

The Third Use of the Law in Post-Modern Christian Living By Sara-Jean Dostal

“I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him.”¹ How many people can identify with Martin Luther’s troubled conscience! Every human struggles with the nagging agony of guilt, and reason argues that we, the guilty, can and must get right with a guiltless God. True believers understand that God’s grace alone absolves the stain of sin while human works contribute nothing to salvation. How, then, does imperfect human observation of God’s holy Law fit into the life of a Christian? A study of Scripture, Reformation-era examples, and errors made by other organizations and individuals shows the importance of the Third Use of the Law in Christian living.

The purpose of God’s Law is three-fold; though it serves the essential functions of maintaining external discipline in society and bringing sinners to recognize their need for salvation, a Christian must regard the Law primarily as a guide for godly living. This Third Use of the Law stands apart in its unique relationship to the Gospel. Although Gospel is always intrinsic in the Law, and though the mirror of sin certainly propels one toward Christ, the Gospel’s role is a vital part of properly understanding the Third Use. Through the Gospel, the Holy Spirit renews the hearts of Christians and helps them understand Law as “the immutable will of God according to which man is to conduct himself in this life.”²

When tourists want to know how to locate the best shops and restaurants, they ask the tour guide; couch potatoes who wish to learn about upcoming episodes of their favorite programs consult the *TV Guide*. Likewise, when Christians, moved by the Spirit, want to learn how to live, they look to God’s guide, given in his holy Law. Pastor William Fischer explains, “In response

to his love, God wants us to live a life that reflects our love for him. Thus he has given us his Law to guide us in our day-to-day living as Christians.”³

God’s Law, summed up for Christians in the Ten Commandments and apostrophized further in Christ’s command to love God and our neighbor (Matt. 22:37-39), serves as a necessary guideline for proper living. Every human heart contains the taint of imperfection. In the words of the hymnist, each man is “born alive, yet dead to sin.”⁴ St. Augustine first used the phrase *de peccato originali* (original sin) to describe the natural inclination of human will.⁵ Called concupiscence or termed the Old Adam as in Catechism class, this sinful lust invades every human, causing actions and motives that oppose God’s commandments. Mankind is so tarnished with imperfection that even the Christian conscience can have difficulty distinguishing God’s will.⁶ Paul writes of the church members at Ephesus and of all men, “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins (Eph. 2:1).” A dead man can do nothing by himself to improve his condition. Likewise sinful man, by himself, can do nothing to earn even a small degree of God’s favor. Because of original sin, Christians cannot rely on conscience alone for guidance.

For a Christian, God-pleasing application of the Third Use of the Law involves acting with appropriate motivation. The lifestyle of a practicing hypocrite, because of his strict adherence to the code of civic righteousness, can sometimes seem more godly than the morality of a weak and struggling Christian. The Formula of Concord warns the early Lutheran church to carefully distinguish between individuals who, in the spirit of Christian freedom, truly follow God’s guideline and those who do so only out of desire for reward or fear of punishment. The pretenders who keep the Law to their own glory or who seek to turn away God’s wrath by their own morality act as “saints after the order of Cain.”⁷ Just as God rejected Cain’s sacrifice—

since Cain offered it only in anticipation of his reward—so he will reject all human works not precipitated by the Holy Spirit.

However, the deeds done by a believer spring from the Christian freedom he has through grace. Although Christians, too, must struggle against sin in this life, the Father receives their imperfect attempts at obedience because they act as servants of Christ rather than as slaves to the Law. Scripture promises that believers' "spiritual sacrifices" are "acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 2:5). Time after time Paul's epistles emphasize that nothing native to human nature can earn God's favor apart from the vicarious righteousness of Christ that sanctifies even imperfect human works (Rom. 7:18, Rom. 8:3-4, Gal. 5:17, 24). Second Corinthians teaches that "Christ's love compels us," offering Christians powerful motivation to comply with God's guidelines (2 Cor. 5:14).

Few church fathers have preached more eloquently on the futility of merit as a motive for good than Martin Luther. His personal experiences and Scripture-based study make him qualified to give expert advice on the Third Use of the Law. Despite living an exemplary life as a student and a monk, and later as priest and professor, Luther spent his first thirty years in spiritual and emotional anguish. He possessed an acute understanding of the Second Use of the Law: a mirror that reflected his sin. Mingled with abject terror of God's angry judgment, Luther's awareness of his sin led him to turn for comfort to the Law's First Use as a curb. Abusing his body to absolve his soul, Luther lost all vision of the Third Use of the Law.⁸ He became a slave to his sin, falling into the trap that Paul warned the Galatian Christians to avoid: "You who have been trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace" (Gal. 5:4).

By the grace of God, Luther later learned that the path to salvation followed Christ's road to the cross. Of reading in Romans 1:17 that "the righteous shall live by faith," Luther later exclaimed, "This passage appeared to me as the gate to paradise."⁹ But for Luther, faith did not end with the promise of Ephesians 2:8-9. During the Reformation he continually taught that good works had their place, not in the attainment of faith but as its result. Luther's writings stressed the importance of the Gospel as the motivation and the Law as the goal. Although a Christian's sinful nature gets in the way of his eagerness to follow the guidance given in Scripture, believers should continue to strive toward a perfect life—not as a means to gain our own salvation but as thanksgiving to Jesus who gained it for us.

The teachings of Martin Luther faithfully and eloquently uphold the truths found in Scripture. How, then, does human reason support the argument? Even an unbeliever suffers the burden of a guilty conscience when he acts contrary to God's will as imprinted on his heart. While true Christians know that reconciliation comes only through Jesus' merit, logic argues that humans can get right with God by doing as he asks. When man falls short of God's perfect standard, reason convinces him that he can make it up to God by performing more good works to compensate for the transgression. The WELS' pamphlet *God's Great Exchange* outlines human wisdom's viewpoint on the logic of work righteousness. Mankind has a tendency to turn to the tricks that have proven successful in human relationships: the sinner promises to try harder next time or measures himself up to those around him, claiming, "I'm not as bad as that other person." To achieve reconciliation, he attempts to outweigh his sins with good works on the balance of God's favor.¹⁰ Proverbs 16:25 says, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death." Man's reason tells him that the potential to work good lies within himself.

Evidence of what Pastor Arnold Koelpin terms this “human potential movement” exists, captured in the pages of history and abounding all around in today’s post-modern society.¹¹ Both the ancient Greeks and the Roman contemporaries of Christ exercised their belief in mankind’s ability to do good. Their theology taught them that life’s troubles resulted from angering one of their deities; performing good works, then, served as a means to appease the gods and guarantee peace and order. Likewise, the Pharisees of Jesus’ day grasped the concept of civic righteousness. For them, observing the Sinai law code to the letter became the path to spiritual deliverance, and they scorned their neighbors who could not or did not follow their “holier-than-thou” suit.

Modern-day moralists, too, believe that holy works merit holy reward. Individuals rise on the wings of celebrity while they preach civic righteousness from pulpits of popularity. Affiliation with a church body is not necessarily a prerequisite for such preaching. The public rises in support of teachers like Dr. Laura and Judge Judy who argue that moral living will cause society’s problems to disappear. While such teachings may curb outward immorality they exclude both the need for true justification and the power of proper motivation. Preachers who preach morality alone produce saints after the order of Cain.¹²

Lutherans recognize that justification comes through faith and not by works. However, where other organizations err by omitting grace and advocating work righteousness, Lutherans, perhaps, fall into the trap of overemphasizing grace and omitting the necessity of works.¹³ Indeed, outside observers have sometimes stated that “teaching salvation by grace alone through faith will encourage hearers to disregard God’s law and live in sin.”¹⁴ St. James preached a different message when he recognized that “Faith without deeds is dead” (Jas. 2:26). Though the righteous works performed by a Christian out of love and thanks do nothing to work

righteousness, these actions give evidence of faith's presence. A Christian who professes to believe yet makes no attempt to live according to God's guideline in the Law is probably not a true Christian.

The implications present in the Third Use of the Law extend not only to personal expressions of faith, but to evangelism efforts as well. While souls must be reached primarily with the saving Gospel message, the Christian witness should also remember the adage "actions speak louder than words." Proper adherence to the Law is essential as an outreach tool. Christ speaks of witnessing by example in Matthew 5:16; "Let your light shine before men that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." The early Church won its converts through works of love; likewise Christian works today should shine like a beacon through the gray cloud of godless ethics accepted by our post-modern society.

The harmony that exists between Law and Gospel becomes a focal point of Lutheran beliefs. The two stand in stark contrast to one another and find reconciliation only in the cross of Jesus.¹⁵ The Law, in its Second Use, condemns; it makes man conscience of sin and drives him to the Gospel in search of a savior. Only the Gospel forgives sin, works righteousness, and frees believers from the curse of the Law. However, Christian living goes farther. "Just as we are not saved by our works, so we are not freed from fruitage."¹⁶ Jesus taught that false teachers and true Christians can be distinguished by their fruits of faith or lack thereof (Matt. 7:20). Luther re-echoed Scripture when he said, "Faith is a living, restless thing... We are not saved by works; but if there be no works, there must be something amiss with faith."¹⁷ Proper Christian living follows the guidelines outlined in the Third Use of the Law.

End Notes

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- ¹ Roland H. Bainton, Here I Stand (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1950), 65.
 - ² Theodore G. Tappert, ed., The Book of Concord (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 566.
 - ³ William E. Fischer, Christian Freedom: Christ Sets Us Free (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996), 114.
 - ⁴ Caspar Neumann. "From Eternity, O God," Christian Worship. A Lutheran Hymnal (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993), 461.
 - ⁵ Arnold J. Koelpin, An Examination of the Doctrine of the Will, [1996], St. Cloud, MN, Minnesota District Spring Pastoral Conference, n.pag.
 - ⁶ Fischer 91-92.
 - ⁷ Tappert 566.
 - ⁸ Fischer 34.
 - ⁹ Fischer 40.
 - ¹⁰ God's Great Exchange (WELS Outreach Resources [1997]), n.pag.
 - ¹¹ Koelpin n.pag.
 - ¹² Tappert 566.
 - ¹³ Siegbert W. Becker, "Observing the Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel in the Preaching and Teaching Ministry," A Christian Handbook on Vital Issues (New Haven, MO: Leader Publications, 1973), 60.
 - ¹⁴ Fischer 40.
 - ¹⁵ Becker 58.
 - ¹⁶ Ralph W. Loew, The Lutheran Way of Life (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 146.
 - ¹⁷ Bainton 331.

