

The People's Bible Teachings

LAW AND GOSPEL

Bad News—Good News

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Editor's Preface

The People's Bible Teachings is a series of books on all of the main doctrinal teachings of the Bible.

Following the pattern set by The People's Bible series, these books are written especially for laypeople. Theological terms, when used, are explained in everyday language so that people can understand them. The authors show how Christian doctrine is drawn directly from clear passages of Scripture and then how those doctrines apply to people's faith and life. Most importantly, these books show how every teaching of Scripture points to Christ, our only Savior.

The authors of The People's Bible Teachings are parish pastors and professors who have had years of experience teaching the Bible. They are men of scholarship and practical insight.

We take this opportunity to express our gratitude to Professor Leroy Dobberstein of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wisconsin, and Professor Thomas Nass of Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota, for serving as consultants for this series. Their insights and assistance have been invaluable.

We pray that the Lord will use these volumes to help his people grow in their faith, knowledge, and understanding of his saving teachings, which he has revealed to us in the Bible. To God alone be the glory.

Curtis A. Jahn
Series Editor

Introduction

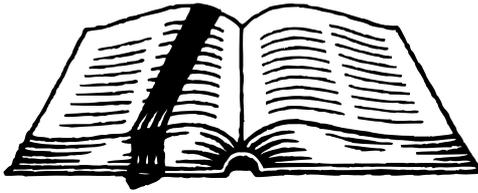
Good news—bad news! You have heard the jokes. You may have shared a few yourself. In good news—bad news jokes, the bad news eclipses any good news. So it is in our world. In God's world the formula is reversed. It is bad news—good news. Bad news is eclipsed by good news. This is no mere joke; it is serious business, as serious as life and death. It represents the difference between heaven and hell.

We live in a bad news world because of sin. Satan passed off bad news as being good. “When you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5). Sin cast a pall over the lives of our first parents and over all of their descendants. All people are born in sin, and God hates sin. “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23).

For a world filled with bad news, God has provided good news. “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Bad news and good news, sin and grace, law and gospel—these two great doctrines are the very heart and core of Holy Scripture. They tell the story of the holy Christian church. They tell the story of my life. But misunderstanding and confusion of these two great doctrines lie at the root of many of the problems that plague the church today.

Clear doctrines! Simple truths! The story of the ages! Law and gospel! How important it is that we understand them clearly and apply them correctly—to our lives and to the lives of others. Our eternal salvation depends upon it! This book will show us how this is so. May God bless our study of what the Bible teaches about these two central doctrines—law and gospel.



LAW



GOSPEL



1

God's Word Is Twofold

One divine Word

When God appeared to Moses at Mount Horeb in the form of a bush that burned but was not consumed, he said, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground" (Exodus 3:5). The place where Moses stood was holy because it was the place where God chose to reveal himself to his servant. God announced that he had chosen Moses to lead his people out of slavery in Egypt to Canaan, the Promised Land.

Holy Scripture is our "burning bush." Scripture is the place where God reveals himself to sinful people. Like the Israelites in Egypt 3,500 years ago, all people are in bondage, but this bondage is worse than the bitter slavery that Jacob's descendants suffered under the heavy yoke of

Pharaoh. The whole world is held in the bondage of sin. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, sinned by disobeying the will of God: they ate of the forbidden fruit. God had said, "When you eat of it you will surely die" (Genesis 2:17). All people share in that original sin (Romans 5:12), and the world faces an eternity in hell because of it. However, our gracious God has appeared to mankind in order to deliver all people from sin, death, and hell. That holy place where God appeared to reveal himself and his saving plan to the human race is Scripture.

It is not as though people without the Bible do not know that there is a God. They may know much about God from the creation of the world. People may know that God is good, wise, and powerful from the wonders of his creation. "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" (Romans 1:20). The stars and planets in their course and the vastness of the universe should lead people to see the hand of God. Who can observe the seasons of the year, the miracle of life, the wonders of the human body and still say there is no God? Only a fool can (Psalm 14:1).

Furthermore, the conscience, which God implanted into man from the beginning, also testifies to man's accountability to the Creator. "They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them" (Romans 2:15).

This natural knowledge of God, however, as valuable as it is, cannot save. Because sin has infested the human heart, no one by himself can know who the true God is or what he has done for our salvation. "The man without the

Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14). The natural knowledge of God can, at best, lead only to a seeking after God (Acts 17:27). As Luther observed, the natural knowledge of God is a point of contact for God's revealed Word.¹

To learn the truth about God and eternal salvation, the world must look to the divinely revealed Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:15,16). Jesus and his apostles repeatedly directed sinners to the writings of Moses and the prophets, the Old Testament. To those who challenged his authority, Jesus said, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39,40). The apostle Peter confidently asserted, "We have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (2 Peter 1:19). Scripture claims no less for the holy writings of the evangelists and apostles: "This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words" (1 Corinthians 2:13). Only in Scripture does God reveal his plan of salvation to us.

One divine truth

Human truth is valuable in its own right. Whether historical, natural, or scientific, human truth serves a valuable end. For example, we speak of history as an excellent teacher. History reveals that the cause of a nation's fall is usually weaknesses and excesses from within as much as

any force from without. Since events of the past tend to repeat themselves, much can be learned from history.

Human truth, however, is based upon human observation. For that reason, human truth is only as reliable as the human observations behind it. More than once history books and scientific theory have been changed because of human error. At one time people believed the world to be flat. Try to tell someone that today! In addition, what is held to be true by one person may not be regarded as true by another. One person believes that vitamin supplements are part of a healthy diet; another person thinks they are unnecessary.

Not so God's truth! Even as there is only one divinely inspired Scripture, written by the prophets, evangelists, and apostles, so there is only one great divine truth. God's truth is not based on mere human observation, intuition, or opinion. It proceeds from the mind of the holy, omniscient, eternal God. All of God's Word is truth (John 17:17).

At the heart of God's great truth is his grace in Christ Jesus. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). God's eternal Son also became true man in order to be a ransom for sin (Mark 10:45). He kept the law that man had broken (Galatians 4:4,5) and gave his life on the cross as the sinner's substitute (Philippians 2:8).

The great lie, on the other hand, is every idea of self-righteousness—that man is able in any way to save himself from his predicament of sin. A certain ruler once asked Jesus: "Good teacher, what must *I do* to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 18:18). When Jesus told him to sell everything he possessed, give the money to the poor, and follow him, the man became sad. He had failed to keep

even the First Commandment, for he loved his possessions more than God. Nevertheless, people claim and even boast, "I live according to the Golden Rule!" In this way they think they become acceptable before God. However, self-righteousness is no righteousness in God's eyes. It is the lie of all lies.

The apostle Paul lamented Israel's disdain for God's truth: "Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness" (Romans 10:3). What all people lost through sin and what Israel rejected, Christ came to restore once and for all. "Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17).

To this very day we have God's sure, prophetic Word recorded in that very special book we call the Bible. Many modern interpreters question the authority of the Bible. They deny the inerrancy of its writings. They insist that it cannot be true in all historic and scientific matters. But God cannot lie. His Word is true, even when it speaks about matters of history and science. Above all, it is true when it speaks about what Christ has done for man's salvation. I can rest my eternal life on it.

One divine will

Divine revelation is one. Divine truth is one. So also is divine will. God's saving will is nothing less than that all might know and enjoy his established truth in Jesus Christ. "God our Savior . . . wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time" (1 Timothy 2:3-6). This will of God for sinful man, like his divine revelation and

divine truth, is unfailing because God is constant; he does not change his mind. “The plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations” (Psalm 33:11).

People, however, change their minds. Peter denied his Lord (Matthew 26:69-75); Saul, God’s appointed king, turned away from God (1 Samuel 15); King David fell into grievous sin (2 Samuel 11). Time after time, people fail to live up to God’s will for their lives, but God is faithful. His will for sinners, from the greatest to the least, remains the same. “The Lord . . . [wants] everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

Two kinds of messages

To accomplish his one unchangeable will for sinners, God has established two kinds of messages. We know them as law and gospel. The apostle Paul pointed to these two messages as he defended his ministry to the Corinthians: “Our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Corinthians 3:5,6). Here Paul speaks of two covenants (agreements), a covenant of the letter and a covenant of the Spirit. By the covenant of the letter, Paul means the law of God. The law that God gave through Moses was a typical covenant where two parties agreed to do their part. God agreed to bless man *if* man would obey God. By the covenant of the Spirit, Paul means the gospel. It is not a typical two-sided covenant. Rather, it is a one-sided agreement in which God promises unconditionally (no *ifs*) to do all for man who is able to do nothing.

The apostle John cited the same two messages of God’s Word when he announced, “The *law* was given through

Moses; *grace and truth* came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17).

The two kinds of messages, or two forms of God's divine will, are directed towards people along two distinct lines. It is God's will that man should not sin, for God created man in his own image, that is, without sin. Holy and without sin, man possessed a knowledge of right and wrong. Not only did man know God's will, but he was also able to do it. In his sinless state man lived in perfect harmony with God. What God willed, Adam and Eve willed. It was Adam's great privilege, with the superior knowledge given to him, to name all the creatures God had made. Adam and Eve found delight in eating of all the trees in the garden except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

It is also God's will to rescue man from the sin into which he has fallen. Through the temptation of Satan, a fallen angel, Adam and Eve lost the divine image. They disobeyed God's will when they ate of the forbidden tree. They no longer enjoyed perfect fellowship with God; they no longer delighted in his perfect will. The pall of death fell upon the garden, for God had said, “When you eat of it you will surely die” (Genesis 2:17). When God came to them, they hid. After the Lord had confronted the man and the woman with their sin, he immediately came to their rescue by saying to Satan, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:15). With these words God promised a Savior from sin.

God's decree of salvation for fallen mankind through the Offspring of the woman was not some kind of afterthought or a sudden change of plan or a clever adjust-

ment of his divine will. What God revealed in the garden he had planned from eternity. Peter takes his readers all the way back into eternity to contemplate the wonders of God's plan and act of salvation for man: "For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. He was chosen *before the creation of the world*, but was revealed in these last times for your sake" (1 Peter 1:18-20).

It is God's will that man should not sin; therefore God has revealed to sinners his holy law. It is God's will to rescue the world from the bondage of sin; therefore he has revealed his blessed gospel. Law and gospel are two distinct teachings of the Word. In fact, they are perfect opposites. Some would say that they are contradictory. Any contradiction, however, is to be found in man's mind, not in God. Both law and gospel represent one divine will, one divine truth, one divine revelation.

Law and gospel have much in common

Law and gospel are opposites, but they are not opposed to each other. That, in itself, sounds like a contradiction. Therefore, before we consider the opposite natures of law and gospel, we need to observe how much these two great doctrines of the Bible have in common.

By divine revelation

As we have already noted, both the law and the gospel were given by divine revelation. God inscribed his law upon man's heart when he created man. Man knew God's immutable will perfectly. No further instruction, no additional revelation, was necessary. Then man fell into sin.

His knowledge of God's will was no longer perfect. His conscience could no longer serve as an infallible guide.

Therefore, in his own appointed time, God gave his law a second time. We commonly refer to this as the Mosaic or Sinaitic Covenant, since God gave it through Moses at Mount Sinai. The descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had become a numerous people, a nation, according to God's promise. But after Jacob took his family into Egypt and Joseph died, they became an enslaved people. Through his chosen leader, Moses, God rescued Israel from Egypt and brought his people to Mount Sinai, between Egypt and Canaan. At Mount Sinai God spoke directly to the people from the mountain. God summoned Moses up the mountain five times in order to communicate directly to him his will for his people.

In addition to restating those principles that were inscribed on the heart of man from the beginning (natural or moral law), God also gave to the Old Testament Israelites laws concerning worship (ceremonial law) and laws regarding government (civil law). Though the Mosaic or Sinaitic Covenant was later set aside (see Chapter 6), God's holy will for all people did not change. It is the same for God's New Testament people. The New Testament Scripture consistently restates those precepts of the natural law revealed by God from the beginning.

The gospel is no less by divine revelation. Unlike the law, it was not written in the heart of man. As long as man continued in that state of perfection in which God made him, there was no need for any other revelation of divine will. But as soon as man ate of the forbidden fruit and lost his original freedom, God graciously revealed the gospel, the promise of the Savior who would be a descendant of the woman (Genesis 3:15). From the Garden of

Eden to Bethlehem's manger, the Old Testament Scripture is filled with the promises of the good news of a Savior who would come to redeem the world from sin. God renewed his gospel promise to the patriarchs and by the prophets during the days of Moses and Joshua, the judges, and the kings. Each additional revelation complemented those that preceded it until Israel was able to know everything it needed to know to recognize the Messiah in his person and in his work.

Not to be overlooked in God's revelation of the law and the gospel is that both covenants, which Scripture calls the old and the new (Galatians 3), existed side by side for centuries. The old covenant, the law was in existence from the time of Moses and remained in effect until Christ's death and resurrection (see Chapter 6). The gospel, which Paul calls the new covenant, was actually in existence longer, from the time God made the first promise of a Savior in the Garden of Eden. The gospel is new, not in the sense of time, but in the sense of being superior to the law. The gospel remains in effect until the end of time.

Universal in application

Both law and gospel, opposites in nature but not in opposition to each other, are universal in application. The law applies to all people. When the question of the moral law and its application arose among the Christians in Rome because of misunderstanding concerning the law, the apostle Paul plainly stated, "What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are *all* under sin. Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and

the whole world held accountable to God” (Romans 3:9,19). God holds all people accountable for their sin. Jews, who had the Mosaic law code, were no better than Gentiles, who did not have it. The Mosaic law condemned the Jews just as soundly as the natural law, given from the beginning, condemned the Gentiles.

The gospel also is universal in application. In fact, if the universal application of the law is important for the church in carrying out its divine commission (and it is), the universality of the gospel is critical. In the Garden of Eden God promised a Savior to undo all that Satan had done, or to state it positively, to restore what Satan had destroyed. God promised a Savior for a fallen world, and Christ came to be that Savior. True, in the Old Testament the Mosaic Covenant was exclusively for Israel. And the promise of a Savior was given first to Israel, but never to the exclusion of Gentiles. God promised Abraham that in him, that is, through the promised Savior who would descend from him, “all peoples on earth will be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). The prophets proclaimed that Gentiles would flock to the church of the Messiah. Isaiah spoke of “distant nations” (49:1), “aliens” (14:1), “foreigners” (56:6), and “the ends of the earth” (49:6) to describe the believers of the New Testament church.

A gospel that is intended for all leaves no room for the notion that Christ died only for some (limited atonement) or that God has decided from eternity that some will not be saved (double predestination). Both of these horrible notions were taught by the reformer John Calvin (1509–1564), who has left his mark on much of Protestantism today.

Both deny a Savior for all people, that is, for those supposedly predestined to damnation.

The universality of the gospel is evident in the ministry of the apostle Paul. Though he felt an obligation to reach out first to his own Jewish countrymen, he rightly earned his reputation as a missionary to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46,47). He was thoroughly convinced that God “wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). This same sense of urgency, which was the hallmark of all of Paul’s mission activity, is summarized well in his writing to the Romans: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (3:23,24). For whom did Christ come? Whom did he justify? Whom did he redeem? The same number who sinned—all!

Spiritual in nature

Law and gospel are both spiritual in nature. The law is God’s, not man’s. It comes from a God who is spirit and who seeks, yes, demands in man a spiritual nature. Paul writes, “We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin” (Romans 7:14). As an illustration of what God requires of man we need only consider Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). There Jesus notes at length that the law is spiritual and requires not only outward obedience, but holiness in every aspect of life.

The gospel is also spiritual. Jesus said, “The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life” (John 6:63). Only the gospel contains spiritual life. Jesus, the Bread of life, came encouraging and inviting people to eat, that is, to believe in him and receive the spiritual life that only the gospel can offer and give.

Both originally intended for the life of man

That the law and the gospel, though opposite in nature, are not opposed to each other might best be concluded from the fact that both were originally intended for the life of man. Yes, both teach a righteousness that is wholly acceptable before God.

We do not hesitate to state in the strongest terms possible that the gospel is intended for man's righteousness and teaches a righteousness of which God approves. The righteousness of the gospel is the perfect righteousness of Christ, the sinner's substitute, which God credited to all people. It is received through faith by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the gospel. "But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe" (Romans 3:21,22). Everyone who trusts in the righteousness of Christ is righteous before God. God no longer sees any of his sins, which are many. He sees only the holiness and perfection that is in Christ.

What may not be as apparent is the fact that the law also teaches righteousness before God. The righteousness of the law is that righteousness which obedience to the law requires. We recall Jesus' words to the expert in the law who came to test him. The law expert had asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 10:25). Before answering his question, Jesus asked him for a definition of the law. The law expert showed a good knowledge of the law when he replied, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (verse 27). Then Jesus answered the

question, saying, "Do this and you will live" (verse 28). The problem was that the law expert, like every other person on earth, was unable to keep the law. God's law demands perfection, and sinful man is unable to keep the law perfectly.

The apostle Paul sums up both God's original intention in giving the law and the law's inability to save sinners: "I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death. So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good" (Romans 7:10-12). God's law, intended for life, cannot give life. The fault is not in God's law, for the law is good. The fault is in sinful man.

Our great responsibility

To properly distinguish between law and gospel is an awesome responsibility, both in application to oneself and to others. I am a sinner who needs to hear both messages. I live in a sinful world where both need to be heard. In either case, the law and gospel must be applied in the way God intended them to be used.

Allow me to illustrate. Common sense requires that tools and instruments be used for their intended purpose. It is quite important for the dentist and surgeon, as well as the carpenter and janitor, to use the right tool for the job at hand. The more delicate the task, the more important the rule. No task is more delicate than the care of souls and the spiritual well-being of sinners. The Christian will always strive to become increasingly clear in understanding law and gospel and be faithful in their application.

This is not something that comes naturally to any person. "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14). Natural man has no knowledge of the gospel. The law is acknowledged only reluctantly and/or imperfectly. What is more, man is by nature self-righteous through and through. He seeks his salvation by the works of the law. Only the Holy Spirit is able to convince man of the futility of trying to keep the law for salvation and convince the heart of the perfect righteousness and completed justification in the Lord Jesus Christ. "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:3).

Likewise, only the Holy Spirit is able to impart the necessary aptitude to divide rightly and to apply properly law and gospel. In the following chapters, may he grant us a greater understanding of God's holy Word, especially the two great doctrines of the Bible, the holy law and the saving gospel.

Perfect Opposites

**LAW &
GOSPEL**