



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

**A Summary Workbook on  
"The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel"  
by Dr. C.F.W. Walther**

**Point 21**

**The seventeenth way that people mix up the Law and the Gospel is when it is taught that merely going through the physical motions of a Sacrament results in God's blessing.**

This serious error is taught in the Roman Catholic Church. They teach that a person gets a spiritual benefit just from the act of being baptized, even if they are unbelievers, as long as they are not living in obvious sins. Just doing the act itself is supposed to bring them God's favor, because of the work. They teach the same thing in their Lord's Supper, which they call the mass, and that grace is given to them just by the act of attending these sacraments. This teaching contradicts Scripture teaching, especially the Gospel, which says that God declares a person to be holy by grace alone, that is by his free gift in Christ. The Bible also teaches that a person cannot do any works that are good before God until he has faith that God has justified him by grace alone.

"For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law." (Romans 3:28)

A person cannot be justified because of his own work of being baptized or going to Communion. That would certainly be a trivial work! The idea that a person receives grace from God merely by doing such things in church completely contradicts the Bible. The truth is that Baptism and the Lord's Supper are ways that the Holy Spirit delivers God's grace to a person through FAITH in Jesus. Without faith, Baptism is just ordinary water being poured on a person. Without faith, I would actually receive God's judgment in the Lord's Supper, as Paul makes plain:

"Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself." (1 Corinthians 11:28-29)

It is of vital importance that I put my trust in the promise of God's grace in Baptism, not in the water itself. In the same way, it would be wicked to think that when I receive Holy Communion that I am simply doing something that Jesus wants to be done as a good work. Jesus himself places the focus on the forgiveness of sins, not on the eating and drinking itself:

"'Take, eat; this is my body.' And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.'" (Matthew 26:26-28)

It is faith in this promise of forgiveness of sins that is the main thing. We receive this forgiveness by faith, and it is delivered to us with the real body and blood of Christ, along with the bread and wine.

Even many of the false teachers would admit that merely hearing God's Word is not enough, but must be followed by a heart that believes what it hears. They should not then suppose that Baptism and the Lord's Supper are any different. They are the same as the Word, with the added benefit that they have an outward sign attached to the promise, namely water and bread and wine. In the same way that the Word of God does not benefit the person who does not believe, Baptism and the Lord's Supper must also be accompanied by faith in God's promises.

Take note of this striking difference between the Law and the Gospel: The Gospel says "Believe, and you will be saved." The Law says "DO this, and you will live." Therefore we should not turn the sacraments into works of the Law which God requires us to do.

Telling a person "you will be saved by grace" is the same thing as telling him "you will be saved by faith." Any teaching that requires man's works as a condition he must fulfill to gain eternal life is a most serious error which tears down the true meaning of the Gospel.

"Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, 'See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?' Then Philip said, 'If you believe with all your heart, you may.' And he answered and said, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.' So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him." (Acts 8:36-38)

The only thing that Phillip required of the Ethiopian Eunuch was his confession of faith. From this we can be certain that Baptism has no benefit at all apart from faith.

"In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." (Galatians 3:26-27)

We see that Paul is speaking to those who have put their faith in Christ. It is believers who have been baptized who have put on Christ. He is not speaking at all about those who may have been baptized apart from this faith.

When Jesus gave the Lord's Supper, he didn't only say "this is my body." He also said "given for you." He didn't only say "this is my blood," but also "shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." What our hearts hold on to is the promise in these words, that Jesus gave his body and shed his blood for ME, personally. This is the faith through which we receive such great blessings in the Lord's Supper. Without this faith there is no blessing, but rather judgment. A person who goes to Holy Communion merely as a duty, and who imagines that he is earning something from God by simply obeying his command, is sadly mistaken and comes under God's condemnation.

We should never come to Holy Communion out of habit, as though it is a work we must perform in order to be considered a good Christian. The real reason we should come is because of God's promise of grace which he attaches to the physical signs in the sacraments - Jesus' true body in the bread, and his true blood in the wine. If a person comes in this way, he will leave the Lord's table with a great blessing in his heart.

In our Lutheran churches we place a very high value on the sacraments. Baptism delivers the forgiveness of Christ to us. It is called a "washing of regeneration." It "saves us" as Peter declares (1 Peter 3:21). In the Lord's Supper we receive the true body and blood of Jesus, the same body that was given on the cross and the same blood that was shed for our sins. We consider these sacraments to be very great, glorious and precious gifts. However, we absolutely do NOT teach that a person is saved merely by the outward act of using the sacraments, as though it were some kind of good work on our part. Instead, we hold to the teaching of Scripture that the grace of God is delivered TO us in the sacraments, through faith which believes God's promises. After all, it is not simply HEARING the Word of God that saves. This must be accompanied with faith that believes the promises which we hear. In the same way, it is not merely the outward act of receiving Baptism or the Lord's Supper that saves us. Instead, we are saved through faith in the promises of God that come with the water of Baptism, and with the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper.

## QUESTIONS

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1. In what way does the Roman Catholic Church consider Baptism and the Lord's Supper to be our own good works?
2. In what way do Baptism and the Lord's Supper actually give us great blessings?
3. When he first gave the Lord's Supper, what words of Jesus show us that we need to receive the Sacrament by faith?
4. In Acts chapter 8, what was needed so that the Ethiopian could receive the blessing of baptism in the right way?
5. Sometimes people come to the Lord's Supper out of habit, or from a sense of duty. What is the real reason why they should come?

6. Why do Lutheran churches place such great value on Baptism and the Lord's Supper?
7. How is the Gospel in the sacraments very much like the Gospel in God's written Word?