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UNDERSTANDING

AND COMMUNICATING

THE WORD OF GRACE

Hans-Dittmar Muendel

Justification by God's grace which is received by faith was central to Luther's religious experience and theology. In name at least, it is also central to Lutheranism. But having the jargon of justification by grace is not the same as communicating its reality and power to people today.

For Luther, justification by grace was a power that transformed his life. It led him out of the monastery, where he was trying to win God's approval, into a life of risking himself, his reputation, and career as he responded to the challenges of his many "vocations" — as teacher, preacher, parent and citizen. Justification by grace not only led Luther to a one-time conversion experience of being liberated from works-righteousness; it was the heart of Christian discipleship or sanctification as well. What Luther called "daily repentance" was nothing other than God's grace working dialectically to set people free to love others today.

Luther's communication of justification by grace changed the lives of many of his students, parishioners and readers. Indeed, it transformed the Church and Luther claimed that the message of justification would continually reform the Church.

When we look at many of our Lutheran parishes, or church bodies, however, we do not sense this mighty transforming power at work. Rather, our preaching and teaching of justification by faith seems to have led many people to moral smugness and spiritual sleepiness. Furthermore, congregations and church bodies seem to fear ongoing reformation or daily repentance. They seem to want to be in control of their own worth and identity, rather than have these hidden in God's gracious will. One finds communication of grace which, on the one hand, suppresses rather than frees

from guilt. On the other hand, one finds leaders trying to motivate parishioners by guilt, after grace seems to have failed to get the predetermined job done.

The practical problems with a seemingly powerless message of justification by grace stem in part from a lack of understanding the theology of justification by grace. In "Law and Gospel as Hermeneutic: Martin Luther and the Lutheran Tradition", Richard Hordern has shown the cause for some of the confusion among Lutherans.¹ Many take "Law and Gospel", which points to a central element in the communication of justification by grace, dualistically rather than dialectically. According to Hordern, when we turn Law and Gospel into a dualism, the Christian's life is divided into competing spheres, one under Law, another under Grace. The unity of God's Word is also destroyed.² Unfortunately, Richard Hordern does not unfold Luther's dialectical approach to Law and Gospel as expressions of the one Word of God. Nor does he show how this prevents the Christian life from being split up into spheres. For him justification by grace is only the beginning of Christian discipleship. After being justified, the Christian is guided by ethical imperatives.³ What is to prevent "justification" and "ethical imperatives" from becoming a new dualism? Luther, as I shall attempt to show, escapes this dualism by making justification by grace the central dynamic of the life of discipleship. God's commands are constantly framed within the context of grace.

The practical problems with justification by grace stem not only from lack of clarity in the theological dynamics that are involved. They come also from not understanding the nature of "the Word" and of Christian communication in general, as Luther views them. Many of our sermons and instructional materials focus on transmitting the *concept* of justification to the *mind* of the hearers and learners. For Luther, the function of the "preached Word" (which is shorthand for all intentional means of communication) is to allow the human "*heart*" to make "spiritual use" of the fact of grace.⁴ "The heart" or "inner person" is that central dimension of humans which always "worships" or relies on something to give the whole person meaning, worth, and direction in life. What or whom the heart trusts determines how a person will respond to the imperatives of life. What a person *knows* in his mind is often miles apart from what he *does* in daily living. If grace only comes into the mind, it will be powerless to transform people's lives and lifestyles.

In the following exposition the theological and communicational problems come into view together as I try to surface some of the key dynamics of communicating justification by grace as Luther has uncovered them.⁵ While Luther's jargon is open

1. Richard Hordern, "Law and Gospel as Hermeneutic: Martin Luther and the Lutheran Tradition", *Consensus*, IX, 1 (January 1983), 3-15.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

3. See *ibid.*, p. 15.

4. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, gen. eds. J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann, 55 vols. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1955-), vol. 37, pp. 88-89. *Luther's Works* will be abbreviated as LW.

5. The major sources I am using are Luther's *Lectures on Genesis*, *Lectures on Galatians 1535*, the major treatises on the Lord's Supper of 1526, 1527, and 1528 (*Luther's Works*, vols. 36 and 37), "Treatise on Good Works" (1520), "Kirchenpostille" (1522), and "The Large Catechism" (1529). The first two works cited provide the backbone to this exposition of Luther's thought.

to many misinterpretations and his use of shorthand phrases misleading, wrestling with Luther is not only good exercise for the theological brain, but also a liberating or transforming experience.

THE ONE WORD OF GRACE AND CREATED REALITY

In *Lectures on Genesis*, Luther states that “even if his nature had remained perfect, Adam, together with his descendants, would have lived in (Word and) faith . . .”⁶ The need for God’s Word and for faith is not created by sin. Human nature to be truly human needs “the Word”. The Word has a role in the ongoing creation of the human—and, after sin, in his re-creation.

That the creation of man and of an historical world is the context for understanding Luther’s notion of the Word must be stressed particularly to Lutherans. Lutheran Orthodoxy immediately identifies the Word of God with Scripture, so that there is only a teaching on Scripture and not a distinctive teaching of the Word.⁷ On the other hand, those who rely solely on the Lutheran confessional writings, also will find it difficult to uncover Luther’s notion of the Word. As Iwand puts it, “It is difficult to gain the concept of the Word of God *per se* from the Lutheran Confessions, because this concept of the Word of God is not in them. The Confessions immediately begin with the contrast of Law and Gospel when they speak of the Word of God.”⁸ Luther begins theologically with the doctrine of creation when he tries to understand the nature and function of the Word. The Lutheran Confessions begin with the doctrine of sin.

For Luther, the nature of the Word needed to create the human is a word of grace, i.e., of God’s well-meaning intentions toward the human. The function of this Word of grace is to make God available to the human heart as an object of trust. Thus the primary aim of the “preached word” (i.e., all intentional means of communicating God’s grace such as baptism, the life of Christ, the Lord’s Supper, teaching, preaching and counseling) is “to instill confidence in the heart.”⁹

What kind of a human, or at least “inner person”, does this Word of grace produce? The Word “snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves, so that we do not depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person, or works but depend on what is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God, which cannot be deceived.”¹⁰ Our identity and source of worth lie outside of ourselves in the Word, or in the will of him who created us. Only when we do not have to worry about proving our own worth and establishing our own identity are we free to respond to whatever challenges the movement of life puts in our way. Confidence of the heart leads to openness and responsiveness to life; anxiety about ourselves leads to being caught up in ourselves.

Without a basic trust in the power behind the universe, life with its natural and

6. LW 1:153.

7. See Hans Joachim Iwand, *Nachgelassene Werke*, vol. 5: *Luthers Theologie*, ed. J. Haar (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1974), p. 204, n. 157.

8. *Ibid.*, my trans.

9. LW 1:41.

10. LW 26:387.

moral demands on us produces anxiety: fear of taking responsibility, of making the wrong decisions, of losing ourselves. We find that we are not free to evolve our life according to some plan that ignores historical reality or what the unpredictable future might bring. We are at the mercy of realities over which we are not masters. So if we are to be free and willing to respond to these challenges, demands and realities, we must trust the "providence" that puts them in our way. As Wingren puts it, "Man has to accept life from God's hands, for it is definitely God who stands behind all that different times bring him. Man is at the mercy of this almighty God."¹¹

Before answering *how* we can know that it is definitely God who stands behind what time brings us, we should look a bit more closely at *what* God confronts us with in life. Kjell Ove Nilsson has shown us that, according to Luther, God's will and mandates confront us in various relationships, orders and circumstances of daily life.¹² The uncreated Word of God, as distinct from the preached Word, is present in all of natural and social creation. Nature and society are God's "words" to us.¹³ In our "social" relationships in particular we encounter God's command that we love our neighbour as ourselves. This command which wants to put pressure on us to act in a certain way in our relating is what Luther calls "the natural law".¹⁴ C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* calls it "the law of human nature" to indicate that it functions more like a command, which we can and often do ignore, than like an inexorable law of nature such as gravity.¹⁵ In this "law" or imperative to love, God is calling to us. If we ignore this call, because we are caught up in ourselves (*homo incurvatus in se*), then it will have to be brought home to us by "preaching".

Gustav Wingren in *Luther on Vocation* demonstrates conclusively how God's commands confront us in our multiple relationships with other people. The human is not made as an isolated entity, because "in the earthly realm man always stands in *relatione*, always bound to another."¹⁶ These relationships Luther calls our "vocations" or "callings" to indicate that here we must respond to God. Any person lives in many of these vocations at the same time. The same person is, e.g., the father of his children, the husband of his wife, an employee related to employer and fellow workers, a citizen related both to the political process and to fellow citizens. And all these multiple social roles are intended by God for the welfare of those to whom we are related by them. We are inescapably called to "love" others in familial, economic, political terms.

Who or what teaches us how to "love" people in such diverse roles and types of relationships? According to Luther in *The Treatise on Good Works*, faith in God teaches us. Luther does not mean that "faith" is a short-cut so that we do not have to gather relevant information, enter into dialogue, learn to revise our views, make deci-

11. Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), p. 217.

12. See Kjell Nilsson, *Simul: Das Miteinander von Goetlichem and Menschlichem in Luthers Theologie*, Forschungen zur Kirchen- and Dogmengeschichte, no. 13 (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963), pp. 42-50 on the concept of God's mandate in daily life as "natural law".

13. See e.g., LW 1:47 and LW 26:95-97.

14. See Nilsson, loc. cit.

15. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Collins, 1962, Fontana pbk), p. 16.

16. Wingren, p. 5.

sions and develop the appropriate skills or expertise. Rather faith accompanies the whole process by which we come to responsible decisions and actions. Faith gives us the freedom from self-concern so that we are free to genuinely be attentive to the needs of others and to the tasks at hand. Faith interprets the works we must do in our many vocations, not as a means to prove ourselves to God or anyone, but as the way of participating in God's good will toward humans. Luther puts it this way, "Thus a Christian man who lives in this (complete) confidence toward God knows all things, can do all things, ventures everything that needs to be done, and does everything gladly and willingly, not that he may gather merits and good works, but because it is a pleasure for him to please God in doing these things."¹⁷

Complete confidence in God is the source of our freedom to notice, and respond to, God's commands written into life in multiple types of relationships. We must trust that it is "good for us" to be burdened with these relationships. We must trust that it is "good for us" to risk our security on behalf of others. If we do not trust the "goodness" of the commands written into daily life, we will try to ignore them or even disobey them directly. So the crucial issue in becoming a responsive-responsible self is whether or not we believe that life and its demands were created by a well-meaning Creator.

Now that we have explored a bit of *what* faces us in life in our vocations, we can return to our first question: *How* do we know that, in Wingren's words, it is definitely God who stands behind all that time brings us? For Luther the answer is: the Word tells us. Left to our own experiences with nature and society — even if we for a moment ignore the human misuse of these — we come to very ambiguous conclusions about the nature or intentions of the power that guides the universe. It is an act of grace that God comes to us not only "clothed in creation" and in all our "callings", but also "clothed in the Word".¹⁸

Not daily reality, nor the mandate to love written into vocations, but the Word makes God there for me, for my heart to trust. As Luther says, "He is there for you when he adds his Word [to his presence in creation] and binds himself, saying, 'Here you are to find me'. Now when you have the Word, you can grasp and have him with certainty and say, 'Here I have thee, according to thy Word'."¹⁹ That God is not silent, but from the beginning of human existence, establishes the order of the "preached Word", the whole spiritual regiment that creates and preserves the trusting core of our personhood, is a work of grace. We do not have to run hither and yon to search for what is ultimate and what we can trust. God binds himself to us in his "preached Word", in which we have everything we need for relating to the power behind the universe.²⁰

Even without "the Word" God is present, creating and preserving our "outer person" or "body". However, asks Luther, what use would that be to our heart or "inner person"? The heart would not know that this life is God's creation nor that this God

17. LW 44:27.

18. See LW 1:13; cf. 1:11.

19. LW 37:68.

20. See Gustav Toernvall, *Geistliches und Weltliches Regiment bei Luther*, Forschungen zur Geschichte und Lehre des Protestantismus, no. 2 (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1947), p. 17.

means us well. However, when God's Word is added to God's presence in his creations then "the heart uses the Word and partakes spiritually of precisely that in the Word of which the body makes use and partakes outwardly and physically."²¹ The Word provides the frame of reference for how we interpret what our outer person experiences in daily reality, in the created realm. In a sense all of daily life becomes sacramental when the Word is added to God's presence in all created realities.

What does this connection between God's presence for "the body" and God's Word-presence for "the heart" say about how we communicate God's grace? It says that the word of grace is never in a vacuum. It always "frames", or provides the context for, concrete realities, which include the commands written into creation. The Word that God created the heavens and the earth, e.g., makes creation of spiritual use to a person. Life now becomes the point of encounter with the Creator.²² Similarly the Word "frames" or is "added to" such "outward things" as our vocations, so they are not only a moral challenge but a call to trust the Creator. Grace is the context for all of God's commandments, as Luther shows in *The Large Catechism*.²³ Thus when the Word presents a commandment it calls for faith and obedience at the same time. Our obedience shows our trust in God's gracious intentions. Our faith in God's grace leads us to obey the concrete command to serve.²⁴

A part of the weakness of our communication of justification by grace is that we have lost this intrinsic connection between the Word and daily reality. We must learn to preach, teach, counsel and worship in such a way that we provide a new frame of reference for the challenges of life. We must provide a new perspective, the perspective of grace, for looking at our multiple roles and tasks. We must try to instill confidence in the heart that the works that pour in on us, and all the demands on us are "good and serviceable" to us. People have not understood our communication, when they repeat some abstracted concepts about grace, but only when they begin to see their own life in a new light and begin to respond on the basis of this new way of seeing. There is only one sphere of life for the Christian: created reality. There is only one Word of God which interprets life for us in a spiritually useful way.

To sum up, for Luther there is a concept of the Word which precedes any dialectical split into Law and Gospel. This primary or root Word is both an act and a word of grace. Its purpose is to create human "hearts" which place their ultimate trust in the Creator rather than in themselves or anything created. These confident hearts are necessary, if humans are to be free to respond to the moral dimension of daily living. The moral dimension is present in our relationships or "callings" as a call to serve our neighbour. The Word instills confidence in the heart by providing the frame of reference for interpreting our experiences in life with its callings. The Word shows us that a well-meaning Creator is addressing us in the call to love others. Neither the Word of grace nor the command to love are ever abolished, not even after the fact of sin or of sin-consciousness. Grace is never permissive, but always interprets our life

21. LW 37:89.

22. LW 37:88.

23. Note Luther's exposition of the Decalogue and particularly the role of the first commandment.

24. On the relation of faith and commandments see LW 1:153-154.

and its commands. And we never can be free to love unless we are justified by God's grace, rather than by our works. Confidence of the heart, not guilt, is the source of the freedom to truly attend to the needs of others.

SIN AND THE LAW/GOSPEL DIALECTIC

God's grace is not earned by human good works, nor is it deterred by human sin. However, sin does affect how this one Word of grace must be communicated, if it is to create an inner person who trusts God and thus obeys his commands. To deal with human sin the one Word of grace must function dialectically as "Law and Gospel", to express it in one of Luther's most misunderstood shorthand phrases.

The one Word of grace cannot instill confidence in the heart directly, when the heart has put its trust in some other god or idol. When a person puts his trust in his own ideas and achievements to master life and to establish a sense of self-worth, how can the Word inspire him to have faith in the uncontrollable Creator? The Word must first do the "alien work" of killing the old inner self (that sets the self up as its idol), before it can do its "proper work" of creating an inner self which trusts God.²⁵ Thus God's one Word of grace entails two dialectically opposite processes. When Luther looks at the function of the Word which "kills" the old self with its egocentric approach to life, he calls it "the Law". When he looks at the function of the Word which "brings to life" the new self which trusts God's grace and loves the neighbour, he calls it "the Gospel".

The two functions of the one Word may never be separated or dissolved into a dualism, since God only "kills" for the sake of life. A superficial reading of Luther can lead to regarding Law and Gospel as two separate approaches to life, since Luther does not always express both sides of the dialectic at the same time. One could gain the impression that "the Law" was a separate way of salvation which God abandoned in favour of "the Gospel" as a new way, instituted because man did not manage to keep "the Law". A closer reading shows that the Law never justifies *because it was never given for justification*.²⁶ The *theological or spiritual use* of the Law was added to the promise of unmerited grace in order to "reveal sin theologically", i.e., to man's heart or spirit.²⁷ The revelation of sin seeks to destroy trust in our own ideas and works so "that grace can have access to us."²⁸ The spiritual use of the Law is always in the service of God's grace.²⁹

We now turn to consider "the Law" and "the Gospel" separately to understand

25. See LW 44:77. The same dialectic of killing for the sake of life is expressed, e.g., in LW 26:314, 324, 331, 345.

26. See LW 26:313. Cf. LW 26:137, " 'But the Law is good, righteous, and holy.' Very well! But when we are involved in a discussion of justification, there is no room for speaking about the Law."

27. See LW 26:316.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 314.

29. In light of this insight, it becomes clear that we should never take the notion that "the law always accuses" out of context.

how they function in dialectically opposite ways to enable the one Word of grace (to) re-create us.

The Spiritual Use of the Law Reveals Sin.

Luther claims, “. . . 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 . . .”³⁰ Luther does not claim that those who should hear “the Law” *feel* any hatred or contempt for God, nor that they are overtly wicked. It is because sin usually does not appear as sin to the sinner’s consciousness that “the Law” is necessary to reveal it. The most common expression of sin is that justification by grace is replaced by self-justification, which Luther calls “works-righteousness”. On the basis of our own ideas or standards of a good and decent life, we establish our own righteousness. We become morally smug and use the church’s message of grace to suppress any guilt feelings our actions may arouse in us.³¹ When we do so-called moral or even churchly works, we do them primarily to establish our own sense of worth, rather than for the neighbour. Each important activity that we do increases the presumption of righteousness in us. This presumption is a “solid wall” that blocks our heart from true self-knowledge. It also blocks us from hearing many of the calls to serve which are present in our “callings”. Thus it must be revealed to us by a power outside of us that we in fact do not place our trust in God but in ourselves. It must be revealed that we are in fact stopping up our ears to the cries for help that surround us.

The mighty hammer which God has created to break down the solid wall of presumption is the spiritual use of the Law.³² Its task is to destroy our false confidence in what we have or can accomplish by our own efforts. It exposes our basic distrust of the power behind the universe, our contempt of God. It shows us that while we may think we believe in God, our actual life is guided by hidden self-interest.

Before we look at how the Law reveals our sin to us, we must describe what this Law is that can break through the solid wall of presumption. What can break through the egocentric world-view by which we as sinners interpret all our experiences of life? Another synonym for the spiritual, theological, chief or proper use of the Law is simply “the preached Law”. The Law which is to be preached consciously and intentionally so that it becomes useful to the heart, is nothing other than the natural law. Only the very concrete demands or commands of life-in-relationships can shatter the narrow perspective of self-righteousness. The fact of human sin does not cause God to change the basic dynamics and orders of created life. He does not institute new laws to deal with sin. Rather, he institutes the office of *preaching* the natural law.³³ The Law, which is a call to love-born-of-trust, does not change. It takes on an

30. LW 26:309, italics mine.

31. The whole notion of moral smugness has been well developed in Reinhold Niebuhr’s concept of the sin of pride. See his *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1: *Human Nature* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1964), pp. 199-201.

32. See LW 26:314; cf. *ibid.*, pp. 309-310.

33. Martin Schloemann in *Natuerliches und Gepredigtes Gesetz bei Luther*, Theologische Bibliothek Toepfelmann, no. 4 (Berlin: Verlag Alfred Toepfelmann, 1961), has definitely established that

additional function after sin. It now has to confront the "inner person" with its escape from relational reality, from freedom and responsibility. Written into vocations, the natural law had the *moral* function of calling for our responses. As "preached Law", it takes on the *spiritual* function of beginning to liberate the heart from its false and deadly dependencies.³⁴

We can discern two distinct elements or stages in the way the preaching of the natural law reveals sin. We can call these stages "confinement under the Law" and "exposing rationalizations". I do not add "confession of sin", for the Law cannot bring about a confession without the promise of forgiveness.

Confinement under the Law. Our conscience as sinners is controlled by our "new god", the ideas or ideals of life that we worship often without being consciously aware of them. Thus by ourselves we do not sense that we have transgressed God's will. The preached Law has the task of changing who or what we feel accountable to. Our presumption of righteousness comes from the fact that we measure our performance by our own, or society's arbitrary standards of a moral life. The preaching of the Law breaks down the supports of this presumption, not by setting up a higher standard of performance, but by making us accountable to God's will as it confronts us in our daily tasks. Thus the preaching of the Law sets us into the sight of God, *coram Deo*, the God clothed in creation. However, the preached Law does not necessarily use the word "God", nor does it presuppose any knowledge of God. A religious background is not a prerequisite for the preached Law to work. God's will in reality is.

The effectiveness of the preached Law in breaking down our narrow view of morality comes from the *naturalness* and concreteness of its claims. The claims are written into social relations and into the human heart. It is in these concrete demands of living which call us to focus on our neighbours that we begin to experience the reality of God, or at least experience that life expects us to act in a way which we did not choose.

Our task, and the limit of our task, as communicators of the preached Law is to portray life and its imperative in as concrete and realistic terms as possible. Beyond that we cannot force our preaching to succeed in breaking down the solid wall of presumption. Luther alerts us to the fact that, in their presumptuous knowledge, many people will "not care about the Word at all but smugly despise it, as though it did not pertain to them at all".³⁵ The spiritually effective Word is "not only the sound of my voice but . . . something that is heard by you, penetrates into your heart, and is believed by you."³⁶ This "something" which allows our human words to penetrate a person's smugness and presumption is God's Holy Spirit. We must avoid trying to play the Holy Spirit by using techniques of artificially inducing guilt-feelings, as if that

the preached law communicates the natural law in such a way that the natural law can become the basis for a consciousness of sin.

34. The distinction between the "moral" and "spiritual" function of the natural law is *my* attempt at expressing the shift between the functions of the natural law for the man of faith and the man of sin. These two functions should in no way be identified with Luther's "two uses of the Law". The "two uses" are both targeted at sin, the one to curb its negative social effects externally, the other to overcome sin inwardly.

35. LW 26:376.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

were the same as preaching the natural law. Nor do we have control over what particular set of relationships — political, economic, familial, etc. — will become a spiritual force in breaking down the whole system of self-righteousness.

If the preached Law does penetrate into our hearts and thereby shatters our moral smugness, we come to a sense of being judged and condemned — by reality or by God. The reason we feel condemned lies in the fact that we still measure our worth by our performance. The loss of presumption does not mean that we are simultaneously free from the need to justify ourselves. Our narrow standards of morality have been replaced with the limitless demands of life amongst other people. We thus face the prospect of never being able to justify ourselves before the Law. The preached Law has us trapped in a spiritual prison, which Luther describes as follows: “The custody or prison [of the law] signifies the true and spiritual terrors by which the conscience is so confined that it cannot find a place in the whole world where it can be safe . . . Then a man is simply deprived of all wisdom, power, righteousness, counsel, and help.”³⁷

What the preached Law has brought about by shattering our presumption is that we now feel our own distrust of the unsafe and uncontrollable world with all its demands. This distrust is our basic sin. It is the reason we have started to put our trust in our own ideas and efforts in the first place. We now feel the deadly threat to our old self in the spiritual prison of the Law. But as long as we do not see any possibility of finding a new way of justifying our life, we can only despair or try to rationalize our failure to love.

Exposing rationalizations. While only the function of “the Gospel” can show us a new way of justifying our life, the preached Law is necessary to expose human rationalizations. Rationalizations are our futile attempts to escape the prison of the Law. Because we still cling to the method of self-justification, we do not want to take personal responsibility for our transgressions.³⁸ We try to excuse ourselves by accusing the circumstances in which we live, the orders of creation, and ultimately God. We may admit that we “made a mistake” or “did wrong”, but at the same time transfer the guilt for our actions away from ourselves: “Everyone is doing it”; “I have to do this to survive in my job”.

The function of the preached Law at this stage is to expose the rationalizations for what they are. The task is relatively simple, because we know that we are finding fictitious reasons for our failures. The preached Law tells us to our face what we are telling ourselves secretly in our heart. But every time that the preached Law expresses our own inner thoughts, we again become aware of our spiritual prison. For us to leave the prison, we would have to be able to confess our sin, i.e., take personal responsibility for our failures. But we cannot do that unless there is some hope of grace.

The Gospel Leads to Confession of Sin.

Without “the Gospel and knowledge of grace”, we cannot confess our sin and give up our self-justifying self. The new self of faith and responsibility can only be born

37. *Ibid.*, p. 338.

38. LW 1:177-179.

when the old self dies. We are new selves — the selves God intended at our creation — when we no longer put our trust in our own thoughts, works, or even in the experiences of our conscience, but rather in the Word of grace. Our worth, identity and justification are outside of ourselves in God's justifying Word.

How does the Gospel enable us to confess our sin and thereby give up all attempts at justifying ourselves? To be effective, the preaching of the Gospel must correct our erroneous feeling that life, or God, will keep on accusing us for our failure to love others. The Word of grace has to be communicated as the good news that our spiritual confinement under the Law has an end. Luther continues, "Therefore the heart that has been confined under the Law should be encouraged and comforted this way: 'Brother, you have indeed been confined. But you should know that this is not being done so that you will be held in the confinement of this prison forever, for it is written that we are confined until faith should be revealed. Therefore you are being afflicted by this prison, not to do you harm but to recreate you through the Blessed Offspring'."³⁹ In this example the Gospel is used as pastoral advice to someone who feels confined by the spiritual prison. We notice that the Gospel does not deal with our anxiety about taking personal responsibility for our failures by suspending the demands of the natural law. It liberates us from our *spiritual* confinement under the Law by revealing a new source of worth and identity: faith in Christ's actions on our behalf. When Luther speaks of Christ abolishing the Law he is again using shorthand. What Christ actually abolishes is "all the claims of the Law *upon the conscience*."⁴⁰ Only when Christ rules our conscience can we be free to fulfill the natural law.

In order to accept Christ's work as our new source of worth, we must confess our sin. It is in the act of confession that we let go of the whole self-justifying approach to life. Because the Gospel promises us forgiveness and a new source of worth independent of our performance in life, we gain the courage to finally let go of the presumptuous opinion of the heart, "which refuses to be sinful, impure, miserable, and damned but wants to be righteous and holy."⁴¹ We now take personal ownership of our sin, rather than rationalizing it away. We become irrevocably a sinner, even in our own eyes. But not as some morbid state of life ridden by continual guilt and remorse. Rather confession of sin is an act of hope which dares to trust God's promise of grace. And trust in God's grace always expresses itself in the way we respond to God's commands which we encounter in daily living.

The Law/Gospel dialectic is thus God's remedy for sin. It leads to a radical discontinuity in our way of finding meaning and worth in life. A dualistic misunderstanding of Law and Gospel cannot accomplish this. Either a permissive gospel which suspends the Law leads to deepening our moral smugness. Or a moralistic Law leads to attempts at gradual moral improvement of the self. In both cases, one does not break with the whole system of self-justification. Where a misused Law and Gospel lead us to try to improve ourselves by our own efforts, "the heart not only does not

39. LW 26:339.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 349, italics mine.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 314.

take hold of the doctrine of grace, which gives a sure promise and offer of the forgiveness of sins for the sake of Christ, but it actually looks for more laws to help out."⁴²

Law/Gospel and Discipleship.

The use of Law/Gospel in bringing about a conversion from self-justification to justification by grace is not a one time event. The Word of grace in its dialectical function must accompany our life-long process of learning to live by grace. The Gospel does not abolish the spiritual use of the Law once for all time, according to Luther. Rather the function of the Gospel to abolish the sin-revealing function of the Law "happens personally and spiritually every day in any Christian, in whom there are found the time of Law and the time of grace in constant alternation."⁴³

Why does Luther describe Christian becoming, discipleship or sanctification as "daily repentance" which requires the time of Law and Gospel to be in constant alternation? It has to do with the nature of faith and sin. As indicated, faith becomes real as we respond to God's commands in daily life free from worrying about ourselves. Faith becomes actual in obedience, in the vocational works of love. On the other hand, our ability to obey these commands depends on faith as the source of freedom to serve. As a result, each new challenge in life asks us whether we will respond out of justification by grace or out of the perspective of self-justification. Grace is available to us, once for all times. However, the question is whether we will use it as our frame of reference in the particular tasks and problems at hand. We are constantly tempted to use the familiar perspective of establishing our worth by our own ideas, plans and works. We are constantly tempted to secure our life rather than to risk ourselves for others. In short, we are constantly tempted to use the view of sin, rather than that of faith in interpreting and responding to life-situations.

As a result of our living between sin and faith, self-justification and justification by grace, we need to use God's Word of grace as Law and Gospel to keep on setting us free to respond in faith and love. Justification by grace does not change one magically into a different kind of person. It makes us "new selves" by setting into motion a life-long process of transformations.

SOME PRACTICAL DIRECTIONS:

To conclude I will sketch some of the communicational issues we have to explore, if our communication of justification is to reflect the intrinsic connections on the one hand between the Word of grace and natural law and on the other hand between the nature of sin and the Law/Gospel dialectic.

- 1) The whole purpose of the Church, of the "spiritual regiment", in all its functions is to allow God's grace to have access to people. Grace is the one thing that no other institution of society can provide. Grace is the one thing needed for us to be able to be responsive to all the challenges of life in vocations.
- 2) The means for communicating justification by grace cannot be limited to public

42. *Ibid.*, p. 315.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 340.

preaching and teaching. Grace is communicated to the individual by Baptism and the Lord's Supper. It is communicated by the life of Christian community at home and at church. It is communicated in counseling and dialogue among fellow Christians. If grace does not get communicated by the whole "spiritual regiment", then preaching and teaching will be greatly weakened in their effectiveness.

3) Preaching the Word of grace to be "of use to the human spirit" cannot be primarily conceptual or dogmatic preaching.⁴⁴ In modern jargon, it must be "metaphorical". It must portray daily reality with its intrinsic natural law in the context of grace. Luther's *Large Catechism* is a good example how life and its commandments can be presented positively as a call to faith and obedience (as well as in such a way that it reveals to us our sin). The reality factor in the preaching will be the power both to instill confidence and to break down our narrow perspectives on life.

4) Public preaching cannot normally accomplish the reversal from the view of sin to the view of faith by itself. The Law/Gospel dialectic needs the sensitivity of a fellow Christian who can personally tell us that "the time of Law has to come to an end", when our conscience is confined under the Law. Law/Gospel needs dialogue between two people, not only for personal consolation with the promise of grace, but also for exposing rationalizations and for confession of sin. We must explore ways of reintroducing the practice of a private confession of sin.⁴⁵

5) We must learn and teach how we can use the Law/Gospel dialectic to help us in "daily repentance". Luther's *Quiet Time* (Intervarsity Press) and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's suggestions to his seminarians in *Life Together* give us some clues how Scripture meditation and prayer can be used as a means of grace which keeps on liberating us from self-justification.

44. See Eduard Riegert, "Preaching: Where We've Been," *Consensus* VIII, 1 (January 1982), 3-11 and "Preaching: Where We're Going," *Consensus* VIII, 2 (April 1982), 11-18.

45. From his practice as a Christian psychotherapist, Paul Tournier alerts us to the importance of personal confession of sin on the way to becoming true persons who live by grace. See his *The Meaning of Persons*, trans. Edwin Hudson (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1968), pp. 154-158.