

## **The Law and the Gospel in the Liturgy**

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### **The Two-Fold Word**

"The Word of God is living and active" (Heb 4:12), the "Spirit-ed," exhalation out of the mouth of God, who breaths out his life-giving breath into lifeless clay and makes man a living being. Through the Word all things were created, and by the same Word all creation is sustained and preserved.

This living and active Word is a two-fold Word of the Law and the Gospel. The Word of the Law judges and kills the sinner. It silences every mouth before God. It strips the self-righteous, self-excusing sinner of every credential and covering. Under the Law, Adam and Eve were stripped of their self-stitched fig leaves. They stood naked and ashamed in their sin before a holy God.

The Law declares every work of sinful humanity as utterly sinful, no matter how holy that work may outwardly appear. "Through the law comes knowledge of sin" (Rom 3:20). The Law does not make a sinner. It seeks the sinner, and it inerrantly and infallibly finds, judges, and kills the sinner it seeks. "The wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23a). All die for all are sinful. The Law mortifies; it kills.

The Gospel makes alive; it vivifies. "The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23b). The Gospel resurrects life from death. It breathes the breath of Jesus' resurrection into the breathless death of our sinfulness. This life-creating good news, is found only in Jesus Christ crucified, risen, and reigning. And in Jesus Christ there is only Gospel: "The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (Jn 1:17).

The Gospel justifies. It acquits the guilty, declaring the convicted sinner righteous with the external, objective righteousness of Jesus Christ (Rom 3:21-26). Sinful man, exposed by the Law, is now clothed by the Gospel with blood-bought clothing, his sin blessedly exchanged for Christ's righteousness (2 Cor 5:21). The Gospel does not seek the saint. It creates the saint it seeks. And it does so in the humble, hidden, rejectable way of the manger crib and Calvary's cross, through the spoken word and baptismal water, through the bread and the cup.

The Gospel does not look for saving faith. It creates and sustains saving faith. And faith born of the Gospel feeds on the Gospel which gave it birth. As a newborn baby nestles at the breast of its mother, so faith, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the holy mother church in the water of baptism, feeds on the pure spiritual milk of God's Word that is proclaimed through the church in the liturgy.

### **The Word in Action**

The liturgy is the Word in action. It is the present and ongoing work of the Word Incarnate, Jesus Christ, the crucified, risen, and reigning God-man, who lords his saving death and resurrection over the world. As Jesus once stood among his fearful locked-up disciples on the first day of the Resurrection to proclaim his peace and present his wounds (Jn 20:20), so in the Liturgy, the same Jesus is now present with his church, an equally frightened and locked-up band of disciples, to proclaim his peace and show forth his wounds in his Word and in the Supper of his body and blood.

Because the liturgy is the Word in action, the liturgy is properly called "Divine Service." The liturgy is God's leiturgia, his public service to his fallen creation through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. Here the Father creates true worshipers who worship him in spirit and in truth (Jn 4:23-24). God's liturgy for the life of the world are the deeds and words of Jesus. Jesus' words are Spirit and life, for Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life (Jn 6:63b; 14:6). His words are cleansing words (Jn 15:3). With Jesus' words come the fruits of his once-for-all-atoning sacrifice on the cross. Calvary's gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation are offered, delivered, and applied personally to the sinner.

### **Death and Resurrection**

The twofold Word of the Law and the Gospel creates a duality in the life of every baptized believer in Christ. The Christian is at once a total sinner under the Law and total saint under the Gospel. This duality means that the Christian must continually be brought into the presence of the Law and the Gospel throughout his life. His old nature in Adam must continually be crucified and buried by baptism into the death of Jesus. His new nature in Christ must continually be raised in Jesus' resurrection. The believer in Christ must daily be reckoned dead to sin and alive to God in Christ. The baptismal life of the Christian is one of continual repentance, of being turned continually from death to life, away from the self and toward Christ.

God's work in the liturgy is nothing else than the ongoing two-fold work of holy baptism: to kill and to make alive. This two-fold work stands in sharp contrast to any one-track view of justification as a gradual movement or progression from sinner to sainthood. In this life, the Christian remains a total sinner-total saint. It also opposes any semi-Pelagian notion of worship, that by our worship we merit God's grace and favor. In the liturgy, the Christian stands before God as an empty-handed beggar calling out, "Kyrie, eleison. Lord, have mercy." And in his dying and rising in the death and resurrection of Jesus, he departs to his home justified, filled to overflowing with the gifts of Christ.

This understanding of the Word in action as the Law and the Gospel profoundly shapes our understanding of the church at worship. The church is not a gymnasium in which the righteous bulk up their spiritual biceps and then gawk admiringly into the mirror of the Law to see how well they are progressing. Nor is the church's worship an aerobics session for the pneumatically fit to recharge their batteries for another week of victorious living. The church is a sanatorium for the sick unto death with sin, in which the medicine of God's Word is applied in the liturgy--the Law, which diagnosis and kills the deep,

inherited disease of Adam; and the Gospel, which brings new life in Jesus Christ by the healing balm of his blood.<sup>1</sup>

### **Sacrament and Sacrifice**

The two-fold Word of Law and Gospel imparts a characteristic duality to the liturgy, often expressed in terms of "sacrament" and "sacrifice." For the purposes of this article, the term "sacrament" will be defined as an external rite or ceremony instituted by God in which he has promised to be graciously present to forgive sin through the death and resurrection of Jesus. A sacrament delivers what Jesus won by dying. A "sacrifice" is faith's grateful response toward God in prayer, praise, thanksgiving, and loving service of the neighbor.<sup>2</sup>

The sacrifices of sinful man can never atone for sin. To imagine that they can is paganism. Only the once-and-for-all sacrifice of the sinless flesh of Christ hanging dead on the cross atones for the sin of the world and every sinner in the world. A Christian's sacrifices are "eucharistic" in character, that is, they "give thanks." They are thank offerings rendered to the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit. Christians offer their bodies as "living sacrifices" holy and acceptable to God through the sacrifice of Jesus (Rom 12:1). They offer spiritual sacrifices as priests to God through the royal priesthood of Jesus Christ (1 Pt 2:5). Only through Christ are such sacrifices pleasing to God, for he alone is both high priest and sacrifice--"a high priest forever in the order of Melchizedek," who stands in our place before the throne of the Father, and the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Heb 5:7-10; 6:19-20; 7:26-27; Jn 1:29).

The Liturgy runs in both a "sacramental" and a "sacrificial" direction. God justifies man sacramentally, and justified man serves God sacrificially. God speaks his Word and as his Word has its mortifying and vivifying way with us, we speak to God and to one another. God opens our lips, and our mouths declare his praise (Ps 51:15).

Jesus Christ always remains the center and focus in the liturgy, whether we are speaking sacramentally or sacrificially. Through Jesus Christ, the Father bestows forgiveness, life, and salvation by the Holy Spirit who works through the Word. And through the same Jesus Christ, the church renders her thanks and praise sacrificially to the Father in the Holy Spirit. In both directions, Jesus Christ is the mediator between God and man (1 Tim 2:5).

Where sacrament and sacrifice are confused, there will be a corresponding confusion of the Law and the Gospel. Worship that is focused on our prayer, praise, good works, love, caring, outreach, mission, stewardship, and sanctification instead of on Christ's saving death and resurrection, is focused on the Law and not the Gospel. Sacrifice without sacrament is Law without Gospel. To worship God according to the Law is idolatry, even if the God whom we are worshiping is the one, true God.

This distinction of sacrament and sacrifice provides a Christocentric litmus test for worship. If what is said, sung, or preached in the liturgy could be said, sung, or preached had Jesus Christ never died on the cross and rose from the dead for the

salvation of the world, then that worship is not uniquely Christian. The sacrificial death of Jesus for the life of the world is the essential, core of the Liturgy. "For as often as you eat of this bread and drink of this cup you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26).

### **Ministry and Priesthood**

With the distinction of sacrament and sacrifice also comes the distinction of the Holy Ministry and the Royal Priesthood. Every baptized believer in Jesus Christ is a priest to God anointed by the Holy Spirit in holy baptism (1 Pt 2:9), but not all baptized believers are ministers. Jesus chose his apostles from among his disciples, but not all disciples were apostles (Lk 6:13). Priests are born of the water and Holy Spirit in holy baptism; ministers are made by call and ordination. The distinction of ministry and priesthood is a horizontal distinction before men, not a vertical distinction before God.

A Christian's priesthood is his or her eternal dignity before God in Christ. It is the receiving the gifts of Christ's sacrifice and in the sacrificial giving of the self in the service of God and neighbor. In the world, this priesthood is exercised according to one's calling and place in life as husband and wife, father and mother, parent and child, employer and employee, governor and citizen. In the liturgy, it is exercised by hearing the Word preached and receiving the Sacrament, and by offering its spiritual thank offerings to God in prayer, praise, offering, and thanksgiving.

The Holy Ministry is distinct from the priesthood which every Christian has by virtue of his or her baptism. The holy ministry is an office, a service of the Word that ends with the visible appearing of the Lord Jesus on the Last Day. This office was mandated and instituted by Christ in the sending of his apostles for the dispensing of his gifts of salvation so that saving faith in him might be created and sustained (Lk 24:46-47; Mt 28:19-20; Jn 20:21-23). The Holy Ministry is a stewardship of the mysteries of God, charged with the task of giving out to the priestly servants of God their proper food at the proper time (1 Cor 4:1-2; Lk 12:42). It is not an elevated status or dignity before God, but a service of the Word within the church wherein a man speaks and acts "in the stead and by the command" of the crucified, risen, and reigning Lord Jesus Christ with his authority to forgive sins. The pastor, by virtue of his office, represents Christ the bridegroom, before his bride, the church, and speaks as his authorized ambassador. "He who hears you, hears me" (Lk 10:16).

The Holy Ministry is the extension of the apostolic office into the present (Eph 4:11). This is confessed in the liturgy by the placement of the sermon after the readings from Holy Scripture. First, we hear the Old Testament prophet, preaching Christ from the Torah within the typology of Old Testament Israel. Then we hear the apostle in the Epistle reading. Then we hear the evangelist in the Gospel proclaiming the words and deeds of Jesus. Finally, within this continuum of prophet-apostle-evangelist, we hear the local representative of Christ who stands in the church's midst as her shepherd-teacher. His sermon is not an isolated event. It is grounded in the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures and is tied to baptism, which it presupposes, and the Lord's Supper, which it anticipates. The preacher is bound by ordination and by the liturgy to preach the two-

fold Word of Law and Gospel as it has been revealed through the prophets, apostles, and evangelists, centered in Christ crucified, for the justification of the sinner. He is under the same charge as were the apostles sent directly by Jesus: To preach repentance and the forgiveness of sins in his name from the Scriptures (Lk 24:45-47).

This distinction of office and priesthood guards the external and objective character of the Gospel. The church does not give herself gifts, nor does she preach to herself, but she receives the gifts of salvation through those whom Christ has sent to preach good news. Gifts come from outside of ourselves. It is not Jesus in our hearts who saves, but Jesus on the cross and in the preached, enscripturated, sacramental Word. Faith comes by hearing the preaching of Christ (Rom 10:14-17).

This does not mean that every Christian does not also proclaim the Word as a priest to God. The Word of God is not bound exclusively to the holy ministry, but has free course and is preached in the world wherever God has located his Christians. In the liturgy, the priestly hearers of the Word become themselves proclaimers of the Word to each other. Through psalms, hymns, and creeds they declare the praises of him who called them out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Pt 2:9). In the eating of the bread, which is the body of Christ, and the drinking of the cup, which is his blood, they show forth the Lord's death until he comes (1 Cor 11:26). In the Benediction, they are sent forth from the liturgy into the world blessed in the name of God (Num 6:22), to proclaim the words and deeds of Jesus in their lives for the life of their neighbor.

### **Well-Schemed and Ordered**

Implicit in the distinction of Law and Gospel is order in the liturgy. The creative Word is an ordered word that brings order out of chaos. Christian worship is "well-schemed" (euschemonos) and "according to order" (kata taxin) (1 Cor 14:40). It is well-schemed in that it is not chaotic or random, but everything proceeds one thing after the other in a harmonious way. It is according to order in that everyone is ordered into his or her place. There are those who preach and those who hear, shepherd and sheep, ministry and church, and ministry and priesthood.

Because the Word of God is an incarnate, creaturely Word, it takes concrete form and shape in the liturgy. Since the Word of God is living and active, the form and shape the Word takes never remain completely static.

The form of the western Mass did not arise spontaneously, nor does it exist today as a fossilized relic of the past. The early church adapted the liturgy of the synagogue and the liturgy of the table for her services of the Word and Holy Sacrament, respectively. The two part service of Word and Meal is discernible already in the apostolic church (Lk 24:13-35; Acts 2:42). Over the centuries, a framework of fixed texts and canticles developed to adorn the service of the Word and the service of Holy Communion: Kyrie, Gloria in Excelsis, Creed, Sanctus, Agnus Dei. The liturgy continues to develop around this framework today.<sup>3</sup>

It is noteworthy that this framework of the liturgy is almost entirely Gospel in its content.

The Kyrie is a bold prayer of the justified for the church, the world, and those who are gathered in worship: "Lord, have mercy."

The Gloria in Excelsis is the song of the heavenly host extolling the Word made flesh, once cradled in lowly Bethlehem, now mangled in humble Word and Sacrament: "Glory be to God on high, and on earth, peace, goodwill toward men."

The Creed expounds the triune name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit into which we are baptized and his creating, redeeming, and sanctifying work for us and for our salvation.

The Sanctus reminds us that we have been brought into the presence of the thrice-holy God with the angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth. Heaven and earth are full of your glory." This same God who once came humbly riding into Jerusalem atop a borrowed ass to die, now comes to us hidden beneath the lowliness of bread and wine. "Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest."

The Agnus Dei extols God's Lamb on the cross and in the supper: "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on us." Calvary's Passover Lamb is now our life-giving food. The Lamb's body and his blood preserve us from the second death. "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (Jn 6:54).

Through its fixed texts and canticles, the liturgy has served to preserve the Gospel, even at those times when the Gospel was not preached clearly in the sermon, or when the Law and the Gospel were frightfully confused by the church's teachers. The conservative Reformation recognized the Gospel content in the liturgical tradition and reformed the existing liturgy by removing or revising only what got in the way of Christ crucified for the justification of the sinner. Luther proceeded cautiously and theologically with his liturgical reforms. Neither his 1523 Latin Mass nor his 1526 German mass represented radical departures from the western catholic tradition.

Liturgical reform is a matter of the proper distinction of the Law and the Gospel. The conservative Reformation did not attempt to recapture the worship forms of a previous "golden age," nor did it create new worship forms from scratch. Both approaches would have been confusions of the Law and the Gospel, implying that the Word of God in action is somehow dependent upon form for its efficacy or that the Word was not present before the Reformation came along. Instead, what was received by the Reformers was handed on in a purified way so that Christ crucified and risen for the sinner was central and unobscured in all things. At stake in the Reformation was not the form of worship per se, but the justification of the sinner.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Gospel Presence of God**

To enter the liturgy is to enter into the saving presence of God. It is holy ground. The Law is preached all around us through the cursed created order. In the earthquake, the

flood, the fire, the storm, and the tempest. In the frustrations and failings of the workplace, in the sweat and weeds of the field, and in the brokenness and disorder of the family. The Law is preached in the bathroom mirror that reflects the signs of our aging, and in the diseases and deaths that scar our lives. Even those who do not go to church or read the Scriptures intuitively feel the Law's pressures (Rom 2:14-15).

The liturgy is a Gospel place, a sanctuary, a place of refuge from the Law's terrifying sentence. God has provided a death in the death of Jesus in which a sinner may die and live forever. To be sure, the Law must be preached and heard. Obstacles to Jesus must be removed. Like Dagon before the Ark (1 Sam 5:1-5), our false gods must be toppled from their thrones before Jesus. But the Law serves the Gospel in the liturgy by clearing the way for Christ, who is present to bless and to forgive at pulpit, altar, and font.

In a remarkable passage on worship in the book of Hebrews, we are reminded that the church in the liturgy has come to Mt. Zion not to Mt. Sinai, to the Gospel not the Law. Gathered in the Name, we are in the most concentrated Gospel presence of God on earth. The kingdom of God is in our midst. We have come to Jesus and his Blood.

"For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers entreat that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given, 'If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.' Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, 'I tremble with fear.' But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel" (Heb 12:18-24).

### **Notes**

1. Ken Schurb, "The Church: Hospital or Gymnasium?" *Logia* 1, no. 1 (Reformation/October 1992), 17-22.
2. For a thorough discussion of sacrament and sacrifice in worship, see Peter Brunner, *Worship in the Name of Jesus*, trans. M. H. Bertram (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 126-213.
3. For an overview of the historical development of the western Mass, see A. G. Martimort, ed., *The Church at Prayer* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1982), vol. 2, *The Eucharist*, by Robert Cabié, 5-107.
4. Bryan Spinks, *Luther's Liturgical Criteria and his Reform of The Canon of the Mass* (Bramcote Notts: Grove Books, 1982), 18-37.

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