parallel.
- Do I believe that unbelievers in hell will have a physical body to suffer bodily torments? Yes, at the final resurrection, all are rejoined to their bodies and the Bible’s description of hell involves bodily torment.
 - “An hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment” (Jn. 5:28-29).