



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 22

The eighteenth way that people mix up the Law and the Gospel is when people teach that there is a difference between being "awakened" in their soul and being converted to faith in Jesus.

Ever since the time soon after the Lutheran Reformation there has been a religious movement called "Pietism." The Pietists have many false doctrines. One of these is a way of mixing up the Law and Gospel by teaching that there are three classes of people in the process of becoming a Christian: 1) Those who are still unconverted, 2) Those who have been spiritually awakened, but are not yet converted, and 3) Those who have been converted.

This teaching about three different classes is completely wrong. The "awakened" people whom the Pietists talked about are actually believing Christians. It is true that there are some people who are greatly impressed with the Word of God, and may change their outward lives somewhat because of a bad conscience, but people like them are not believers in Christ. They have not had a change of heart that can be called an awakening as the Bible describes it.

When the Pietists speak of someone who is awakened but not yet converted, they insist that each person must not only believe in Jesus, but must also have a very great struggle with sorrow in his heart. They say a person must be like King David, who spent whole nights crying and was bowed down with grief for days. This certainly happened to David, but the Bible does not say that every person must go through the same awful struggles before they can be assured of God's grace.

The Bible actually teaches that a person is converted and sealed by the Holy Spirit as soon as they become believers in Jesus as their Savior:

"In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit." (Ephesians 1:13)

Not everyone has sorrow over sin in the same degree, and not everyone has strength of faith in the same degree. The point is this: once the Holy Spirit has brought a person to believe in Jesus, that person is a child of God. This is true even if his faith is weak. We can see that this is the Bible's true teaching by considering some examples:

1) On Pentecost, the crowd of people were cut to the heart when Peter told them they had killed the Lord's Christ. They asked him "What shall we do?" Peter did NOT say "First, go through a great struggle with much sorrow in your heart, cry out to God with tears and wait until the Spirit gives you a feeling of peace and calm, and then you will be saved." NO! He simply said this:

"Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." (Acts 2:38-39)

3,000 people received the good news of this Gospel that day. They were baptized right away, and we are told that they then "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." (Acts 2:42) We understand that they were truly converted in a very short time.

2) The same thing happened with the Ethiopian Eunuch, as we read in Acts chapter 8. Phillip explained the Bible to him and preached Jesus to him. The Holy Spirit brought him to faith, and he was baptized as a converted Christian right away.

3) The jailer of Philippi (Acts chapter 16) had the same experience. When the chains fell off the prisoners and the doors flew open, the jailer was about to kill himself. Paul called out to him that he should not do this, for the prisoners were all still present. Still in despair, the jailer asked Paul and Silas "What must I do to be saved?" Paul did NOT say to him "That can't be done tonight. First we have to find out whether you have been truly converted or are only awakened. You will really have to struggle and wrestle with God before you can be confident that he loves you." NO! Paul simply said "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved!" The jailer did believe and was filled with joy. He and all his household were baptized that same night.

In all of Scripture we find the same pattern. A prophet or apostle would preach the stern Law of God, and as soon as the listeners felt the power of this and became alarmed, the preacher followed immediately with the sweet Gospel of God's forgiveness.

Someone who teaches about conversion like a Pietist does terrible harm to the souls of those who listen to him. He tells them "whether you can be sure of your salvation depends on how much you cry and struggle with God." That is the same thing as telling him that he is saved partly because of his own works.

The Scriptures teach that it is a simple matter for a person to come to faith and be saved, because this is actually the work of the Holy Spirit in God's Word. We should not imagine that it is up to us to become very extremely sorry about our sins before God will forgive us. All we need to do is hear and understand what God himself says about his commandments and our sin in his Law. Once we understand that we are helpless and lost apart from Christ, then the Spirit uses the sweet Gospel of God's grace to comfort us, as he lifts our hearts with faith in the Savior.

Yes, it is true that once a person becomes a Christian he will experience all kinds of conflict. He still struggles with sin and doubt, and persecution from the ungodly world will trouble him. Where the false teachers go wrong is to say this conflict must come BEFORE a person is converted. The Bible teaches that this conflict comes AFTER the person is brought to faith. This is what Jesus is talking about when he says:

"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 16:24-25)

The Christian person should expect burdens in his life. These include self-denial, giving up earthly treasure for God's purposes, and the mocking and persecution that the world heaps upon him.

Some people think that the real Gospel is too easy. "If all we have to do is receive God's gift by faith," they think, "then people will take this for granted and will continue in shameful sins." In fact, God has made salvation very easy for us by paying for it himself on the cross. However, we should be plain with people about the fact that the life of a Christian AFTER he comes to faith is often a difficult thing. Yet even then we have God's promise that he will strengthen us through His Word so that we are able to bear up under our crosses, with patient endurance that leads to eternal life.

"Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." (Isaiah 41:10)

"I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)

"In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 1:6-7)

QUESTIONS

1. What is the false doctrine that Pietists teach concerning 3 classes of people?
2. When exactly does a person become a believing child of God?

3. How much of a struggle with sin and guilt is necessary before a person can become a believer in Jesus?
4. What did Paul answer the jailer of Philippi when he asked "What must I do to be saved"?
5. Why is the teaching of the Pietists such a harmful thing to those who wish to know Christ?
6. What kind of burdens and struggles should a person expect to have AFTER he has become a believer in Christ?