

74, Law and Gospel

By Alvin Petty, retired area minister

The Protestant Reformation, started by Martin Luther in 1517, made an important dichotomy between law and gospel. Luther's genius shines in his simplified one, two punch theology exempified in his dichotomies of law and gospel, faith and works, justification and sanctification, etc. These made his understanding of basic Christian doctrines easy to understand and recapitulate because of their catchy expression. Over time some have oversimplified these dichotomies to an overemphasizing of the gospel, faith and justification side so as to effectively weaken the law, works and sanctification portions of each.

The law and gospel dichotomy was very necessary in Luther's historical context to break the stultifying doctrinal expression and power of the Roman Catholic Church. But in the long run I think the most powerful expression of law and gospel is to view them as complementary marriage partners, held together by the grace of God so that you cannot have one without the other. Law that

informs, instructs and guides us in the path of God's light is a gift of grace as is the gospel. It has far more function than to just condemn sin. But in evangelical expressions of the Reformation legacy, law often seems relegated to just its condemnatory function. But being convicted of our need to have a deeper righteousness is a friendly act of grace and not an adversarial enemy to flee. We should embrace law as a friend to our soul and then we shall say with the Psalmist, "I delight in thy law, oh God, for it is a lamp to my path and a light to my soul."

It is not the end of the world to be convicted of our wrongness for our shadow self as well as our highest self must all be brought into the light of God that our whole being may be saved. The law can teach us to not run from our sin, our shadow self, but to address it honestly so that we may be a person in unity before God and not in denial. We as well as Peter Pan can not live without caring properly for our shadow.

Luther began to build his law-gospel dichotomy when he was lecturing on Paul's epistle to the Galatians. In Galatians Paul attacked those Jewish Christians who tried to make the Gentile converts to keep the whole Mosaic law of circumcision and all which was saying that the Gentiles could only be saved by becoming practicing Jews like them.

Paul was right to attack them for they were wrong on how they used both the law and the gospel. They misused the law by using it to make the Gentile Christians become Jews instead of using it to instruct the new converts in the morality of God's way. Thus they gave too much power to the law while denying the power of the Gospel of Christ to be sufficient for salvation. All groups today who think you have to become just like them to be a true Christian are as much in error as these Jews were.

Luther and other reformers used the law primarily as the means of revealing God's wrath against sin. Then secondarily they made strong use of it for moral guidance after conversion to Christ. Over time this secondary good use of the law became neglected in the American Church. Evangelicals often think, "I've got Jesus! That is all I need!" They have forgotten that Jesus said, "If you love me, keep my commandments." Should we conclude that they just got Jesus but don't love him?

When Luther nailed his 95 thesis on the Wittenberg Church door October 31, 1517, he protested raising money by selling indulgences which allowed people to get away with sinning and he denied the Pope's claim to forgive sins. His very first thesis placed the authority of the Bible against the sacramental tradition of the Catholic Church.

Luther claimed the Church sacraments were not a source of forgiveness, for the Lord Jesus wanted the entire life of believers to be one of repentance. Metanoia, the Greek word for repentance, meant the turning around of one's whole being and not "doing penance" as the error prone Catholic Latin Vulgate translation had it. Repentance did not mean going to confession. No tradition of the Church could be called right unless it had the support of the Bible.

Later at a debate in Leipzig Luther made clear his contro-

versial new doctrine of Sola Scriptura, scripture alone. His debate opponent, Johann Eck, a professor wondered how Luther could understand the Bible without benefit of the Popes, councils and universities. Luther answered, "A simple layman armed with scripture is to be believed above a pope or council without it." Truly the first Protestant had been hatched.

75, Luther, Zwingli and Calvin By Alvin Petty, retired area minister

There were other great reformers besides Luther such as Zwingli and Calvin. They agreed with Luther on the principle of sola scriptura which raised the Bible's authority above that of popes and councils. This was an unprecedented claim. For centuries, both Jews and Christians had relied upon the sacred importance of inherited tradition."

Some say today, "We need to get back to the Bible as the early church did." But the early church had no Bible but the Old Testament and some portions of the New Testament which circulated. Nobody had a whole Bible. Luther was a professor in the University before he ever saw a whole Bible.

The church did not even begin to have an agreed upon canon of the New Testament until 367 CE. Even after that the church relied heavily upon the creeds, liturgies and pronouncements of the church councils as well as the scriptures. Church traditions had equal weight with the scriptures until Luther. "Scripture alone" was a brand new product of the Reformation and not a return to an idealized Church.

Luther did not reject tradition; he kept much of the Catholic tradition. He was happy to use creeds and liturgy so long as they did not contradict scriptures. And he was well aware that the gospel was based upon several decades of early

oral preaching and story telling.

All three of the above reformers anchored in "scripture alone" but all three also believed that the gospel must not be confined to the written text but it must be brought to life by the proclamation of the human voice in preaching, teaching and singing.

Though they emphasized the spoken word, Luther's greatest achievement was his magnificent translation of the Bible into German. He translated the whole Bible by 1534. And by the time he died, one German in 70 had a copy of Luther's Bible. It came to symbolize German integrity.

Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, political leaders began to declare independence of the papacy and form absolute monarchies. This modernizing into centralized states created the desire for each state to have the Bible in its vernacular. The translation of the Bible into English culminated in the King James Version in 1611. Owning a Bible in your own language became a symbol of your rising national will.

Zwingli and Calvin differed from Luther in several respects. While Luther emphasized theology, and Germany following Luther has produced many of our greatest Protestant theologians, Zwingli and Calvin were more interested in the social and political transformation of the Christian life. For example, Calvin's movement and writings greatly influenced the formation of constitutional governments in the Europe and America in the centuries after him. Calvin was essentially a lawyer theologian.

Zwingli and Calvin owed much to the humanists who believed people could be educated into improvement and redemption. Both did not approve of Luther's canon within a canon that exalted some books over others in the Bible. They wanted their congregations to be ac-

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Neoma Williams
Publisher-Editor

Phone: 806/938-2429

Fax: 806/938-2216

Cell: 647-7419

email:

hbeat@amaonline.com

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Weather

Neoma Williams
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	Hi	Lo	Pr
Thursday	87	38	
Friday	84	40	
Saturday	80	43	
Sunday	87	41	
Monday	78	27	
Tuesday	44	23	
Wednesday	65	23	

March moisture.....0.35

2014 moisture.....0.43