Gesetzlich Wesen Unt er Uns: Our Own Arts and Practices as an Outgrowth of the Law
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Editor’s Preface

Renewed interest in the writings of the “Wauwatosa Theologians” John Schaller, August Pieper, and J.P. Koehler has been noted by the publication of several recent papers and articles (Braun, 2003, Selnow, 1998, Pless, 1999). Additionally, references to this particular paper by Koehler were noted in the previously published CHARIS article by Mark Braun, “A Tale of Two Synods.” These references, accompanied by comments from our readers, have prompted the decision by the editorial board to reprint Koehler’s paper.

The subject of the paper, the temptation to resort to legalism, is as relevant today as it was 90 years ago when it was first published, and as it was certainly deemed to be relevant to those who translated and read it 44 years ago. To be sure, the landscape of confessional Lutheranism was different in each of those generations. Koehler was writing in response to the pietistic influences of his day. The climate in 1959 was one of tension as the Wisconsin Synod struggled with growing doctrinal differences with sister synods. But the overriding issue Professor Koehler addressed in this paper is as timeless as the basic nature of human beings. It is man’s nature to desire the law, to live by rules, to exercise discipline, to compare his actions to the standard by which we judge others. How refreshing to be reminded again of our great Lutheran heritage, that we live by grace through faith, and that freedom from the Law proclaimed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ is what directs our actions in the church and in our daily lives.

Previous papers and articles have drawn connections to current practices of church fellowship. Other contemporary applications of this paper will be left to the reader. Written responses to this paper are welcomed.

Because of the length of Professor Koehler’s paper, it will be published in two installments. The second half will appear in the next issue of CHARIS, scheduled for publication in December 2003. The introduction which follows was given in 1959 before the English reading of the paper at the 35th convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States.

Introduction - 1959

Professor Koehler’s essay of a generation back entitled “Gesetzlich Wesen Unt er Un s” has been scheduled for presentation here, obviously from the consideration that our present generation may profit, shall we say may yet profit, from attending these weighty words out of the past. They are weighty words. Published in the Quartalschrift, October 1914 to July 1915, as an expansion of a previously delivered conference address and gotten into print for perusal in the study, they are not
The Paper

The following study grew out of a remark made at a larger mixed conference. It had been said that in our own circles much legalism held sway, that therein lay the cause for the stasis and decline in all fields of church life, that, for that reason, genuine repentance by all of us was called for before a change for the better might be expected. The term “Gesetzlich Wesen” was not generally understood. Some thought “Does not that term mean that one wishes to be saved by works?” which cannot be so unreservedly said of our circles. Others were of the opinion it might refer to the striving after sanctification, but this surely could not be so described and made light of. Very few, likely, understood in what sense the expression was used, namely, as a description of one aspect of all our acts in thought, word, and deed, gained from a careful, all-around observation of life and, especially, from the study of history. For that reason a paper on “Gesetzlich Wesen” was assigned. And, in order to avoid irrelevant details, indeed, in order not to weaken the intended effect of the above remark as a call to repentance, we have narrowed the theme of this work to: “Gesetzlich Wesen in our own midst.”

We preface our detailed study with four statements that are to be enlarged upon and clarified:

1. Gesetzlich Wesen among Christians consists in their taking the motivations and the forms of their actions from the law instead of letting them flow freely out of the gospel. This proceeds out of our flesh, which injects this trait into every act of the Christian and externalizes it.
2. In the Lutheran churches this characteristic manifests itself first of all and primarily in the noisy self-satisfied to-do about pure doctrine. Paralleling this is a clamorous insistence on sanctification that exerts itself especially in church-government regulations. As a reaction, a fussy insistence of sanctification develops that, as among the pietists, rebels against all external discipline both in doctrine and in daily life, but nevertheless makes its legalistic presence felt just as energetically by a consciousness of greater piety.
3. When this condition, during the course of the development of the life of the church, assumes control in one new field after the other like a weed pest and becomes the natural state in each field, then the decline sets in, the decline which also shows itself outwardly in our taking over many virus infected and beggarly elements from the sectarian churches.
4. An earnest that we do not ultimately set our stiff neck against the wooing work of the Gospel, is our faithful accord in the stalwart acknowledgment of this condition. This desired end is brought about, however, by our again becoming absorbed more deeply in and by the Gospel and clinging to it more tenaciously—until it bless us. Which blessing will consist in our again cultivating many cardinal truths of the gospel: truths that are to be found not only in Scriptures but also primarily in Luther’s writings but because of one-sided doctrinal discussion were crowded from the center of our vision. In this way the spirit of our Christians would again find objects to challenge its interest after the old battles, by themselves incapable of furthering new thoughts, had deadened and dulled its powers.
The first statement suggests that the difference between law and gospel must be thoroughly understood before we can define Gesetzlich Wesen. As soon as this difference is clearly established, the following three statements are a natural sequence:

1. The essential ‘being’ of a Christian flows out of the gospel.
2. A Christian as such receives the motivation and forms of his actions from the gospel and not from the law.
3. These consist and are built up of faith, love, and hope. Through these, every manifestation of a Christian’s life is determined. On the other hand, the motivations and forms that natural man derives from the law are: suspicion, selfishness, fear. These natural man also injects into every manifestation of his life as a Christian; and in so far as this is the case, or expresses itself in the Christian, we speak of Gesetzlich Wesen.

What is the Difference between the Law and the Gospel?

The law is the eternal holy will of God as it is revealed, for instance, in the Ten Commandments. The content of the law is love to God and to fellow man. But now when we speak of the law, we think of it in the sense that Paul speaks of it in his letters to the Romans and to the Galatians, when he says the law has been done away with. There Paul does not have in mind the eternal content of the law, founded in God’s essence, but the manner in which this law opposes man in life ever since he fell into sin.

The law or the will of God opposes sin by demands, threats, and condemnation. This the law does not only over against sin as an abstract idea, but it takes a concrete personal position over against sinful man. It is not only the case that man in his present sinful nature has a wrong conception of the will of God and now ascribes to it the characteristic of demanding, threatening, and condemning; no, more, the will of God, God himself, takes an attitude in his will over against sinful man, different from what he had in just this will toward man while he was yet in a state of innocence. This different attitude is what is described in the three expressions above.

The will of God already existed in eternity. But where there was no sin opposing it, there also was no occasion to speak of demands, threats, or condemning. Thus also not over against original man in the state of innocence. For that reason the remark concerning the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden is not to be understood as though God had wanted to coerce man. No, there the point was to warn against danger. Even for the Christian as such, as pneuma, spirit, the eternal will of God exists, but not in the form of demands, threats, or condemnation. From these the righteous are free. To be sure, the eternal will of God remains; but God’s children, sanctified by the Holy Spirit, enter into the will of God with their will, and joy in it and are glad.

The sinner, on the other hand, God wishes to coerce with His demands, threats, and condemnation. That is a harsh manner of dealing with natural man who perceives nothing of the spirit of God. The law wishes to thrust man down into the dust and with pure force bring him to the knowledge of his sin. God cannot deal any other way with natural man. His root-being, sin, is suspicion, selfishness, and fear, as is shown in Moses’ great and typical delineation in the epic story of the fall of man. Where God’s law steps up against such demeanor, it is impossible for anything new and God-pleasing to grow forth; for man still conceives of the will of God, which never was such formerly in his state of innocence, as something demanding, threatening, and condemning. At the same time, it
is not in the nature of the law to create anything, rather it takes on the characteristics as shown above. Therefore it is impossible that the law of God should call forth love toward God or fellow man. For that reason it does not lie in the law's sphere as we now, with Paul, speak of law to generate such new God-pleasing natural activity. To crush and kill is all the law can and desires to do.

Through and out of all this, sin becomes altogether sinful, as Paul shows in detail Romans 5:20; 7:5, 9, 11, 13. Not only do the attempts to keep the law reveal the above mentioned characteristics of sin: suspicion, selfishness, fear, but even sin itself takes occasion through the law, and the result is often outbreaks of sin in course acts of shame. Even when in complete despair the will of man collapses through the devastating work of the law, sin continues in force with the above named characteristics. This is not by accident but lies within the sphere of the law and so is a part of its aim, as also of the intent of God. That is not to be understood as though God himself were the originator of sin and insofar man were not to be blamed. In regard to the latter Paul says that sin took occasion by the commandment, in regard to the former; that is the purpose of God to bring man to the knowledge of sin. The way to that is that sin abound, that it reign unto death.

The way the law works here is intimately related with the judgment of the hardening of the heart; which is not to be understood as though God occasionally hardens the heart of an especially corrupt man— putting it that way would surely give rise to a rash of self-righteous feelings. Rather the hardening of man's heart is the result of the law of God constantly in action against those who resist the working of the Holy Spirit and its urgings in the gospel— for every Christian at all times an ever-present warning against his old Adam.

It is not sound theology if we seek to soften the harshness of this presentation and thereby the intent of the Bible passages on which it is based, God’s law is not child’s play. To be sure, this presentation leaves our human reason with much that is hard to understand. But then the law is not primarily given for our intellectual comprehension, rather it speaks to our conscience. And our conscience says God is right also in this matter.

In order that, finally, sin be revealed as sin, and that man despair of his own righteousness as also of his ability to achieve it, which is God’s main purpose in the law, this law must now also be so preached that it brings about its set purpose.

The Gospel, on the other hand, is something entirely different with respect to what it is, what it aims at, how it brings it about, what it achieves, and the manner in which one uses it. It heralds the wonderful good news that God in Christ has forgiven our sin and therewith given and guaranteed to us salvation, life, and all blessedness. The gospel does not demand, nor does it give directions or orders that something be done; no, it heralds that something has been done. It does not threaten, it imparts precious promises. It does not condemn, it gives gifts. It does not kill, on the contrary, it creates faith, which is new life. This, therefore, takes on the nature of the gospel, not of the law. It is confidence, love, assuring hope, the exact opposite of what the sinner offers the law: suspicion, selfishness, fear.

This is most clearly evident in the Christian’s inner relation to the law. With respect to this new spiritual life the holy will of God loses this character of the law in the form of demands, threats, condemnation. That does not mean alone that the Christian by the Holy Spirit’s influence reacts differently to it in his basic approach; no, the will of God, God himself, takes a different attitude
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toward him. God does not demand of him. Still less does he threaten or condemn. Paul expresses that in this way: The law is taken away, the law does not apply to the righteous. In all of this, however, the will of God remains in effect before as well as after, but it does not bear down on him like the burden of a foreign will; rather it assumes the form, both in the intent of God and in conception of the Christian in so far as he is such, of the will of the tender father, into which the child lovingly gives himself, having his pleasure in it, living, moving, and having his being in it out of the gospel promises, out of faith. For now the child of God knows and understands that its lack of confidence, yes, its fear in regard to the will of God was born out of selfishness. Now it perceives with an inner sense that it is in the will of God, in that which He shows in His will as being the paths of righteousness, that our life is a life of joyous blessedness.

And now the Christian has a much deeper respect for the holy will of God than he had before. This respect is deeper not only in degree but in the whole makeup and nature. For to say the least, it is not the respect of a slave, legalistic and forced, but the respect of a child. In line with this respect the Christian will, of course, speak of law and will use such expressions to cover it as have been formed in the course of the development of human language; but there is no resemblance to what the unbeliever means when he uses the same terms and expressions.

Therefore, when Paul evinces this same respect that a Christian has for the law, when Luther speaks thereof with the same forms of expression as found in the law; one must not without thought confuse this with the way the legalist speaks of these matters, but carefully determine out of the inner connection in what sense the words are to be understood. In the same way one will not point the finger at Christians who, in their mutual appreciation of an attitude toward the will of God as it is born out of a joyous faith, now call this will of God law. Indeed, Scripture does so too. In the above discussion the word law, as a description of the legalistic conception and approach, is specifically reserved for the sake of distinction, and that is precisely Paul's practice.

The gospel, however, is not the complement of the law that followed after the law had first failed; no, it is the original great truth of the peculiar essence and being of God, which is divine love. Scriptures, in order well to emphasize this thought, reveal to us that even before the foundations of the earth were formed, God has chosen us to His own in fellowship with the sinner's for His sake. Moreover Paul says that all things have been created by, through, and to Him, the Savior of sinners, and in Him they move and have their being, Col. 1:14-17. When we approach these truths with our calculating reason, in order to master them by defining and ordering in logical sequence, then our container won't contain them all, the whole is more than its parts. But then this is no field for abstract speculation, for one-sidedly intellectual penetration, but for trusting faith. That is the reason why this speculation brings forth only unsatisfying results as shown in the Calvinist presentation, that the world was created for sin, that grace might shine forth more gloriously. In the same way, to weaken the powerful portrayal that places God's love for sinners before the laying of the foundation of the world, weaken it by catering or bowing in any way to our reason, or to allow the creation of the world in Christ as the Son of God, but not in Christ the Savior from sin - all this leaves one with a decidedly empty feeling. That does not do justice to the expression Paul the apostle uses and besides reduces the impress of the spontaneous originality of the eternal gospel. Out of these expressions we take what Faith can well grasp, namely, that the love of God for us poor sinners for Christ's sake is what God really is made of. The rest, which we cannot understand, we do not let trouble us.
Indeed, this is also in innermost harmony with the eternal holy will of God as shown to be in God before the fall, as it is testified to by the Holy Spirit in the faithful heart of the believer, and as it will remain in joyous worlds to come as the expression of the holy purity of God, which in truth, is what is summed up in the concept of love.

If we at this point again let pass in review what was said of the law in its opposition against us sinners then the contrast between it and the gospel will become yet sharper. The law is something altogether different from the gospel, different and of lesser import. It cannot create anything new which might satisfy it; indeed, it cannot even create the really right, deep, and noble understanding of God’s will. This the gospel does however. It alone makes a Christian what he is, namely, a Christian. And out of this fountain alone the right Christian life further freely flows. And thus the gospel must also be preached.

And Now Wherein Does This Gesetzlich Wesen Consist?

There is a tendency in a Christian’s being to be motivated in his actions by the law as it was just described over against sin, namely, by its demands, threats, and condemnations. In such cases the Christian is moved to obedience of God’s will partly by the demands of God’s law. He feels the will of God as a foreign will bearing down on him, of course to act counter to it he does not have the courage, but his actions do not flow out of a blessed confidence in God; the old suspicion remains alive. The Christian lets the threatenings of the law move him to obedience, so that selfishness in the form of desire for reward remains a driving force in his actions. The Christian lets the curses of the law drive him, so that fear lies at the roots of his activities. And this he does not only where he uses the law as the point of departure for his own actions, but also where he tries to force it on others as the source of their obedience.

This is ugly deformity, for it is not in harmony with the nature of his new life, which would assuredly take its incentive to action out of the gospel. This new life, planted by the gospel is faith, love, hope. Faith follows the ways of God freely, confidently, well shod on the paths of the Father. Love is drawn by the will of God, not as though pushed by an irksome foreign force, but in consonance with its own new inner life as a Christian, loving, wishing, and inwardly striving for that which God desires. Hope is opposed to the fear that strives by its activities to [fight off] danger and disaster thought to be portended of the Lord; it presses forward to apprehend, yes to be apprehended by God, who as the loving Father is the goal of all its yearnings. This is the makeup of the new life of the gospel not only with respect to the Christian’s relation to God, but also in the man-to-man interrelations with his fellow Christian. The guiding force of all his actions funnels through trust, love, patience.

From all this we see that legalism confounds the natural course of the new life. Thus the actions flowing out of a legalistic attitude clothe themselves in definite general external forms which are born under such confusion. Whereas the activities growing out of faith, love, hope, quelling forth from a real, true, and living fountain, are for that reason original, forthright, naive and natural, real and true; the doings of legalism on the other hand appear as mechanical, shallow, proceeding from ulterior and mixed motives, opportunistic, makeshift, spurious and untrue. Legalism ignores the only truly real fountain of Christian life, and turns to the law which never was intended by God as a fountain of new life. On the one hand it puts the law in the place of the Gospel and on the other it confuses both law and the gospel so that neither law nor the gospel remains. It turns law into [its]
opposite, to a means for creating life. The result is that not only the life following the reform does not achieve the righteousness before God, but also the intended effect of the law, the quenching and destroying of the old Adam, is not realized. Likewise, legalism turns the gospel into its opposite. Having ignored the fact that the gospel, like a spring bubbling forth water, is the source of the new life, the legalist takes the technique he has developed in his legalistic relation with the law and transfers this same character to his treatment of the gospel, he seeks to strike a deal with the gospel, to pay his dues to it, and succeeds only in making a law out of the gospel, similar to that he has fashioned for himself out of the law of God. Insomuch he thereby also loses the effect of the saving health of the gospel and contributes to the decline of the new life. But what we are concerned with are the forms in which life now develops. The law crushes, and the gospel following thereupon lifts up on high and so makes humble and content. The legalist is either down and out or sitting on top of the world, despairing or cocksure, while at the same time having his hope in Christ; both wrong. Such a reaction does not agree with what the law and the gospel are to bring about in the heart of man. Something artificial, yea, untrue, springs forth in man, and this trait disports itself in the characteristics of all legalistic dealings. It is external, mechanical, not ringing true, mixed with ulterior motives, a makeshift for the moment.

**Whence is this Confusion of the Law and Gospel by the Christian?**

It flows forth from his sinful flesh. We are still flesh and blood. This need not be proved by Scripture, just the reminder that in essence this flesh is not to be looked upon as weakened in any way. The flesh of the Christian is the same flesh as that of the unregenerate, but with this reservation that it does not have the same free course as with those who are not born again. The spirit wrestles for the upper hand against the flesh, and where the spirit is not quenched in his work the flesh more and more is put under and drowned. But insofar as it is there, it is of the same nature as in the unregenerate. For that reason it needs the preaching of the law and does not call for the preaching of the gospel, just as on the other hand we are not to offer the Spirit the preaching of the law, but wholly and alone the gospel. Because in the Christian there is flesh with the Spirit, for that reason an element of sin insinuates itself in every manifestation of life, in his faith, love, and hope. The course of Christian life flows along in stumbling, falling, rising again. To the extent that the ardor of the first love dims, the strength of the old Adam rises again, whose nature as opposed to the gospel is always legalistic. As long as this battle between spirit and flesh consists in individual attacks the realization of the contrast between spirit and flesh is keen, and one will not speak of legalism. But the farther the Christian’s life departs from the freshness of its youth, the weaker it becomes in all its expressions. Thrust and counter thrust of battle against sin lose their punch, they become perfunctory, they peter out. In the grip of this general relaxing and recession, life more and more takes on the forms of the old Adam, legalism; and that is what we call Gesetzlich Wesen. Faith-life still remains there too, but the arts and practices born of law crowd in and color the acts of faith in such a way that the Christian, because of his lack of vigor, is not always aware of the contradiction. He has his faith by force of opinion or established circumstance. He makes of faith a condition, and ere he is aware all his gospel conceptions join as handmaids with the children of the law.

What thus transpires in the life of the individual Christian also takes place in the life of the congregation as the sum of the individual lives. But with this difference: In the development of the individual life there are as many differences as there are individuals, but in the group life, there is a certain constant and regular step tending to decline.
Here legalism is most readily observed and portrayed. Which brings us closer to our actual subject:
The arts and practices as they have grown out of the law in our own midst.

This conception of Law and Gospel and the proper life flowing from it is not a monopoly of the Lutheran church as such: rather it is the proper basic gospel-attitude common to all who trust in their Lord Jesus. It simply cannot be otherwise. Faith is created by the Holy Spirit. He creates the unity of the spirit. That has to do with the most inward reaches of the soul. Externally of course it is possible that, due to various other influences, a difference may arise in the intellectual doctrinal conception, which ends in the break-up into separate faith groups. Indeed, there will be differences in doctrinal conceptions even within individual faith groups. For in truth, not that is the conception of doctrine that, written or spoken, is spoken, crystallized in the external form or sound thereof, but what is conceived in the innermost being in heart and soul and inclinations. For that reason, even now there is not one single truly spiritually unified faith group, no synod, no congregation. Fact of the matter is, there never did exist an outward unity of the church, not even in the old Catholic church. On the other hand, the inner unity of the Spirit in faith still exists today. All true believers whom the Lord knows, not only in general agree in this that the Lord is their Savior, but in a way which again only the Lord knows, also in their attitude to law and Gospel, an attitude created by that faith. This may also be gathered from observation.

It is not Lutherans alone that in the written and spoken word correctly express themselves with regard to the above facts. Indeed, even with such who theoretically have legalistic leanings one may note that at heart they are truly evangelical Christians. That again does not go for Lutherans only.

Now, however, when the doctrinal position is the point under consideration and we see in the Lutheran church how this attitude toward the truths of Scripture originally blossomed forth in Luther, and how in the historical development in the Lutheran church it repeatedly turns the erring steps back as they wander from the right track, we may rightly say the Lutheran church here has the correct teaching. This is then not said in order to thank God that we are not like others, but as a witness to the Lord's Gospel to the praise of the glory of His grace, of which we have been made partakers. But if we look at the Lutheran church as it appears from without with all its shortcomings and compare it with the other part of the protestant church, Calvinism, then it becomes evident that both have this in common, that legalism becomes a hindrance to the Gospel, but in a different way. One may say that legalism appears oftener and more consistently among Calvinists than among Lutherans for the reason that the typical differences between the two shows itself in this, that the Lutheran Church emphasizes justification and faith; the Reformed Church, sanctification and love. As a consequence there develops among Lutherans an "evangelical consciousness" over against the Reformed. And now it is important to understand how in spite of this "evangelical consciousness," or perhaps by means of it, the legalism of the old Adam grows apace among Lutherans. We say by means of it, for there is an evangelical consciousness that really is none because it exists in the head only and thus operates in such a legalistic manner as though there were no such thing as the gospel. That will become clear as we go on.

On account of the Lutheran emphasis on justification and faith it is natural in our midst that exposition of doctrine takes pre-eminence for the sake of the heralding of the gospel; whereas the Reformed put their main effort into the development of the external life in church government and social welfare. We lay greater stress on doctrine, purity of doctrine. Legalism obtrudes itself here in the form of harping on orthodoxy (Pochen auf Rechtglaubigkeit). Hereby is meant the insistence on the 'right faith' where the emphasis has shifted from 'faith' to 'right.' The reader will please note that
thereby one has been committed to what immediately follows. Such insistence on orthodoxy is primarily intellectual, and in the nature of a challenge calling to account, and with an admixture of satisfaction with one’s rectitude. This noisy ado about orthodoxy flourishes on petty parochialism which is opposed to the ecumenical spirit. For that reason it clings to the lees of the letter instead of living in the facts. The end result is traditionalism, which has lost the spirit of language, the spirit of the gospel. There you have legalism, which opposes the gospel and shows that the insistence on orthodoxy during the course of a doctrinal controversy has forsaken the basis of the gospel.

It goes without saying that the gospel must be kept pure; for without the truth of the gospel, without a true appreciation of the gospel, one cannot have faith, one cannot come to faith. But to keep the gospel pure is not of immediate interest to the heralding of the gospel; that is of secondary interest.

Evangelical proclamation primarily aims for faith. Faith is what it wishes to bring about. But that concerns the inner emotions. To the heart the appeal is made. The words then become a heralding of the wonderful, evangelical truths, a heralding of the evangel, a wooing with the words of truth. Only secondarily then the evangelical proclamation presses for purity of the gospel when the message has been misapprehended. But this still remains lauding and heralding the Gospel. And there is no justification whatsoever for a clamorous fuss (Pochen). For such an explanatory study can be so couched that the correction continues in the character of a joyous telling of the good news. Indeed, that is the only way, that is, by evangelical proclamation, that the arm of the Lord is revealed and faith is created.

The endeavor to keep the gospel in its purity may channel into preachment unto sanctification, when for instance, the occasion arises to exhort in the interest of purity of doctrine over against the sinful bent toward error. When rightly done, however, this preachment unto sanctification too flows out of the gospel. It does not become insistence, an exacting, but remains a solicitous suing and wooing. It may turn into a warning, still, however, as pressing suit of the wooing work of the gospel; for it is assumed, is it not, in the contest for the form of sound words, that we have to do with such who are the faithful in Jesus Christ. Exhortation, concerned with furthering the new life in a positive manner, here too addresses itself to the spirit, not to the flesh. Now to the spirit you do not come with the law with its exactions, threats, condemnations, but only with the gospel.

In a doctrinal controversy it will occasionally become necessary to preach the law to the Christian because of his old Adam. Then of course threats and demands have their place. However, it must be clearly kept in mind that this then no more is a setting forth for the mutual understanding of doctrine, that one now is not trying to engender new life, the new life which is in the acceptance of the word of truth; but rather that one is confronted with sin, on which judgment is to be pronounced. The speaking of this truth, too, must be in love, and so that the other party will not miss it. Of such a nature, for instance, was Luther’s ultimatum in Marburg when he found no basic understanding for the gospel content of his position on the sacraments. It is not superfluous to make the remark that the main point is not externally to keep clearly separate these different ways of speaking: law, gospel, encouragement flowing out of the gospel. That would be but external. The mixing of law and gospel does not consist in covering both in the same paragraph or even in the same sentence, but that our conception of and inner heart’s attitude toward each is confused. He who has this straight within, can externally permit himself the greatest freedom. The Lord Jesus always has these things intermingled in his talks.
In the doctrinal controversy, however, because the works of the flesh enter in, there shows itself a kind of legalism which not only now and then expresses itself in threats and condemnations, in dogmatic obstinacy and self-righteous spirit, and in traditionalism, but also penetrates the whole thinking, perceiving, and experiencing to such an extent that disputations desire to be right and consequent traditionalism becomes apparent in every speech, discussion, and argumentation without the speaker consciously intending it so. These activities in their entirety may be summed up in the two words, “intellectualism” and a “lack of ecumenical spirit.” These two are dependent one on the other. Actually, they likely appear together: historically, intellectualism develops first.

By intellectualism I mean this that in the discussion on the words of life the interests of reason and the intellect crowd into the background the interests of the believing heart. Herewith three factors are intimately related, which I at this time wish to mention together. (1) The main emphasis is placed on the intellectual understanding instead of on the conquest of the innermost heart. (2) One wrestles with words and hangs on the horns thereof instead of abiding in living issues. (3) Out of the language of Scripture, above all the good news of Salvation, a new law is laboriously fashioned, for which intellectual assent is demanded.

That the words of the Way, the Scriptures, or any passage of Scripture be understood by the listener is always taken for granted in evangelical proclamation to the extent that for the proclaiming no more is needed than the correct and clear presentation for the act of understanding. From the dusty battle, however, over the form of doctrine, a manner prevails for which unconsciously this is the major moment that the doctrine be understood. That marks the beginning of the counterfeit. It is possible intellectually to get a picture of the form of the gospel, like unto the hollow skinshell from which the snake has slipped and silently slithered away; yea more, by extended exercise, or by deeper intellectual penetration into the particulars and contextual relationships of the gospel one may come to a measure of knowledge and perception, to a fine critical sense for the gospel, so that the slightest false note of the next man is immediately detected. But that is still not yet faith and trust, but may very well be the furious sound of the form-words of the intellect. On the other hand, it may very well be that without benefit of deeper intellectual penetration into the dogma, a deep-welling, powerful faith-life exists, that may break out into uncommonly thoughtful and effective speech and corresponding action, as no dialectician can hope to formulate, nor any intellectual acumen clearly describe. That is the child characteristic of faith. And it occurs in common people.

Where, contrary-wise, the intellectualizing tendency obtains, it makes its presence felt in connection with the portrayal of the gospel truths in this wise, that it cares more for clarity than for the gospel. Faith wishes to hear gospel truths and history; the intellect thirsts for comprehensive thought complexes, clearly presented. The proper evangelical presentation, therefore, will bring the wonderful facts of God’s love and mercy. That becomes a heralding, a wondering heralding, appealing to faith and overcoming doubt through the facts of God’s grace and love.

Intellectualism, a lusty logomachete, having his quiver full of them, gets tangled up with words. These, his words, must be understood by force if necessary, by force of the proof of grammatical or logical stringency. Certainly it is necessary that one understands the language of the gospel, and to that intent it is also necessary to mark the grammatical and logical relationships. But the assent one wishes for one’s message is not to be achieved through purely formal language discussion, but through the wonderful deeds of the gospel. As soon as the formal part of the discussion comes to the foreground it is already off on a false key. Now the flesh sits in too. The sharp intellectual approach is wrong to start with. This leads to hairsplitting, which on the one hand insists on the word, on the letter; in such a way that it becomes an empty shell, therefore incapable of convincing.
on the other hand, the danger arises that one becomes so lost in the maze of details of the logical consistency of the doctrinal system, that the Bible's story of facts fails to receive its proper due.

As an example of being caught in the letter that killeth, the following may serve: 2 Tim. 3:16, “All scripture given by the inspiration of God is profitable, etc.” was often explained from the Greek text to mean: “The whole scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable.” Then it was further added that such was the correct understanding of Luther’s translation. Thereby it was believed that the divine origin of Scripture had been firmly established. Whoever understands Greek will readily see with the help of dictionary, grammar, and context, that the correct and unmistakable translation must read: “If Scripture is God inspired, then it is also profitable,” or “Every God-inspired Scripture is also profitable.” To such who are not familiar with the Greek it must become evident that Luther’s translation does not wish to offer the first above-expressed thought, but the second.

Those exegetes did not become aware of the flaw in their exegesis because in the first place they thought they could not get along without a clear word of God which expresses in so many words the doctrine of the divinity of Scriptures. That is intellectualism. Then further, Luther, of course, must be right. That is traditionalism. It is surely not our intent to ridicule the earnestness with which a sober Christian holds fast to the once-fashioned form of the fathers. But that is not the whole of it. Being so bent on documenting the doctrine of the divine origin of Scripture in just so many double-weighted words, we fail to see that what Caleb is carrying is the goodness of the Lord and push aside the fresh and fragrant fact of the text, which all the more impressively establishes the divinity of Scripture in that being taken for granted, it is not stated in so many words, but its happy consequences are made to live before our eyes. That I call being caught in the letter.

In the first place that is a bit of untruthfulness more prevalent than commonly thought. The untruthfulness is not of evil intent since actually it is in defense of a truth of God in which oneWholeheartedly trusts. A less stalwart spirit is readily talked into believing that such lawyer’s handling of evidence really can do no harm. And it is no trick at all if, as is often the case in a fresh and original new approach, many men of integrity do not at once master all the intellectual implications (so that eye and hand, heart and mouth agree.)

But if beyond that, the oft grossly misunderstood slogan of the commentators, the wording of the text must decide, is brought up as the big gun to silence the less versatile opponent, then we’re all washed up and can only heap higher the windbag bulwarks behind which we hide. And what is the fruit of our so called victory? And even if the opponent can’t puzzle out the maze we have built, the outcome is not always as successful as with Wilfred the Anglo-Saxon representative of Rome over against the Celtic Bishop Colman at the court of Oswy of Northumbria 644 A.D. (The king asks if it is true that Jesus said to Peter: Thou art Peter, etc. When Colman could not deny it, the king followed the Romanist in order not to be locked out of the kingdom of heaven. He too was lost in the letter), rather, the other’s inner doubt remains together with the feeling that he was right after all.

An example of emphasizing the system of logical consistency is shown in the election controversy where Calvin pictured election and the rejection of the rebellious both as flowing out of the sovereignty of God; or where the Lutherans on their part invented the term intuitu fidei (election in view of one’s faith) to circumvent the determinism of the Calvinists. Both procedures go beyond what is given in Scripture in that they yield thought complexes foreign to Scripture. What is of moment here is that intellectual interests alone bring forth this presentation and thereby seek to coerce. Now compare the times and conditions where these interpretations arose and still arise to
recognize that the spiritual makeup lying at the roots of such efforts is correctly characterized as intellectualism and legalism.

On the other hand the opponents' improper language is rolled into review instead of taking as the point of departure his probable sound intent, or his difficulty in finding the right expression, or that his manner of expression merely is different from mine, so that my limited faculties did not at once understand him. If this then goes to such extremes that the speaker is further held up to disparaging ridicule, then it is clearly demonstrated what spirit's child is holding forth. I do not wish to come to the defense of the touchiness that takes umbrage at the most casual remark. A man of temperament may on occasion make a whimsical remark, which is not to be pounced upon and summarily turned to his discredit. What we are at here is to try to understand from the innermost impulses the nature of the different approaches to the records of the great deeds of God, lest they become a strange thing to our fingertips. The above described procedure is a thing of evil not only because, overshooting its mark, it misses its aim completely and is found wanting just in this point of the mastery of logical acumen, and because of its personal attacks hinders the friendly advances of the other side and the acceptance of the defended position, thus making the other side obstinate. No, it is of itself evil in that, instead of living in the content of the gospel and heralding that joyfully to trusting faith as something to be desired, and thereby winning its confidence, it clings to the external address, to the sound of form-words and dead letters, acts the legalist by muzzling the bite of life by fragmentation and closed compartments through the discipline of academic exercises, and makes of the hope of so great salvation a lawyer's code.

To be sure that is something else again that one wishes to make Scripture, and especially the gospel, into another law, for which intellectual acceptance is demanded. For this procedure it is characteristic that the statement concerning the divine origin of Scriptures is placed at the head of theology. When one has established the divine origin of Scripture out of its various attributes, or established the character of its attributes through the listing of the various passages covering its divinity, then one has what is called the formal principle of theology. Thereupon the naked word, torn out of its contextual relationship, is to have the same legal import as an established court decision has for the lawyer. In other words, to make of the marvelous miracle of Scripture with the wonderful works to usward as its content, make of it a codex of immutable decrees that must be bowed to, that is the doing of a legalist, akin to the handicraft of the Missouri muleskinner. In intellectualism the legalist too must move and have his being. Do not misunderstand me now to detract from the trustworthiness of Scripture. I am speaking against a way of dealing with the word of God that I call legalistic. Properly it is done as follows: First and foremost stands, "Thy sins are forgiven thee." This has been called the material principle of theology; whereas, the divine origin of Scripture is spoken of as the formal principle. That this does not put apples of gold in a picture of silver is needless to say. Melanchthon coined these terms out of his cross-grained view of theology, whose spirit was caught in a legalistic and intellectual emphasis. The main point is faith in the forgiveness of sins. The intellect simply serves to receive the thought so that the content of faith may be appropriated, the hope of our calling. This faith is the work of the Holy Spirit through the word of pardon for our sins. It is created by the shepherd's toiling love that gives His life for the sheep, not by logical stringency. With this same faith I then, as a result, treasure what Scripture says of its own birth and growth by the Father. In this manner it goes on into everything that Scripture has to say. But the divine origin of Scripture is not subject to argument with an unbeliever. That belongs in the sanctuary. This pearl is not to be profaned. Nor would it be of any use to the unbeliever. He cannot trust in this. The darkened eyes of his understanding, and his accusing and excusing thoughts keep him from sensing that he is walking in the darkness of his own conceit in
legalism and intellectualism. Him I would acquaint with the engulfing power of sin and the doom impending over it, with the indication that God alone can save therefrom. Not only can, but has taken away the sin of the world and nailed it to His cross, teaching us to call Him Father with delight. And now on the basis of this our newborn common faith, we would enter all avenues of Scripture, and every new factor would be evaluated in the light of this evangelical truth, indeed illuminated and made acceptable in complete relationship to the glorious truth that, before the foundation of the world, He has made us acceptable in the beloved. For the gospel, because it is gospel, is a faithful saying and therefore worthy of all acceptation (1 Tim. 1: 15) which one loves without conscious thought and therefore trusts implicitly. And all our dealings with it should be in that spirit.

The counterpart is the Calvinist-Zwinglian manner. They have the formal principle, and a formal principle it is indeed. The intellect with its logical stringency is the decisive factor. That this sharpness showed a featheredge when Zwingli with his “This represents my body” instead of “this is my body,” not out of deference to the word but out of fondness for his power of reasoning, departed from the sharp logic of grammar study and smuggled a thought into the text that was given neither by it nor the context, but rather rejected by both, that fact need not hinder our establishing a relationship between intellectualism and legalism. That is an ever-recurring paradox of human life as shown too in the saying: A llzu scharf macht scharig, which may be translated: “Too-sharp a wedge but turns its edge.” One need only follow the whole Calvinistic manner through a summary of its history, to have it made clear that with them a doctrinal discussion is on the same level with a purely mathematical proposition, whose Q.E.D. demands acceptance or creates divisions; and because of the prevalent bent toward individual freedom, generally the latter.

Entirely different was Luther’s manner at Marburg, where he had written his Savior’s words, “This is my body,” on the table before him and refused to be moved therefrom. That was not a dogmatic insistence on the word in its wooden form. That would be switching to the swingletree of the law to move the gospel load. Luther, with his penetrating pen, had long previously exhaustively and with fine understanding of language given forth his views on the Lord’s Supper. And Zwingli no less had demonstrated his full-blown and fundamental rationalism and radicalism, not only in his writings, but also in the Swiss position toward the rationalistic Anabaptists. Luther had a fine sense for this. To prove the spirits was a peculiar gift of his, and that right potent and pungent, too. Since all efforts to bring all facets and factors of the word of God into play for faith proved futile against Zwingli’s position, Luther’s action took the form of an ultimatum. Over against insistent falsity there is finally no alternative. Inner truthfulness demands this. But then it ceases to be a doctrinal discussion and becomes a preaching of the law.

An interesting example of intellectualism versus gospel portrayal is the expression “analogy of faith” with the various changes the term has undergone during the course of history. None of these conceptions has its foundation in the Epistle to the Romans. That was on different occasions established some years ago in the Quartalschrift.

Luther does not make much of the expression. Where it does appear we note that it flows out of Luther’s proper method of exegesis which is grounded in the faith of the exegete. When his heart is attuned to that over which the hills danced for joy, and the angels desired to hear, then he knows what the gospel is about. That will also help the intellectual understanding of the gospel, and the law, too, thereby leading to an ever deeper understanding of Scripture. In the course of the last election controversy the doctrine of justification was called the “analogy of faith.” That is approximately on
the level with Luther’s conception. Where such views are expressed, not primarily in the interest of formal arrangement, but with the evangelical proclamation at heart they work in the interest of a great truth, namely, that which was defended over against the above-described intellectualism. Although it remains to be said that this application of analogy of faith is not borne out by what Paul says in Romans 12:6.

Contrariwise the other conceptions, as they were used during the course of the doctrinal controversy, serve solely the interests of intellectualism. Even the expression used on our side, that the clear Scriptures themselves are the analogy, suffer from the same mistake. It is true that out of Scripture alone can anything be known concerning Salvation— or “Him who shall feed His flock like a shepherd, who shall gather the lambs with His arm and carry them in His bosom and shall gently lead those that are with young. Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and meted out heaven with the span, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills, in a balance.” — But thus carelessly cast into the midst of the then current methodological discussion, the expression is fully removed from the interests of the heralding of the gospel and serves only the external thought that proof in a doctrinal controversy must be taken from the Bible. And still more is that the case with the other conceptions that give forth the analogy of faith as being certain fundamental doctrines, or a summarizing extract of Scripture, or Scripture-as-a-complete-unit to serve as the last link in an unbroken chain of external evidence. There it is plainly evident that the attempt of logic to understand, that is, purely intellectual interests gave birth to such presentation.

Part and parcel of this Zwinglian, that is, intellectual, legalism is the cavalier connivance at differences in doctrine and weak-kneed readiness to make common cause with the opponents in other church matters. That is also in order. For if our treasure chest contains naught but manmade opinions, there is not much point in creating divisions by fighting over it. On the other hand, if legalism takes over in a Lutheran theological discussion the exact opposite, a lack of ecumenical spirit.

The Ecumenical Spirit

The expression “true visible church,” which, wrong though it is, finally could be correctly understood, has much to do with this lack of ecumenical spirit. Now the ecumenical spirit, a heart for the whole household of God, for the other sheep, not a part of the immediate fold, flows immediately out of the Gospel. If it is true that there is one holy Christian Church, the communion of the saints, among whom rules the unity of the Spirit, that is, the same mind that was in their Lord, and the faith in Him, the head, who fills all in each one, then it cannot be otherwise, the faith of one is drawn to the faith of the other. But this ecumenical spirit then does not consist in having a doctrine covering the invisible church. That, too, is a gift of the Lord. But we make of it something external if it does not go any farther, if that is all there is to it. But the ecumenical spirit surely does not consist either in the lack of character that overlooks the differences, which finally must lead to separation if one wishes to remain truthful. That is also external and superficial.

Under ecumenicity of the evangelical proclamation I understand this, that one nourishes the appreciation for the one true invisible Church, the communion of those who trust in the Lord Jesus, as against the political machinations of the different concrete church groups of this world that claim they are the one true visible church. True ecumenical spirit is something within one, peculiar to the individual through the Holy Ghost.
It consists in my rejoicing that another; whether from Jerusalem or Samaria, on the road to Damascus or at Athens, has come to faith in the Lord Jesus, who, having begun the good work in both, will have each of us grow to the fullness of His stature, set and poised for every task, at which task the sound of the other’s lusty ax calls me to his side for common salutary effort in truth that holds in subjection my reason which is reluctant to allow that his strokes make up in might what they may lack in measure. Thus I acknowledge my Savior and His salvation and practice my profession too.

If I at any time meet up with someone that believes on the Lord Jesus, then the very fact of his faith and that, through his faith, he has become a child of God, member of the body of Christ, becomes the main thing and warms the very heart. To this I will give expression by emphasizing those things that unite us in faith, and not open up with reproach and criticism on those things that still divided us. Intellectualism and the lack of the ecumenical sense, each conditioning the other, on the other hand express themselves predominantly in judgment and condemnation, thus showing the character of the work of the law. It goes without saying, however, that evangelical sense does not sacrifice truthfulness. Therefore, criticism will not be ruled out, but it will be colored by the Gospel. Is it necessary to go into detail to show what is meant by this? Instead of that let me relate two examples.

When Moody was in St. Louis at the end of the seventies and proclaimed the gospel of grace in a wonderfully fine manner, Walther, in the classroom, could not refrain from paying him recognition in the friendliest fashion, without then toning this down with reservation in respect to his errors. One could feel that Moody was very dear to Walther. That won my heart at that time for the gospel of Walther and Moody, whereas the silly veneration, often carried on the cuff for Walther and always in opposition to someone else, often spoiled the joy in his presentation. In regard to Moody I should like to [offer a] remark here that will serve to clarify the following example. In his daily sermons Moody often touched on the truths of election by grace. Not that he mentioned it by name, but rather such a situation was being enlarged upon in which Scripture speaks of the gracious election message of comfort and cheer. There Moody, every time I heard him, produced the same images in the thoughts of his hearers that we wish to awaken with the good news that God has taken us to His bosom before the foundations of the earth were laid, so that one had to say Moody had the right stand in his views on election. However, at the end of his stay, in order, as he said, to unfold the full purpose of God, he ex professo held a sermon on election shot through with the crassest Calvinism. An example how the intellectual position and the heart’s inner attitude may be poles apart.

The other example occurred while I was out west some years back and met up with many members of other faith groups. There I chanced upon a pious elderly lady, a Presbyterian. She had fine Christian views and since she could put them across and defend them too, we often ended up in a penetrating theological discussion. Thus we came, too, to speak on election. I marveled to find that she, a Calvinist, held precisely our position, which she expressed in simple trusting confidence. Instead of encouraging this attitude, my immaturity betrayed me into calling forth her opposition by reminding her of Calvin’s actual stand and her disagreement therewith. Now she called to mind how she had learned it, and the harmony was out the window; nor could I thereafter budge her from the Calvinist doctrine of election. My intellectualism had conjured up her traditionalism. An example how the intellectual position and the heart’s inner attitude may be poles apart.

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resting till the other is shown up as having been in the wrong, spoiled my ecumenical sense, which I likely had.

**Traditionalism and the Party Spirit**

Since the Reformation the ecumenical sense has been lost to some extent through the breaking up of the external church into many groups. This stands in intimate relation to the setting up of the confessional writings as the doctrinal source. The exact formulation of the doctrine was an historical necessity, as it was established step by step over against misunderstanding and errors. The confessional writings and their origination are not to blame for that. The manner too in which these writings come into being reveals the right spirit. They are confessions of faith, preachments of the gospel. They also appear in the book of concord as the confessions of the one holy Christian church. So too the rejection of the false teachers, rather their errors, is not to be censured; for that is not born out of a censorious spirit, but in order that the antithesis be brought into clear focus. But in the course of time legalism crept into the way the confessional writings were used and so spoiled the Christian's consciousness of the one Church.

What is meant here is the party spirit that stresses the external crowd of confessionalists over against the other. When our doctrinal discussions are carried on in such a tone that we are out to show the other: you are wrong, your position is incorrect, ours is correct; when correcting holds the spotlight and the regard for the growth of the unifying bond of faith is crowded into the dim background, then, by all orthodoxy in gospel matters, there is present an intermingling of law and gospel, the arts of the legalist. The dogged insistence on the correct dogma finally causes the doctrinal controversy to degenerate into a quarrel over the externals of self interest that slights the interests of faith, the ecumenical church, but guards the advantages of the external crowd and its cronies. All levels operate with the mechanical means of the thought processes borrowed from the spirit-stifling doctors of the law instead of working and wooing for faith in the Savior by means of the wonderful fact and factors of the Gospel, which never was meant to be mastered by the sharpness of man's mind. Then it is only natural too that the Scriptures have been demoted to second place. Even though it is established that the Scriptures are the norma normans, the ruling standard, we actually make the confessional writings, or even the writings of the fathers the effective norm; and Scripture, dressed in its dicta probantia, the individual proof texts, must serve in the role of curtain boy, shifting the scenes and dimming the lights for the norma normata, the standard that is ruled, corrected, established.

It is understood that I am not talking about the external labors of the dogmatician but the inner attitude of the arts and practices of legalism that creeps into the mind of some and at certain times. When the dogmatician arrays the doctrines in a book, he cannot give exhaustive exegetical discussions. The natural result there is short references to the Scriptures. But when in the inner recesses of the mind of the teacher, in his manner of working; and granted no design of disrespect against the Scriptures on his part, his position to Scriptures as over against his party's doctrine is so off-balanced that the Scripture must serve to force his party's doctrine into the foreground, then we not only have the legalistic doings shown in the lack of ecumenical spirit, but the legalism of the intellectualist in addition. Scripture passages torn from their context, or like a worn dime having lost their distinctive impress, now must serve as citations from a codex of decrees. The purely intellectual understanding steps to the fore. Still more is this the case when the interpretation of the text has not been won directly from Scripture by the author himself through personal experience, but rather has been copied for generations from one book to another. That generates legalism. Or it is turned
Traditionalism is the way of thinking where tradition, the form of teaching inherited from the fathers, is decisive. This way of thinking obtains not only among Catholics, where tradition often runs counter to Scripture; but also among Lutherans. This expression is not meant to describe the falsity of the tradition, but the tendency to trust human teachers and their interpretations rather than Scripture, immediately and without reservation.

There is surely no inner need for this in the Scriptures as though they were hard to understand as the Romanists contended. On the contrary, the human interpretations of Holy Writ, in toto, because of their learnedness are much more difficult to understand than the childlike simplicity of the Scriptures. Rather, this tendency is a sign and a result of the lack of inner freedom, which may spring from varied causes. If one by nature is given to leaning on authorities, that will also reveal itself, as described above in his theological activities. That is not great harm then either where the Holy Spirit is free to work. Such a Christian will not fail to study the Scriptures. And even if he has been accustomed to be guided by others, even such a one, when all help fails in time of need, will develop a spiritual freedom and independence that neither he nor others dreamed of, clinging alone to Scriptures and living therefrom. Nevertheless, this force of habit to lean on human authorities will remain a danger both for him and for the church.

Otherwise, however, this unhealthy tendency is nurtured by the neglect of Scripture study, and when that starts its cancerous growth, vision perishes and lack of freedom takes over; and there you have traditionalism. That this is legalism is indicated by the root, Unfreiheit. In an earlier article of the Quartalschrift I called it Geistesstarre, spiritual paralysis. When we visualize the figure in this expression, the Gesetzlichkeit, the rigidity, becomes apparent. (Gesetzlich, the root of which is related to our English ‘set,’ set in one’s ways: Starre, whose root is also in our word ‘stereopticon,’ through which we thrilled to look at still-life pictures when we were young, and there is the word ‘stereotype.’ Our souls are congealed, as concrete is set in its forms.) This rigidity is more apparent in the above-described way of working, which is the natural result of the inner attitude. Now compare, if you will, wherever in history this way of working obtains and see if the following is not also found.

Namely, in inner association with this manner develop two factors which reveal still more sharply that it is born of the law. In the first place, the pride in one’s own rectitude, in this case then the rectitude of one’s own faith, finds expression. That occurs, for instance in sermons where at jubilees or other like occasions, chief reference is made to what our groups, individual men among us, or the jubilarians, have all accomplished. It goes without saying among us that we then bring in: “To God alone be all glory.” But the developments are not thus presented. Rather, one praises man, one compares men and their doings with other men; but one does not show up that and how this is not their doing, and the after-thought: “God alone be honor;” limps along behind. The speakers in the individual case naturally do not wish to push the grace of God into the background, but a tinge of the feeling of one’s own worth, either unconsciously innate, or acquired by training of the past, hinders the glorious message of God’s grace, which so naturally would have pre-eminence at such times, from finding noble and exalted expression.

We have here the same occurrence to which we already drew attention earlier in regard to poetry in our midst. I quote to the point from the Quartalschrift, July, Vol. 11, p. 160: “The American synodical life suffers from a sore weakness; that is its partisanship. In such an atmosphere no truly great art
can arise. That is evidenced especially by the poesy of our American Lutheran poets. If it centers about the gospel, or nature, or even the general thoughts of life, their art is genuine, original, and true. As soon as it centers on synod, or individual persons or happenings in synodical life, the poet never rises to true artistic power. Then he really has no great truth of all-inclusive import to proclaim, but unbeknownst to himself, has come under the spell of his party’s politics which opposes open vision and great creative power.” This very same thing occurs in sermons, articles for publication, and other writings. Here belong the constant allusions to one’s own synod and its leaders as though there were no other Christians. That is not blameworthy, to emphasize the grace of God experienced in smaller circles, but it is blameworthy not to behold it from a higher watch than petty partisanship. What is in point here is that one recognizes the relationship with intellectualism and legalistic arts and practices.

The other factor which parallels or rather mutually conditions the legalistic, anti-ecumenical activities, is that the knowledge of the gospel gift of eternal life through the forgiveness of sins leaves much to be desired among us. Closer attention will reveal that, by all right evangelical intention, the gospel is shortchanged without many of us having the slightest inkling of its happening. Many sermons, granted all proper orientation in dogmatics, have an entirely wrong tone. As when, for instance there is arrayed before a congregation a list of all a Christian has to believe in order to be saved. There man’s act of believing is made the object of our faith, and it naturally degenerates into a purely intellectual act that establishes agreement with the visible situation. Or when, so to speak, the mathematics of the doctrine of the Trinity are presented as an object of faith. True, the tri-unity of our God is a truth revealed by Scripture. But, torn out of its context, it is not an evangelical truth. That was frequently the failing of the old Greek fathers to involve the interests of the intellect in the trinitarian and christological controversies. That was no fruitful gospel penetration. With Athanasius and Leo the Great this turned the scale that they presented the truths in direct relation to the rudiments of redemption. That alone is the object of our faith. And where that is in the foreground one will not fall upon the idea of making even the act of believing the basis of our trust.

Of like nature are the confessional addresses after the pattern: How a right confessional address prepares for proper partaking of the Lord’s Supper; where, in the whole setup of the sermon, the attention is centered entirely on the sinner and his doings not only in the first part, and even there improperly, but above all in the second and third part, instead of on the Lord’s gift of grace that is offered him there. And especially in the paranetic part of the sermon much is sinned in this regard. These are not isolated instances, but rather, if I may depend on the judgment of colleagues who have a sound critical sense, this stamp is clearly impressed on an extended literature.

Another way in which the reaction complexes born of the law (das gesetzliche Wesen) are operative besides the above-shown insistence on orthodoxy is the insistence on sanctification. There is of course no question as to the need for the encouragement of sanctification, but this is not to be confused with a clamorous fuss. To this end a study of sanctification would be helpful.

**Sanctification and the Law**

What is sanctification? This question is not superfluous, for its answer will reveal how we deal with the concepts of law and gospel. The task of the Holy Spirit (that living waters flow from our being as from a fountain) may be conceived for the grasp of the mind as follows: (1) In an all-embracing sense, the entire work of the Holy Ghost, which he accomplishes through the word of God,
including the law’s preachment unto death. (2) The common general conception, as it is contained in
the heading to the Third Article, from calling to preserving, with the gospel as the means. (3) The
specific conception as the third part of the overall work of the Holy Ghost, where sanctification is
set alongside of enlightenment. There the word is used to represent the work of more and more
freeing from sin and also the external life of him who has been justified by faith. This is the subject
under discussion now, specifically from the point of view of the Holy Ghost calling man to
sanctification, to put to usury the pounds entrusted to him, the powers of the spirit given him
through faith.

Sanctification is given in one and the same breath with faith. It is impossible to emphasize this too
strongly. In the effort to keep justification in the foreground we often fail in the emphasis of
sanctification in various ways. We hesitate lest we fall into the Reformed manner of speaking, where
sanctification is considered the important thing and justification but means to an end. One must be
careful and not condemn such procedure offhand. It all depends on how it is meant. But because
such manner of speaking is current among those who make so much of the Christian’s doing that
they in the end completely lose sight of the mighty works of a gracious God, we readily fall into the
other extreme, and thus slight sanctification.

The reason for that is intellectualism, which considers justification and sanctification mere concepts.
There one can separate them and picture faith as the root. But they are not mere concepts, rather
they are events, actualities. There the one is contained in the other. There is no sanctification
without justification, there are no works without faith; but also, conversely, there is no faith without
works, no justification and faith without sanctification. The pure and holy God’s creation has been
destroyed by sin and the devil. The whole gospel concerns itself with its restoration as a completed
fact. Christ suffered and died in order to bring us also this gift; he broke the power of sin and saved
us from its thralldom. The Holy Spirit creates in us the new life in and out of God, through faith, a
life pure and holy. The Christian who recognizes the pardoning of his guilt as a release from a
loathsome, hateful burden cannot help but hate sin. True, the old Adam seeks to trouble him in that
and beclouds the issue as though this were only a lucky release from the threat of death, but trust in
the Lord Jesus who gave His life for us takes a different attitude. Faith cannot but love the Savior
and therefore find sin hateful. For that reason redemption, justification, and sanctification are closely
related.

So then, how does sanctification come about? The Holy Spirit through the glad tidings of full
pardon for our sins creates in man this new life, which has the two sides described above, the
receptivity of faith and the activity of love. But that is like unto a tiny bud that is now to grow forth.
The Christian is not solely of this new life. Sin is still there. For this, Scripture has various
expressions which in a way retain their figurative meaning. It speaks of flesh and spirit, of the old
external and the new inward man. This is a wonderful revelation, which we should not think to
master psychologically. Even though these are things that transpire within our bosom, their
wondersomeness transports us far beyond the dialectic realm. Only as through a glass darkly,
therefore, can we speak of these things, that error may be avoided; not as though we clarified
anything for human understanding.

Thus, right off, we say the individual who has come to faith is one personality, not two. When we
speak of flesh we mean the whole man, the personality which, by reason of its faith, is also called
Christian. When we speak of spirit, then that is again the same personality. And yet spirit and flesh
are entirely different from one another. For Pelagius and his followers the matter is very simple. He,
on occasion, as the unbeliever does also, speaks of two souls in his breast. But he, we remember, has an inborn virtue whose powers develop further through education. That of course is nonsense, but natural man can make head and tail out of that. Whereas, the scriptural presentation of spirit and flesh remains to the believer too an unfathomable marvel. Flesh is the native state and life, in bondage to the devil and to sin. Spirit is newly created of the Holy Ghost. The spirit has not perchance evolved out of the flesh, rather it is the new life, God-created. It is the life of the Holy Ghost, yea, the Holy Ghost himself in us; and yet again not as though man’s personality were thereby destroyed. That would lead us into pantheism. My concern is to hold to Scripture’s threefold use of the word pneuma: (1) God as spirit. (2) One part of the threefold division of natural man: body, soul, spirit. (3) The inner part of the Christian that the Holy Spirit has taken over and in which He carries on His activities, as opposed to the flesh. Of this latter we speak in sanctification as it is now under consideration.

That the turning of one’s back upon sin is here taken for granted follows out of Scripture’s presentation of the opposition between spirit and flesh and the continual combat between them. But the question arises, is encouragement of sanctification necessary and, if so, to which of the two is it addressed, to the flesh or to the spirit?

One could be of the opinion that the spirit is not in need of encouragement unto sanctification, for does not the Holy Spirit himself create all this new life? Then to be sure both to will and to do in this battle against sin, against the flesh, is given at the same time. But we know also that we do not at once attain to the full stature and accoutrement of the man of God. The new life must grow. The Holy Spirit does not mechanically create something new. Rather, the elemental life of the spirit enters into the nature of human lie, where a fresh, challenging spark, dynamic with the word of God, though small at first, yet with all elements contained in itself, is to grow and mature to full vigor in the thick of lusty labor and dusty battle, as the child Jesus also increased in wisdom, etc. In the case of Jesus that was not sanctification in our sense of the word. But it is a parallel which shows how the spiritual in man can progress, grow, and abound.

In addition, the Christian has the flesh still with him, which is continually bent on subduing the activities of the spirit. For that reason this new creation of the spirit is in need of enlivening and strengthening, and this occurs, aside from the message of the gospel, through the proper encouragement of sanctification. The encouragement of sanctification therefore follows out of these two existing conditions: out of the nature of spirit and faith which is opposed to sin, and out of the fact that the spirit of man stands in need of help and strengthening.

In view of this it is immediately clear of what nature the encouragement is to sanctification. It does not address itself to the flesh but to the spirit. We are not to reform the flesh, but to drown and mortify it. We are not to unfold or evolve the new life out of the powers inherent in natural man, but rather as the Holy Ghost created the first germ of new life, so the additional work on this new life is an on-and-on creating of the Holy Spirit, by the same means as in the beginning. For that reason we cannot speak here of the law-preaching that demands, threatens, and condemns. The encouragement unto sanctification is to quicken the spirit. It should, therefore, tend to help and confirm. Only the Gospel can do that.

But since we are speaking of sanctification, of turning our backs upon sin, of our struggle against sin, the encouragement to sanctification deals with just those things that are spoken of in God’s condemning law, too, of the things into which God wishes to lead our footsteps, and of the things
He wishes us to avoid. But what a change in the manner of speaking of it! There the words are pitted against human self will. Here they presuppose the willingness of the child of God. There, unregenerate man, or the old Adam in the Christian, too, senses the will of God as a foreign will, the will of a mighty, threatening task master, under whose burden he is to labor. Here we speak to the believing Christian of the will of the Father, our Savior, in whom we delight because only His paths lead to saving health. There the preaching wishes to break the stubborn will of man; here it wishes through doctrine and exhortation to help the weak will along. There the preaching knows nothing of the gospel; here it is always intimately connected with the gospel. Not only is it prompted by the gospel, but also the presentation of the will of God thereby takes on a tone that has no similarity to that of the law.

No demanding (Do this!) no threatening (Do that or else!); no condemning (Now, see what you did!); rather a coaxing, a refreshing of the spirit, a picturing and unfolding of the good yet to come, and always all bound up in the Gospel. Indeed, what am I saying? It is actually speech of an entirely different nature, that treats of things entirely different from the things of which that law speaks.

Included in this address and approach is also the factor of respectful childlike fear as well as the humble consciousness of our own insufficiency. That is not something born of the law, although it revolves about the things with which the law is concerned. But a humble spirit and childlike fear are fruits of the Gospel.

And now, if anyone is of the opinion that this presentation, which accepts in all its validity the Apostle's word that no law is given to the righteous, robs the Christian life of the feeling of responsibility, let him consider that the childlike fear and humility created by the Gospel is a sturdier plant than slavish fear and despair. Indeed, the acknowledgment of God's majesty and sovereignty is alone given through this Gospel-born attitude of soul and not through anything that could possibly flow out of the law. Therefore this address, which we call gospel-encouragement (evangelische Ermahnung), has in addition to the stimulating joyousness of faith, also the characteristic of soberness that is far removed from any frivolousness.

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Editor's Note: The second half of Professor Koehler's paper will be published in the Winter edition of CHARIS.