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**The Formula of Concord, Article V:
Law and Gospel**

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The “Especially Brilliant Light”

Grace and peace to you in Christ Jesus, our only Savior and the Center of our faith.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, it is a great privilege for me, a poor sinner who finds all hope only in the cross of Christ, to stand before this gathered assembly of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC) at this twelfth triennial convention held in Lusaka and present an essay on the Formula of Concord, Article V: Law and Gospel.

The Formula of Concord calls the proper distinction between law and gospel an “especially brilliant light,”¹ because only this light keeps the Word of God clear, Christ’s merit unobscured, and frightened consciences truly comforted. For that reason, this convention’s reflection on Article V is not mere historical interest, but a living pastoral necessity for the church’s preaching and teaching in every place and time. I am deeply humbled by this undeserved opportunity to bear witness to the Word of Truth through this essay.

Although we are gathered here as representatives of confessional evangelical Lutheran churches from the four corners of the world separated by distance, by languages, and by cultures, we are still one. We are one in our confession. We are one in our faith. We are one in our doctrine. For just as the many body parts belong to one body, we too belong to the one holy Christian Church, the communion of saints of which Christ alone is the Head.

Our Lord alone, who spoke by the prophets and the apostles, laid the foundation for our fellowship in the gospel of his Word and the sacraments. Through the courage and clarity of our Reformation fathers, he guarded and defended his church in the times of tumult and testing. He guarded the church against all the whirlwinds of errors and contradictions being stirred up by the devil. And he continues to guard and guide his church until his second coming. With that confidence and assurance, we who subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions still preach the whole counsel of God, refute errors, and administer the sacraments with one accord without confusing or mixing the Word of God, presenting ourselves to God as

¹ FC SD V:1. Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from the Lutheran Confessions come from *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959). FC = Formula of Concord, Ep = Epitome, and SD = Solid Declaration.

workers who are not ashamed of proclaiming the truth about sin and grace by rightly dividing the Word of God.²

In every age, the Lord preserves his church not only against outward pressure, but also against inward confusion that threatens the comfort of the gospel. For that reason, the Formula of Concord must be read as a confession born in conflict and written for the care of souls. The next section turns to the sixteenth-century historical setting and controversies that made Article V necessary.

The Historical Context

Throughout the history of the church and humanity, it is evident that the devil rarely challenges the truth directly. Instead, confusion is sown in subtle ways. This pattern is reflected in the account of the Garden of Eden, where God's Word was not outright denied at first; it was distorted, creating uncertainty and doubt. The old serpent does not first shout, "God is false." The serpent whispers, "Did God actually say?"³

The same pattern was also seen within the church. God's Word was not thrown away at once. God's Word was bent. God's Word was made uncertain. Doubt was planted in the heart, and confusion did its slow work. And it gave way to the very errors and controversies that broke out in the sixteenth century. The clarity of Scripture was dimmed, and people's consciences were affected. As a result, God's law was diluted, making sin less serious. Similarly the gospel was distorted, making grace conditional.

Article V of the Formula of Concord was not written during peaceful times of scholarly reflection within the Lutheran Church. Instead, it emerged at a moment when the church faced immense political pressure and theological controversy. During this time the devil's assault came against the two chief teachings of Holy Scripture: the law and the gospel. Therefore, the Lutheran Church was compelled to confess clearly, so that the Word of truth would not be diluted or polluted and consciences would not be harmed.

Article V: "Of the Law and of the Gospel," reflects the late sixteenth century's struggles. It was written because confusion about the law and gospel threatened the church. To appreciate its significance, one must first understand the historical setting that prompted this confession.

After Luther's Death: A Church under Pressure

When Dr. Martin Luther died on February 18, 1546, the Lutheran Church lost what Bente calls a "bulwark of peace and doctrinal purity,"⁴ and a terrible vacuum remained. Until that

² 2 Timothy 2:15. In *The Lutheran Study Bible* notes on this verse, the author quotes from Apology V:67: "It is necessary to distinguish these things aright, as Paul says in 2 Timothy 2:15. We must see what Scripture says about the Law and what it says about the promises." See *The Lutheran Study Bible*, ed. Edward A. Engelbrecht (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009), 2083.

³ Genesis 3:1. In *The Lutheran Study Bible* notes on this verse, the author writes that the "first temptation was (and remains) the temptation to doubt God's Word." The author quotes from Smalcald Articles III VIII:5: "[the devil] turned Adam and Eve into enthusiasts. He led them away from God's outward Word to spiritualizing and self-pride." See *The Lutheran Study Bible*, 18.

⁴ F. Bente, "Historical Introductions to the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church," in *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1921), 93.

time Luther's own influence kept external opponents at bay and prevented internal disagreements. Bente notes that "the powerful and commanding personality of Luther had checked all forces making for war from without and for dissension from within."⁵ Even the false brethren did not dare to "publish their errors while the voice of the lion was heard."⁶ After Luther's death, that restraint was gone. Strife began quickly. Political and theological conflict followed "in the wake of his death."⁷

Melanchthon himself felt the weight of the moment. In his address at Wittenberg on February 19, 1546, he spoke of Luther with the words: "*Obiit auriga et currus Israel*. He is dead, the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof."⁸ This was more than a lament. It was a warning. The church would now be tested. Without Luther's steady hand, compromise and division could grow.

At the same time, the external political pressure became severe. The Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, sought to eradicate what he called the Lutheran "heresy" by force. He defeated the Smalcald League at the Battle of Mühlberg in 1547 and forced the Evangelical princes, including the Elector of Saxony, into humiliation and captivity. A military defeat thus became a theological crisis because the Emperor now had control to dictate the religious policy.

Augsburg Interim and the Compromises

Following his victory in the Smalcaldic War, Emperor Charles V passed the decree widely known as the Augsburg Interim on May 15, 1548. It was designed to regulate religious affairs of the day. This decree demanded that Lutherans adopt Roman Catholic doctrines and ceremonies, accepting papal authority.

Imperial troops were deployed to enforce the Interim. Cities that resisted lost civic freedoms. Pastors who refused to comply were removed, imprisoned, banished, and in some cases even executed. This "Interim" period thus became a time of sifting. It showed how quickly fear can drive compromise. Without the firm guidance of Luther, the theologians of Wittenberg were strongly tempted to seek a middle way. Fear of persecution and fear of losing property pushed many toward concessions.

Once the Interim was forced into the church, "a domestic warfare was unavoidable."⁹ The crisis was not only political. It struck the heart of doctrine. The Augsburg Interim described justification as not only absolution but also inner renewal. It even omitted *sola fide* and shifted the emphasis toward the Roman doctrine of infused righteousness. In that way, the gospel itself was being reshaped into something partly earned and partly achieved within the sinner.¹⁰

⁵ Bente, "Historical Introductions," 93.

⁶ Bente, "Historical Introductions," 93.

⁷ Bente, "Historical Introductions," 93.

⁸ Bente, "Historical Introductions," 93.

⁹ Bente, "Historical Introductions," 104.

¹⁰ Bente, "Historical Introductions," 96.

Leipzig Interim and the Compromises

In a criticism of the Augsburg Interim published in early July 1548, Melanchthon wrote, “Although war and destruction are threatened, it is, nevertheless, our duty to regard the Word of God as higher; that is to say, we must not deny what we know to be the truth of the Gospel.”¹¹ Yet when the pressure of the Interim increased, Melanchthon did not give the public and firm testimony that loyal Lutherans expected from him. Aquila pleaded with him to speak and urged him to “defend the Word and name of Christ and His honor”¹² against Agricola, who praised the Interim. But Melanchthon, intimidated by the Emperor’s threats and fearing for his safety, remained unwilling to step forward openly.

This reluctance did not remain silent but soon moved into compromise. At Elector Maurice’s request, Melanchthon agreed to help draft a substitute for the Augsburg Interim. This compromise document was adopted at Leipzig on December 22, 1548. It soon became known as the Leipzig Interim.

The Leipzig Interim was defended with the language of “moderation” and “adiaphora.” In that spirit, the Wittenberg and Leipzig theologians began “declaring their willingness to submit to the will of the Emperor with respect to the reintroduction of Romish ceremonies and to acknowledge the authority of the Pope and bishops if they would tolerate the true doctrine.”¹³

Yet, the Leipzig Interim did not only adjust outward ceremonies. It also blurred the heart of the gospel. It became, as Bente says, “a truce over the corpse of true Lutheranism.”¹⁴ In it, *sola fide* was omitted, and justification was described in terms that Rome could interpret as “infused righteousness.” Faith was placed alongside other virtues, and good works were said to be necessary to salvation.

The Emergence of Controversies

Once the church allowed public compromise in the name of “moderation,” the gate was wide open for further conflicts. The soil became fertile for a number of theological disputes. However, within the scope of this essay, it is necessary to focus on the two major controversies that became the primary reason for the writing of Article V: the Antinomian Controversy and the Philippist confusion.

1. The Antinomian Controversy: The Danger of Silencing the Law

The history of the Lutheran Church demonstrates that the devil attacks the central doctrine of justification from two sides. On one side, he uses legalism, the idea that man can earn salvation by his own works. This was the error of the papacy that Martin Luther fought against in the Reformation. But as soon as the devil saw that he could not destroy the gospel through works-righteousness, he attacked from the opposite side. He tempted people to believe that because we are saved by grace, the law of God is no longer necessary in the

¹¹ Bente, “Historical Introductions,” 98.

¹² Bente, “Historical Introductions,” 98.

¹³ Bente, “Historical Introductions,” 98.

¹⁴ Bente, “Historical Introductions,” 99.

church. This error is called “antinomianism” (from the Greek *anti*, “against,” and *nomos*, “law”). So, “the root meaning of ‘antinomianism’ is opposition to the Law.”¹⁵ The father of this confusion was a man named Johann Agricola, and his teachings threatened to turn the freedom of the Christian into a license for sin, thereby losing Christ entirely.

The Rise of “Grickel”

Johann Agricola was not originally an enemy of the Reformation. Born in Eisleben, the same town as Luther, he was one of Luther’s students and trusted friends. Luther even called him “Grickel” and hosted him in his own home. However, Agricola possessed a dangerous mixture of vanity and ambition. When Philip Melancthon was given a professorship at Wittenberg instead of him in 1526, Agricola became jealous and began to look for ways to distinguish himself as a “purer” theologian than his colleagues.

The conflict began when Melancthon wrote the “Visitation Articles” in 1527, urging pastors to preach the law to the common people to bring them to repentance. Agricola attacked this, claiming that it was a return to Roman Catholic legalism. He famously declared, “The Decalog belongs in the courthouse, not in the pulpit. All those who are occupied with Moses are bound to go to the devil. To the gallows with Moses!”¹⁶ Although Luther managed to settle this initial dispute, Agricola secretly continued to spread his errors, eventually forcing Luther to hold several public disputations against him between 1537 and 1540.¹⁷

The Antinomian Error: Confusing the Source of Repentance

Agricola’s error was a confusion regarding how the Holy Spirit works repentance in the heart of a sinner. He fundamentally rejected the biblical function of the law. His central claim was even more dangerous, he taught that “once a man is regenerate and has come to faith, he no longer has need for the Law’s punishing directives. True contrition and repentance, even knowledge of sin ... are worked by the Gospel only.”¹⁸

He taught that when a sinner looks at the wounds of Christ and sees how much the Son of God loved him, this love alone breaks the heart and creates repentance. Thus, he insisted that “by experiencing the kindness and mercy of God the regenerate man is caused to grieve over his sins and repents.”¹⁹

Therefore, he concluded that the Ten Commandments have absolutely no place in the church and the pulpit, and affirmed that preaching the law only produced a forced, fearful repentance (like that of Judas) rather than a genuine repentance born of love.

¹⁵ Eugene Klug and Otto Stahlke, *Getting into The Formula of Concord* (St. Louis, Concordia, 1977), 43.

¹⁶ Bente, “Historical Introductions,” 163.

¹⁷ Donald L. Thompson, “The Formula of Concord: Article V – Of the Law and the Gospel,” (paper presented at the Metro-North Pastoral Conference, Milwaukee, WI, September 18, 1995; found in the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary online essay file), 2.

¹⁸ Klug and Stahlke, *Getting into The Formula*, 43.

¹⁹ Klug and Stahlke, *Getting into The Formula*, 43.

The Dangers of Antinomianism

Luther saw immediately that Agricola's teaching was a trick of the devil designed to remove Christ.²⁰ Luther argued that "whoever abolishes the Law must with it also abolish sins. If he would allow sins to remain, he must much more allow the Law to remain. ... If there is no sin, Christ is nothing."²¹ Why would a person need a Savior if he has no sin to be saved from? I notice three dangers that come out of antinomianism. They are:

1. **Carnal Security:** Without the thunder of the law, sinners fall into a false sense of security. They imagine they are Christians because they know the story of Jesus, even while they continue living in open sin. Melanchthon in his criticism of antinomians writes, "Plainly they pour new wine into old bottles who preach faith without repentance, without the doctrine of the fear of God, without the doctrine of the Law, and accustom the people to a certain carnal security, which is worse than all former errors under the Pope have been."²²
2. **Anti-gospelism:** From the words of Bente, it is very clear that "the cocoon of antinomianism always bursts into antigospelism."²³ Ironically, antinomianism destroys the gospel. If the law does not first crush the heart, the gospel cannot bind it up. If the gospel is employed as a tool for inducing fear, it ceases to function as the gospel.
3. **A Return to Works-Righteousness:** Bente argues that by teaching that contrition follows from the love of God (rather than the fear of the law), Agricola reversed the order of salvation, making a human work (love) the antecedent (cause) of justification rather than its fruit. Agricola essentially reintroduces the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification. By insisting that repentance must arise from love, he made a human emotion and a "good work" (loving God) the prerequisite and cause of forgiveness.

The Verdict of the Formula of Concord

The Formula of Concord decisively rejected Agricola's errors. It affirmed that the law must be preached to believers and unbelievers alike. It clarified that while the gospel brings the cure, the law must first diagnose the illness. "For the Gospel does not preach the forgiveness of sins to indifferent and secure hearts, but to the 'oppressed' or penitent."²⁴

2. *The Philippist Confusion: Turning the Gospel into Law*

After Dr. Martin Luther died in 1546, an error emerged not only from Reformation opponents but also among his Wittenberg colleagues, the "Philippists" loyal to Philip Melanchthon. They blurred the distinction between law and gospel, which risked diminishing the church's comfort.

²⁰ Bente, "Historical Introductions," 167.

²¹ Bente, "Historical Introductions," 167.

²² Bente, "Historical Introductions," 163.

²³ Bente, "Historical Introductions," 161.

²⁴ FC SD V:9

The Roots of Confusion

The initial issues arose due to a lack of clarity. Although Philip Melanchthon was a distinguished scholar and the author of the Augsburg Confession, he often did not maintain Luther's consistent precision. In his later years, Melanchthon sometimes described the gospel in terms that made the line between law and gospel unclear. For example, he referred to the gospel as "a preaching of repentance" that rebukes "the sin of unbelief."²⁵

Melanchthon's followers, men like Paul Crell, Christopher Pezel, and Caspar Cruciger the Younger, interpreted his ambiguous statements and transformed them into rigid doctrinal errors. In their zeal to oppose the lawlessness of the antinomians, the Philippists went too far. They taught that "the Gospel is not only a proclamation of grace but also at the same time a proclamation of repentance, which rebukes the greatest sin, unbelief."²⁶ They reasoned that because Christ rebukes the sin of unbelief, and because unbelief is a rejection of the gospel, therefore the gospel itself must be a preaching of repentance.

The Philippist Error: The Gospel as a Preaching of Repentance

The central issue of Philippist thought centered on the claim that the gospel, in its true form, contains both the message of repentance and the admonition of sin. Paul Crell, a prominent Philippist, expressed this by stating: "Since this greatest and chief sin [unbelief] is revealed, rebuked, and condemned by the Gospel alone, therefore also the Gospel alone is expressly and particularly, truly and properly, a preaching and a voice of repentance or conversion in its true and proper sense."²⁷

This teaching significantly altered how the gospel is understood. Rather than being just a source of comfort, grace, and forgiveness, the gospel is altered into a message filled with demands and accusations. The "good news" was turned into a "new law." If the gospel's role is to rebuke sinners and terrify their consciences about unbelief, then the gospel is no longer a medicine that heals, but it has become a medicine that kills.

The Dangers of the Philippist Error

It is important to recognize that this issue is not merely a war over words. The Philippist error has a direct impact on the sinner's assurance before God. If the gospel includes both correction and condemnation, where can the terrified sinner go for relief?

1. **Turning Christ into a New Moses:** This error treats Christ as a second Moses. As our Confessions caution, transforming the gospel into a message solely focused on repentance—to "change the Gospel into law"—obscures the merit of Christ and deprives troubled consciences of comfort.²⁸ If the gospel comes to a sinner with a whip to rebuke unbelief, then that gospel ceases to be the free offer of grace. Then the gospel will become a new requirement, leaving the sinner without a refuge.

²⁵ Bente, "Historical Introductions," 172.

²⁶ FC SD V:2

²⁷ Bente, "Historical Introductions," 172.

²⁸ FC SD V:1

2. **Confusing the Distinct Functions of the Word:** This error mixes up the two chief distinct purposes of God's Word. It is true that the Scripture sometimes use the word "gospel" in a wide sense to refer to the whole doctrine of Christ, which includes his call to repentance. However, regarding the specific function of these teachings, a clear and strict distinction must be maintained.

By teaching that the gospel is meant to rebuke the sinner, the Philippists took away the only true comfort a terrified conscience possesses. They turned the good news into bad news. If the gospel is used to accuse, it can no longer heal. One must reject this confusion, for as the Formula of Concord states: "The Gospel is not a preaching of repentance or reproof, but properly nothing else than a preaching of consolation, and a joyful message which does not reprove or terrify, but comforts consciences."²⁹

The Verdict of the Formula of Concord

The faithful Lutherans, led by men like Flacius and later the authors of the Formula, recognized that this teaching would destroy the Reformation. They saw that "the cocoon of antinomianism always bursts into antigospelism."³⁰

Therefore, Article V of the Formula of Concord decisively rejected the Philippist error. It confessed that while the word "gospel" can be used broadly, "strictly speaking, the Gospel is the promise of forgiveness of sins and justification through Christ, whereas the law is a message that rebukes and condemns sin."³¹ It clarified that the Holy Spirit uses the law to reprove unbelief, for the law demands faith in God. The gospel remains exclusively the offer of grace, the "power of God unto salvation" (Romans 1:16).

Defining the Terms: Law and Gospel

According to the Formula of Concord and the faithful Reformation fathers, the doctrinal content of the entire Holy Scripture, both the Old and the New Testaments, consists of two distinct doctrines: the law and the gospel. These two doctrines are not merely different phases of one divine revelation; they are distinct in their nature, their promises, and their effects.³² While the Bible contains historical accounts, prophecies, and poetry, all valid theology must ultimately be classified under one of these two headings. As the Apology of the Augsburg Confession states, "All Scripture should be divided into these two chief doctrines, the law and the promises. In some places it presents the law. In others it presents the promise of Christ."³³

The controversies of the sixteenth century, such as the antinomian and Philippist errors previously discussed, demonstrate how easily the purity of these doctrines can be compromised when they are not clearly defined. Confusion regarding the definition of the law and the gospel inevitably leads to confusion in the hearts of the people. Therefore, before one can properly define and distinguish these two chief teachings of the Holy Scripture, one must understand their strict Scriptural definitions as set forth in the Lutheran Confessions. As

²⁹ FC Ep V:7. *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1921), 803.

³⁰ Bente, "Historical Introductions," 161.

³¹ FC SD V:27

³² Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1953), 228–229, 250–251.

³³ Apology IV:5

these Confessions provide a pure and unambiguous exposition and explanation of God's Word—the Holy Scripture—which remains the only authoritative source and norm for faith, doctrine, and life.

The Necessity of Strict Definition

When the Formula of Concord speaks of the law and the gospel, it is careful to define them in their “proper” or strict sense. This precision is necessary because the term “gospel” is sometimes used both in the Scriptures and by the theologians in a wide sense to refer to the entire doctrine of Christ, including his call to repentance and the exposition of the law, which became the source of much of the contention during the Interim period. If one were to stop at this wide definition, as the Philippists did, one might erroneously conclude that the gospel is a “preaching of repentance” or a message that issues new commandments.³⁴

Nevertheless, the Formula of Concord maintains that such a broad definition does not adequately serve pastoral care or doctrinal clarity. To prevent misinterpretations that might reduce the gospel to a message of repentance or equate it with a new form of law, the Confessions emphasize that the law and the gospel must be distinguished in their proper or strict sense, as opposed to the wide sense. Only through this precise distinction does the doctrine become the “especially brilliant light” that reveals the merit of Christ and provides comfort to troubled consciences.³⁵

The Definition of the Law

What, then, is the law in its proper sense? In its proper sense, the law is not merely a human tradition or a collection of civil ordinances. Rather, it is the Word of God, revealing God's just and unchanging will for humanity. The law provides guidance on how individuals ought to conduct themselves, outlining both required and prohibited actions.

The Formula of Concord sets forth the following precise definitions for the law:

Epitome: “We believe, teach, and confess that, strictly speaking, the law is a divine doctrine which teaches what is right and God-pleasing and which condemns everything that is sinful and contrary to God's will.”³⁶

Solid Declaration: “We unanimously believe, teach, and confess... that, strictly speaking, the law is a divine doctrine which reveals the righteousness and immutable will of God, shows how man ought to be disposed in his nature, thoughts, words, and deeds in order to be pleasing and acceptable to God, and threatens the transgressors of the law with God's wrath and temporal and eternal punishment.”³⁷

The essential function of the law, therefore, is to command and to accuse. The law makes demands and exposes sin. It serves like a mirror. It reflects God's holiness and shows how far human beings fall short. As the Formula explains, the law has this unique purpose:

³⁴ FC SD V:3-6

³⁵ FC SD V:1; FC Ep V:7

³⁶ FC Ep V:3

³⁷ FC SD V:17

“to condemn sin and to lead to a knowledge of sin.”³⁸ Therefore, whenever God’s Word commands, demands, threatens, accuses, or warns of punishment for sin, whether in the Old Testament or in the New Testament, it is certainly the preaching of the law.

The Definition of the Gospel

What, then, is the gospel in its proper sense? In its proper sense, the gospel is not a new law, nor a demand for improvement, nor a message that threatens and condemns. Rather, it is the Word of God that reveals to the condemned sinner, forgiveness, life and salvation offered freely and solely for the sake of Christ’s vicarious satisfaction without the merit or cooperation on the part of the sinner.³⁹

The Formula of Concord sets forth the following precise definitions for the gospel:

Epitome: “We believe, teach, and confess that the Gospel is not a proclamation of contrition and reproof but is, strictly speaking, precisely a comforting and joyful message which does not reprove or terrify but comforts consciences that are frightened by the law, directs them solely to the merit of Christ, and raises them up again by the delightful proclamation of God’s grace and favor acquired through the merits of Christ.”⁴⁰

Solid Declaration: “For everything which comforts and which offers the mercy and grace of God to transgressors of the law strictly speaking is, and is called, the Gospel, a good and joyful message that God wills not to punish sins but to forgive them for Christ’s sake.”⁴¹

The essential function of the gospel, therefore, is to comfort and to forgive. The gospel makes peace and brings joy. It serves as a healing medicine. It offers mercy and reveals Christ. It proclaims God’s grace to sinners who are condemned by the law. As it is stated in the Formula, “the Gospel is the promise of forgiveness of sins and justification through Christ.”⁴² Therefore, whenever God’s Word offers forgiveness, announces peace with God, and directs terrified consciences solely to Christ’s merit, whether in the Old Testament or in the New Testament, it is certainly the preaching of the gospel.

The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel

After defining both of the terms, it is important to clarify and understand their distinctions. For confessional evangelical Lutherans, correctly distinguishing between law and gospel is not just optional but very essential and central. The Formula refers to this distinction as “an especially brilliant light which serves the purpose that the Word of God may be rightly divided and the writings of the holy prophets and apostles may be explained and understood correctly.”⁴³

³⁸ FC SD V:17

³⁹ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3, 222.

⁴⁰ FC Ep V:7

⁴¹ FC SD V:21

⁴² FC SD V:27

⁴³ FC SD V:1

Although both are the Word of God and both are necessary for the church, commingling them leads to spiritual disaster. History demonstrates that such mix-up leads to confusion, controversies and chaos. These two teachings must never be tangled into “one doctrine,” because “a commingling of the Law and Gospel always results in a corruption of the doctrines of conversion, faith, and justification.”⁴⁴

Differences in their Content and Promises

The primary and clearest distinction between law and gospel is found in their respective content. The law addresses matters of works, outlining what individuals are required to do for God. In contrast, the gospel centers on faith, conveying what God has accomplished for humanity through Christ.

The law also offers promises, as seen in Scripture: “Do this and you shall live” (Luke 10:28). However, these promises are always conditional and depend on perfect obedience. And since no one can keep the law perfectly, its promise will never bring comfort. It instead exposes sin and holds the sinner guilty.

Whereas the gospel promises are not conditional. They do not depend on human performance. They depend on Christ and God’s faithfulness. As Pieper points out, law and gospel are fundamentally different: The law demands and condemns, while the gospel offers and forgives.⁴⁵

Differences in their Function and Effects

Both the law and the gospel have their own distinct functions. The law functions as a condemning weapon leaving the sinner with no place to hide from God’s anger over sin. As the Formula says, “Everything that rebukes sin is and belongs to the law, the proper function of which is to condemn sin and to lead to a knowledge of sin.”⁴⁶

Whereas the primary function of the gospel, by contrast, is to bring comfort and life to the terrified sinner. For “the Gospel is a proclamation that shows and gives nothing but grace and forgiveness in Christ.”⁴⁷ And it is “the power of God unto salvation” (Romans 1:16).

The proper distinction between the law and the gospel is the key for interpreting the Scriptures. As affirmed by the Formula of Concord, the church must always “observe this distinction with particular diligence”⁴⁸ lest the church fall prey to the confusion again. When this distinction is maintained, the glory of Christ shines brightly, and sinners find true peace in the promise of grace.

⁴⁴ Bente, “Historical Introductions,” 169.

⁴⁵ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3, 228.

⁴⁶ FC SD V:17

⁴⁷ FC SD V:12

⁴⁸ FC SD V:1

A Practical Comparative Study of Modern Confounders of Law and Gospel⁴⁹

It is a grave mistake to assume that the errors of the sixteenth century, antinomianism and Philippism, are mere historical artifacts. The devil has tirelessly sought to obscure this distinction by mingling these two doctrines at every age. This confusion appears in various forms, from the gross errors of the papacy to the subtle mingling in modern preaching. The core confusion behind many modern confounders springs from a single root. The refusal to let the law remain the law (which condemns) and the gospel remain the gospel (which saves freely).

What follows is a practical comparative set of twenty-first century confounders that often appear across major denominations. Each confounder is measured by the Formula's definitions: the law condemns the sinner and kills, whereas the gospel comforts the terrified and saves.

1. *The Conditional or Decision Gospel Groups*

Current Follower: This approach is common in Baptist, Pentecostal, Evangelical, and non-denominational circles. It is often heard in revival meetings, campus ministries, and popular Christian media where “altar calls” and “decision moments” are central.

The Error: The gospel is treated as a possibility that becomes true only after a human choice. The message quietly shifts from Christ's finished work to the hearer's act: not simply “Christ has died and risen,” but “Christ saves *if* a decision is made.”

The Confessional Criticism (FC): Article V rejects every attempt to make the gospel, in its strict sense, a preaching that demands, rebukes, or pressures the sinner. When the gospel is framed as a requirement, whether the requirement is to “decide,” “commit,” or “surrender,” then the gospel is no longer “properly nothing else than a preaching of consolation.”⁵⁰ It has been changed into a new law. Then Christ's merit is no longer the sole comfort, and faith itself is treated as a measurable performance rather than the Spirit's gift.

The Result: The hearer is driven inward. Assurance is sought in the quality of the decision, the strength of surrender, or the intensity of sincerity. The conscience is left uncertain and unstable, because the foundation has been moved from Christ's merit to the heart's condition. Article V warns against this, lest the gospel is changed into law, and Christ's merit is obscured.⁵¹

The Practical Note: In caring for a terrified conscience, the pastor should not ask, “Has the heart been given to Jesus?” or “Has the decision been made?” The human heart is deceitful and cannot be the foundation of comfort. The pastor should instead declare, “Christ has given his life for sinners, and his forgiveness stands firm.” The gospel is not a demand for human surrender; it is God's absolution delivered for Christ's sake.

⁴⁹ This comparative summary is by no means intended to be an exhaustive or detailed dogmatic analysis of the entire theological systems of the denominations mentioned. Rather, it represents a practical assessment of prevalent trends and errors viewed specifically through the lens of the Formula of Concord, Article V, based on the author's study of the Lutheran Confessions in preparation for this essay.

⁵⁰ FC Ep V:7, *Triglotta*, 803.

⁵¹ FC SD V:1

2. The Feeling or Experience Gospel Groups

Current Followers: This approach is common in Methodist, Holiness, Charismatic, and certain Pietistic traditions where the validity of faith is measured by the intensity of emotional experience or a specific “crisis” moment of conversion.

The Error: Assurance is redirected away from Christ’s external promise in the Word and sacraments and placed into the inner life, prayer intensity, emotional warmth, inner struggle, or a sensed “breakthrough.” The question quietly changes from “What has Christ done and promised?” to “What is being felt and experienced?”

The Confessional Criticism (FC): Article V guards the hearer from turning the gospel into a conditional message. When comfort is tied to inward evidence, the gospel is “turned back into a teaching of law,” because the heart is given a new task: producing or maintaining the right condition. In that exchange, “the merit and benefits of Christ are easily obscured,” and the terrified conscience is deprived of the very thing the gospel gives—pure consolation grounded outside the sinner, in Christ alone.⁵²

The Result: The gospel no longer sounds like a gift delivered; it begins to sound like a spiritual process to be achieved. The conscience learns to measure its “spiritual temperature.” When feelings fade, despair grows. When feelings rise, pride grows. Either way, the heart is trained to look inward for certainty instead of resting on Christ’s objective work.

The Practical Note: Faith does not rest on feelings. Feelings change, but Christ’s promise does not. Comfort is located at the cross and in the external Word that delivers forgiveness. The question “Do the feelings say forgiven?” gives way to “Has Christ died and risen for sinners?” His sacrifice remains true even when the heart feels cold and empty.

3. The Social or Liberation Gospel Groups

Current Followers: This approach is common in mainline Protestantism, Liberation Theologies, and the contemporary “Social Justice” movements, where the church’s mission is framed mainly as societal transformation, and the central need is described as oppression and injustice rather than as sin before God.

The Error: God’s good command to love the neighbor is renamed “gospel.” The “good news” then becomes a program of change, justice work, equality campaigns, and community reform, so that the message sounds less like Christ’s forgiveness and more like a summons to moral action.

The Confessional Criticism (FC): Article V draws a bright line that the gospel, in its strict sense, is not a message that commands or demands. It is consolation that points “alone to the merit of Christ” and raises terrified consciences. When neighbor-love is proclaimed as the saving message, the gospel has been displaced by law. Good works, however necessary as fruits, cannot carry the office of forgiveness. When the fruit is treated as the root, the passive righteousness of faith is exchanged for the active righteousness of the law, and the heart is pushed from Christ’s merit to human performance.⁵³

⁵² FC SD V:1

⁵³ FC SD V:1

The Result: Christ is changed from Redeemer to moral teacher or social reformer. The conscience is loaded with the weight of “fixing the world,” while the comfort of Christ’s vicarious satisfaction grows quiet or disappears. The sinner is left with tasks, but without the absolution that creates faith and peace with God.

The Practical Note: Feeding the poor and seeking justice belong to the law’s teaching about love for the neighbor. The gospel proclaims what Christ has done for sinners and delivers forgiveness. From that forgiveness, love begins to flow in freedom not as the basis of acceptance, but as the fruit of faith.

4. Gospel Reductionism Groups

Current Followers: This approach is common in contemporary “gospel-centered” Evangelical movements and some liberal Lutheran circles where the desire to sound welcoming leads to discomfort with preaching God’s wrath, judgment, and the law’s threats.

The Error: Everything gets labeled “gospel.” The law is softened, avoided, or treated as unhelpful negativity. In its place, “gospel language” about love and acceptance is used to correct behavior and motivate change. Grace is then treated as a tool for moral improvement rather than Christ’s free comfort for the condemned sinner.

The Confessional Criticism (FC): Article V protects the gospel’s strict meaning. When law and gospel are contrasted, the gospel is “properly nothing else than a preaching of consolation, . . . which does not reprove or terrify, but comforts consciences . . . , points alone to the merit of Christ, and raises them up again.”⁵⁴ When “gospel” is used to reprove and press for change, the gospel is “turned back into a teaching of law,” and Christ’s comfort is obscured. At the same time, withholding the law from secure hearts repeats the antinomian misuse: sin is not named as sin, consciences are not struck, and the gospel is treated as unnecessary or merely assumed.

The Result: Two opposite spiritual injuries appear. Some remain secure in their sin because the law never exposes. Others become exhausted because “gospel” talk turns into a constant pressure to improve. In both cases, the hearer is not led to rest in Christ’s merit. Either the wound is never uncovered, or the medicine is changed into a demand.

The Practical Note: Repentance does not grow from soft words that avoid accusation. The law names sin and closes every excuse. Only then does the gospel sound like what it truly is: Christ’s absolution, pure comfort, and unconditional relief for terrified consciences.⁵⁵

5. The Roman Gospel Groups

Current Followers: This approach is formally taught in the Roman Catholic theology and often reappears wherever justification is defined as inner renewal, moral progress, or cooperation with grace.

⁵⁴ FC Ep V:7, *Triglotta*, 803.

⁵⁵ FC SD V:25

The Error: The “gospel” is treated as a new law, grace offered. Justification is secured through renewal and obedience. Christ is heard less as the Redeemer who gives righteousness and more as a Lawgiver who requires a higher righteousness.

The Confessional Criticism (FC): Article V warns against “making a law out of the gospel,” because this mingling obscures Christ’s merit and robs consciences of comfort. When law and gospel are contrasted, the gospel is “properly nothing else than a preaching of consolation, ... which does not reprove or terrify, but comforts consciences ..., points alone to the merit of Christ, and raises them up again.”⁵⁶

The Result: Assurance collapses into measurement. The conscience is trained to ask whether repentance, renewal, and obedience have become “enough,” and the answer never settles the heart.

The Practical Note: Comfort is located outside the sinner in Christ’s finished merit delivered in the promise. Renewal follows as fruit, but it cannot carry the conscience, and it cannot serve as the ground of acceptance before God.

6. *Prosperity Gospel Groups*

Current Followers: This approach is prominent within Neo-Pentecostal and “Word of Faith” movements, widely spread through mass media and revival platforms, often appealing to those seeking material “breakthrough.”

The Error: Christ’s atonement is expanded into a guarantee of wealth and bodily health. Faith is treated less as trust in Christ and more as a mechanism that triggers blessing. The “gospel” becomes a transaction: giving, declarations, and techniques are presented as the means by which God’s favor is released

The Confessional Criticism (FC): Article V confines the gospel, in its strict sense, to consolation for sinners terrified by the law, pointing “alone to the merit of Christ.” When material outcomes are attached to faith and giving, the message shifts from promise to condition. The gospel is thereby “turned back into a teaching of law,” because divine favor is presented as dependent on measurable acts and outcomes rather than on Christ’s merit.⁵⁷

The Result: The poor are burdened with a false accusation that suffering signals unbelief, while the prosperous are tempted into carnal security. The theology of the cross is displaced by a theology of glory, and the afflicted are left without consolation when prosperity does not arrive.

The Practical Note: Comfort is anchored in Christ crucified and in the external promises delivered through Word and sacrament, not in bank balance or bodily condition. The gospel proclaims forgiveness and eternal life for Christ’s sake, even when poverty remains and sickness continues.

Across these groups, the underlying confusion remains the same: God’s promise is reshaped into a human requirement. In one direction, the law is softened into guidance for a better life, and sin no longer stands exposed before the holy God. In the other direction, the

⁵⁶ FC Ep V:7, *Triglotta*, 803.

⁵⁷ FC SD V:1

gospel is recast as a program of repentance, decision, progress, or performance, and Christ's merit is no longer heard as a free and finished gift. Wherever this happens, the Formula's "especially brilliant light" is dimmed. Consciences then swing between two miseries—false security for the unbroken, and despair for the broken, because neither the law nor the gospel is allowed to do its own work.

For that reason, the discussion now turns from diagnosis to pastoral practice. The next section considers practical help for mission churches in India and in honor–shame settings, where strong religious instincts about merit, shame, and “face” easily bend both law and gospel unless Christ's clear voice is kept in the foreground.

Practical Help for Mission Churches in India and Honor–Shame Cultures

In many mission settings, hearers already carry strong religious assumptions into the pew and into the classroom. In the Indian context, a familiar Telugu couplet is *Dharmashastramu–Suvartha* (Law-Gospel). The terms can be well known to the ear, while their proper meaning remains unclear to the conscience. When that happens, confusion does not stay theoretical. This confusion shows itself most clearly in preaching and catechesis, where either secure sinners remain untroubled or terrified consciences lose the comfort of Christ.

The Contextual Challenge

In India, I've noticed that the first problem is a basic misunderstanding about the scope of Scripture. Many Christians assume that the Old Testament contains only law and the New Testament contains only gospel, as though Moses cannot comfort and Christ cannot command. That assumption injures the care of souls. When law and gospel are not rightly distinguished, secure sinners receive comfort where terror is needed, and terrified sinners receive burdens where comfort is needed.

This confusion is intensified by persistent works-righteous instincts. In the Indian religious mindset, sin (*papam*)⁵⁸ is commonly treated as moral failure that produces *negative karma*⁵⁹ and violates *dharma*,⁶⁰ rather than as rebellion against the holy God. From that angle, many presume innocence by birth and deny the corruption of original sin. However, the Confessions state that original sin is “the abominable and dreadful inherited disease which has corrupted our entire nature. In fact, we must consider this as the chief sin, the root

⁵⁸ In the South Indian language of Telugu, *papam* is defined in Hindu theology as “demerit” or an immoral action which results in negative *karma*. It functions as the direct opposite of *punyam*, or “merit,” which is accumulated through righteous deeds. This dualistic system treats sin as a finite debt to be paid rather than an inherent corruption of nature.

⁵⁹ *Karma*, literally meaning “act” or “deed,” is the immutable moral law of cause and effect, often described as “sowing and reaping” whereby every action produces a corresponding result. In Hindu belief, an individual's *karma* comprises their moral actions and the resulting consequences, which collectively determine the specific body and life form they will inhabit in their next reincarnation. See Timothy Tennent, “Essentials of Hinduism: wm243-01 Introduction to Essentials of Hinduism Lesson Transcript,” 6.

⁶⁰ *Dharma* is defined as the “cosmic order of disciplined behavior” or moral duty that serves as the destiny for each individual to obey during their lifetime. Adherence to one's *dharma*, which includes moral principles such as non-violence, truthfulness, and self-control determines whether an individual is reincarnated into a higher or lower life form in the next existence. In some contexts, the term is also used to mean “teaching.” See “Hinduism: An Evaluation from the Theological Perspective of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod,” December 2013, 3.

and fountain of all actual sin.”⁶¹ When sin is reduced to just a heap of *karma* viewed as finite debt, the law tends to sound like advice for self-improvement. Then the natural heart imagines salvation as a ladder to reach better conduct, stricter discipline, greater merit. Pieper describes this impulse precisely: “Natural man seeks grace and salvation through the Law. . . . This *opinio legis* is an obsession with him.”⁶² In that atmosphere, the law becomes a means of climbing, and the gospel is quietly reduced to a reward for improvement.

The honor–shame worldview adds further pressure. In many South Asian settings, reputation and “name” function as a priceless possession. Shame is feared as exposure and public humiliation.⁶³ People instinctively reach for coverings,⁶⁴ like outward respectability, stricter practices, and public acts of charity. When honor becomes the measure, religion easily becomes a tool for restoring “name” rather than receiving mercy. In extreme cases, shame combined with unbelief collapses into despair, as seen in Judas Iscariot.⁶⁵ Here Scripture corrects instinct. The law does more than expose outward shame; it unmask guilt before the holy God and rips open every self-made covering. Only after that work can the gospel be heard as more than social repair. The gospel proclaims full reconciliation with God, forgiveness, life, and salvation in Christ alone. These assumptions rarely stay theoretical; they surface in the pulpit, shaping what is preached and what is withheld.

The Homiletical Cure

In this setting, preaching easily drifts into aimlessness. Walther’s warning about loading the gun and firing blindly into the forest,⁶⁶ captures the danger of sermons that never take aim at the conscience. A vague line such as “all people are sinners” can remain an empty phrase.⁶⁷ The law becomes general, and the sinner remains unexposed.

However, the confessional Lutheran stance is solid. The law addresses concrete life—home, marriage, vocation, and marketplace.⁶⁸ It exposes specific idols, excuses, and self-justifications. It speaks with sternness because the disease is deadly. In that way the law unmask what some call the terminal disease of the soul. Where sin is not truly named, the conscience is not truly convicted.

Two modern ditches often appear at this point. One ditch is *legalism (Philippism)*, where gospel language is used as pressure and the promise becomes a new law. The hearer is quietly placed on a ladder of self-merit. The other ditch is *gospel reductionism*

⁶¹ FC SD I:5

⁶² Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3, 241.

⁶³ Especially when someone fails to live up to the expectations of society or is treated as worthless by one’s own people. In that regard “avoiding shame and acquiring honor is the operating system behind everyday life.” This is a summary from the class notes of our 2022 LMSI Seminary sessions taught by Rev. Thomas A. Heyn, the then Administrator of Board for World Outreach, ELS, on the three world views, in our study of Apologetics.

⁶⁴ As Adam and Eve attempted to cover themselves, people often seek to regain respect through outward actions.

⁶⁵ Matthew 27:4. In *The Lutheran Study Bible* notes on this verse, the author writes that the corrupt priests left Judas “to deal with his own sin rather than directing him to God’s grace.” See *The Lutheran Study Bible*, 1644.

⁶⁶ C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1929), 99. Walther in his twelfth evening lecture was criticizing the “worst fault in modern preaching,” which is the lack of “point and purpose.” He argues that believing preachers often think they have done their duty simply by preaching the Word of God, regardless of whether it hits a mark.

⁶⁷ Wilhelm W. Petersen, “Properly Dividing the Word of Truth” (paper presented at the ELS Circuit #6 Meeting, Lake Mills, Iowa, September 21, 2002; found in Bethany Lutheran Seminary online essay file), 7.

⁶⁸ Petersen, “Properly Dividing the Word of Truth,” 7.

(*antinomianism*), where the law is treated as unloving and is pushed aside. But sin does not vanish when the law is removed. “In brief, to remove the Law and to let sin and death remain, is to hide the disease of sin and death to men unto their perdition.”⁶⁹ Then the law returns through a distorted gospel, and the hearer is either left secure (because sin is never exposed) or exhausted (because grace becomes a new demand).

The Pastoral Practice

The minister’s work resembles medicine. Symptoms can be treated, but the deeper disease remains unless the Word reaches the conscience.⁷⁰ For that reason, the classic Lutheran question remains practical: Is the hearer a secure sinner or a repentant sinner?⁷¹ The distinction governs the use of the Word. The secure conscience meets the law. The terrified conscience receives the gospel.⁷²

Here, private confession and absolution displays a particular pastoral clarity. In that moment the gospel remains gospel, pure consolation because forgiveness is delivered as Christ’s merit given, not as a reward for inner progress. It invites truthful speech about sin’s malady and permits a direct Word of Christ: “Your sins have been forgiven. That sin has been paid for.”⁷³ Such absolution does not rest on the quality of inner change. It rests on Christ’s objective satisfaction.

Finally, *new obedience* is taught in its proper place. Good works do not purchase acceptance with God; they only flow from faith as its fruit.⁷⁴ Walther’s illustration is helpful to explain this. As the sun shines without being ordered, faith bears fruit because it lives.⁷⁵ The Confessions describe this freedom as life lived “from a free and merry spirit.”⁷⁶ At the same time, the law continues to address the believer because the Old Adam still clings and resists.

Conclusion

Across the church in every place and time, the central pastoral need remains the same: God’s people require a clear Word that truly kills and a clear Word that truly makes alive. This essay began by giving thanks for the Lord’s fellowship in the one confession and by confessing God’s providential care in guarding the church through conflict and error. The same care is needed today. When the law is softened, sin is minimized and Christ is made to seem unnecessary. When the gospel is turned into conditions, Christ’s merit is obscured and terrified consciences are robbed of certainty. For that reason, the Formula of Concord calls

⁶⁹ A quote from Martin Luther found in Bente, “Historical Introductions,” 166.

⁷⁰ Adam Horneber, “Of the Law and the Gospel: Formula of Concord, Article V, With Practical Applications to our Ministry” (paper presented at the Hudson-Delaware, New England & Seaway Circuit Conference, Frost Valley, New York, January 23, 2007; found in the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary online essay file), 14.

⁷¹ Horneber, “Of the Law and the Gospel,” 14.

⁷² Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3, 231.

⁷³ Horneber, “Of the Law and the Gospel,” 14.

⁷⁴ FC SD IV:1

⁷⁵ Walther, *The Proper Distinction*, 211. Walther illustrates that just as a living tree naturally bears fruit and the sun continually shines without being ordered to do so, true faith proves its vitality by freely bearing fruit without any coercion of the law.

⁷⁶ FC SD VI:17

the proper distinction between law and gospel an “especially brilliant light,” because it keeps the Word rightly divided and keeps Christ’s comfort clear in preaching. In that light, the preacher stands as a helper of Christians’ joy,⁷⁷ directing troubled hearts away from self-trust and toward the Shepherd—toward his cross and his empty tomb. Amen.

Glory be to God Alone!

⁷⁷ Walther, *The Proper Distinction*, 407. In his thirty-ninth evening lecture, Walther advises theological students on their future ministry, stating: “Remember this word of the apostle well: when you become ministers, you become helpers of the Christians’ joy.”