

No Law, No Gospel: Some Thoughts on the ELCA's Decision¹

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Hi my name is Shawn and I'm a sinner in complete need of a Savior. How do I know this? Well, two reasons. First, I have this nagging existential guilt that presents itself in the oddest of ways. Unless alleviated it robs me of any sense of wellbeing and really twists my insides into a knot. As Freud says, guilt is the, "most important problem in the evolution of culture" (Fitzsimmons 11). This guilt is a universal problem that we need release from.

The second reason I know I'm a sinner is from the Law of God. When I place myself before the standard of a Perfect Almighty Creator I'm left speechless by how much I've fallen short. When I come face to face with the law of God I discover that according to God's standard I'm a murderer whose committed adultery in his heart, and worshiped other gods on many occasions. Again if this is not alleviated I'm dead.

This is where I'm at without Jesus Christ. I am branded a sinner by my conscience, the never ending implied laws of the world and the unbendable Law of God. I have no way out. As the Apostle Paul says, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" Thankfully this is where Jesus Christ comes into the picture. This is the Gospel. After crying out for deliverance Paul declares,

Romans 7:25²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Romans 8:1-3 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.² For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh.

What I've just described above is the theology of "Law and Gospel." It's what Luther described as, "The highest art in Christendom, one that every person who values the name Christian ought to recognize, know and possess." In short, it is this: *the Law is nothing else than God's unbending word and command that demands complete fulfillment from the bottom of the heart. The Law labels me as a condemned sinner in need of a Savior. On the other hand the Gospel bids us merely to accept the offer of grace, forgiveness of sins, the Holy Spirit, and eternal life that was provided for us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.* Together Law and Gospel are two words and two ministries that God uses to bring us back to himself. Law flattens and kills me and the Gospel revives me or as the Apostle Paul states:

Galatians 2:19-20¹⁹ For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ.²⁰ It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Because of their unique relationship the Gospel is not "good news" without the law. In other words, **no law=no Gospel**. Lutheran theologian John Pless states it this way, "Only where the Law has crushed sinners does the Gospel do its gracious work of healing the broken-hearted" (44).

¹ Works Cited. Werner Elert: Law and Gospel. Allison FitzSimons: Guilt, Anger, & God. Martin Luther: The Distinction Between Law and Gospel (A Sermon), The Heidelberg Disputation, the Preface to Romans & Smalcald Articles. John Pless: Handling the Word of Truth

So what's this have to do with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's (ELCA) decision August? In case you're unaware, in August the ELCA made the decision to support both monogamous same sex relationships and allow those who are in such relationships to serve as ordained leaders in the church. Here's the resolution in their own words:

Resolution 1: "RESOLVED, that the ELCA commit itself to finding ways to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable life-long, monogamous, same-gender relationships"

Resolution 2: "RESOLVED, that the ELCA commit itself to finding a way for people in such publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church."

One of my issues with these proposals, besides the obvious disregard for the authority of Scripture, is the fact that ***in doing this the ELCA may be robbing those who are in same-gendered relationships the opportunity to know the grace, forgiveness, and comfort of the Gospel.***

Let me explain. The Law of God declares homosexuality to be a sin (Leviticus 18:22, 1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:8-11, & others). So just as the law declares me to be an adulterer because of my lusts, a murderer because of my anger, and an idolater because of the way I stray; the law would convict one who is homosexual of his/her sin. The sin of homosexuality is no better or no worse than my countless sinful acts, but like all sin it misses the mark and is a bondage that we need release from².

So in essence, because the ELCA lessens the sting of the law for those who practice same-gender relationships, they are in affect pushing them away from the saving Gospel of Christ. The "grace" they are wishing to offer in these resolutions is in fact opposite of grace because it pushes one away from the only true Grace that the world has ever known. Lutheran theologian Pless says it this way:

Without the prior work of the Law, the Gospel itself is perverted as it is reduced to nice words about God with sentimental appeal but *completely void of forgiveness of sins.* (Italics Mine 43)

Or as Luther himself says, "Who could know what and why Christ suffered for us without knowing what sin or the law is?"

The ironic thing in all of this is that in passing this resolution the presiding Bishop of the ELCA believes they are building, "on the key Lutheran principles of Justification by Grace..." But, ***in taking away the law, the ELCA nullifies Justification by Grace and turns it into a hallmark card rather than salvation. They are robbing those in same-gendered relationships from ever truly experiencing the grace of Christ.*** As Luther states:

They cannot be humble who do not recognize they are damnable whose sin smells to high heaven. Sin is recognized only through the law... Such preaching concerning sin is preparation for grace, or it is rather the recognition of sin and faith in such preaching. *Yearning for grace wells up when recognition of sin has risen.* (Italics Mine)

In short, ***No Law, No Gospel...***

² Subsequently choice is not the issue here. We are all in bondage to sin. Just how one does not "choose" to be homosexual, I did not "choose" to struggle with lust, anger, or idolatry. It's a bondage I need release from. It's the law that make us conscious of our bondage to sin. It's the cross that frees us.