

D I S T I N G U I S H I N G

Law and Gospel

A Practical Guide for Lay Teachers

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Introduction: The Heart of the Matter

Martin Luther called the doctrine of justification the “article on which the church stands or falls” (*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*). This was not rhetorical exaggeration. If you get justification wrong, everything else in the Christian faith distorts—the sacraments become mere rituals, prayer becomes bargaining, good works become currency, and the terrified conscience finds no rest. If you get justification right, everything else finds its proper place.

Inseparable from the doctrine of justification is the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. This distinction is not merely an academic exercise in biblical interpretation. It is the master key to faithful teaching. Every time you stand before a class—whether you are teaching adults or children—you are handling these two words of God—Law and Gospel—and how you handle them determines whether those you teach hear the voice of a demanding God who can never be satisfied, or the voice of a merciful God who has done everything necessary for their salvation in Christ. This distinction is especially critical in adult classes, where participants often bring years of theological assumptions from other traditions that may subtly distort Law and Gospel.

This paper will equip you to understand and teach both doctrines faithfully, in accordance with the Augsburg Confession, Luther’s Small Catechism, and Holy Scripture — the historic confessional commitments of the Lutheran Church.

1. What Is Justification?

The Problem: Sin and the Wrath of God

Before we can understand justification, we must understand the problem it solves. Every human being since the Fall stands under the just condemnation of God. This is not merely a matter of individual bad choices, though those are real enough. The deeper problem is original sin—the inherited corruption of our entire nature that we carry from conception (Psalm 51:5). We are not sinners because we sin; we sin because we are sinners. The Augsburg Confession states this clearly in Article II: since the Fall, all human beings “are

born with sin, that is, without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with the inclination to sin” (AC II.1-2).

This means that the problem is not simply behavioral. It is constitutional. We cannot fix ourselves, improve ourselves, or contribute anything to our own rescue. The Law of God, which is holy, righteous, and good (Romans 7:12), reveals both God’s perfect standard and our utter inability to meet it. The Law diagnoses; it does not cure.

The Solution: God’s Verdict in Christ

Justification is God’s answer to this problem, and it is entirely His work from start to finish. The word “justification” is a courtroom term—a legal, *forensic* declaration. To “justify” does not mean “to make righteous” in the sense of internal moral improvement. It means “to declare righteous”—to render a verdict of “not guilty” in the divine courtroom. This distinction is critical and non-negotiable in Lutheran theology.

Here is what the Augsburg Confession teaches in Article IV, the central article of the entire Confession:

Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake, who by His death made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in His sight (Romans 3-4).

— Augsburg Confession, Article IV

Notice what this article affirms and what it excludes:

- **Not by our own strength:** Justification is not the result of human effort, willpower, or moral achievement.
- **Not by merits or works:** There is nothing we can do—no prayer, no act of charity, no religious observance—that earns or contributes to our justification.
- **Freely, for Christ’s sake:** Justification is a free gift (*gratis*), grounded entirely in what Christ has done—His perfect life, His atoning death, His victorious resurrection.
- **Through faith:** Faith is the hand that receives the gift. Faith does not earn justification; it receives it. Even faith itself is not our contribution—it is the Holy Spirit’s work in us through the means of grace (Ephesians 2:8-9).
- **God imputes righteousness:** God credits Christ’s righteousness to us. This is an alien righteousness (*iustitia aliena*)—it belongs to Christ and is given to us. It is not produced by us or found within us.

The Small Catechism on Justification

Luther's explanation of the Second Article of the Creed in the Small Catechism is a masterpiece of clarity on this doctrine:

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.

— **Luther's Small Catechism, Second Article**

Observe the pronouns: *my* Lord, redeemed *me*, purchased and won *me*. Justification is not an abstract theological concept; it is intensely personal. Christ's work is *pro me*—for me. And notice what Luther says about the cost: not gold or silver, but His holy, precious blood. The price of our redemption reveals both the seriousness of our sin and the depth of God's love.

The Three "Solus"

The Reformation teaching on justification is often summarized in three Latin phrases that every Sunday school teacher should know and be able to explain:

- ***Sola Gratia (Grace Alone)***: Salvation originates entirely in God's unmerited favor. We contribute nothing. Grace is not a reward for our efforts; it is the undeserved gift of a merciful God to rebellious sinners. "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8).
- ***Sola Fide (Faith Alone)***: Faith is the sole instrument by which we receive justification. This does not mean that faith is a work we perform; faith is the empty hand that receives Christ's gifts. It is trust—confidence in the promise of God that for Christ's sake, our sins are forgiven. "We hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law" (Romans 3:28).
- ***Solus Christus (Christ Alone)***: Christ is the sole ground and cause of our justification. His perfect obedience to the Law in our place (active obedience) and His suffering of the Law's penalty in our place (passive obedience) are the complete and sufficient basis on which God declares us righteous. There is no other mediator, no other sacrifice, no other name. "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

2. The Proper Distinction of Law and Gospel

If justification is the *what* of the Christian faith, the distinction between Law and Gospel is the *how* of faithful teaching. C. F. W. Walther, the first president of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, devoted an entire series of lectures to this topic (published as *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*), and for good reason: this distinction is the single most important hermeneutical and pastoral skill a teacher can possess.

What Is the Law?

The Law is everything in Scripture that reveals God's holy will, commands obedience, and exposes sin. It tells us what God requires and shows us that we have not met—and cannot meet—that requirement. The Law is summarized in the Ten Commandments, but it extends to every passage of Scripture that commands, prohibits, threatens, or accuses.

The Law serves three purposes, traditionally called the “three uses of the Law”:

1. **The Curb (Civil Use):** The Law restrains outward sin in society. Even unbelievers are constrained by the Law written on their hearts (Romans 2:14–15) and by civil laws that reflect God's moral order. This use of the Law maintains external order but does not save anyone.
2. **The Mirror (Theological Use):** The Law reveals our sin and drives us to despair of our own righteousness. This is the Law's primary theological function—to crush our self-confidence and show us that we need a Savior. “Through the law comes knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20). Without this use of the Law, the Gospel becomes unnecessary and meaningless.
3. **The Guide (Didactic Use):** For the regenerate Christian, the Law serves as a guide for the new life of faith. Because our old sinful nature persists until death, we need the Law to instruct us in what pleases God. This use of the Law does not motivate obedience through fear or compulsion but informs the believer who, by faith, *wants* to do God's will. The motivation for the Christian's obedience is always the Gospel—gratitude for what God has done—not the Law's threats.

What Is the Gospel?

The Gospel is the good news of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Strictly speaking, the Gospel contains no commands, no conditions, and no threats. It is pure promise: for Christ's sake, your sins are forgiven. You are declared righteous. You are reconciled to God. This is done. It is finished. The Gospel is not advice (“here's what you should do”); it is announcement (“here's what God has done *for you*”).

The Gospel is delivered through specific means—the Word of God, Holy Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and Absolution. These are the “means of grace”

and will be treated in detail in subsequent position papers. For now, the essential point is this: the Gospel is not a general idea floating in the air. It comes to specific people through specific, concrete means that God Himself has instituted.

Why the Distinction Matters

The Law and the Gospel must never be confused, mixed, or reversed. When they are, the results are spiritually devastating:

- **If you mix Law into the Gospel**, you turn the free gift of salvation into a conditional offer that depends on human performance. The Gospel ceases to be good news and becomes merely good advice. The terrified conscience finds no rest because there is always one more condition to meet, one more work to perform, one more level of sincerity to demonstrate.
- **If you preach Gospel without Law**, you produce complacency and cheap grace. Without the Law's diagnosis, the Gospel's cure seems unnecessary. People who don't know they are sick don't appreciate the physician. Sin is minimized, repentance becomes optional, and the cross becomes sentimental rather than substitutionary.
- **If you preach Law without Gospel**, you produce either despair or self-righteousness. Those who take the Law seriously are crushed by their inability to keep it. Those who don't take it seriously deceive themselves into thinking they're doing well enough. Neither group hears the one thing they truly need: the promise of Christ.
- **If you reverse Law and Gospel**, you comfort the impenitent (who need the Law's accusation) and accuse the penitent (who need the Gospel's comfort). This is perhaps the most common and most destructive error in teaching and preaching.

3. The Role of Good Works

One of the most common questions that arises when justification by faith alone is taught is: "What about good works? Don't they matter?" The answer is: yes, absolutely—but not in the way most people assume.

The Augsburg Confession addresses this directly in Article VI:

Our churches teach that this faith is bound to bring forth good fruits and that it is necessary to do the good works commanded by God because of God's will. We should not rely on those works to merit justification before God.

— Augsburg Confession, Article VI

Good works are the necessary fruit of saving faith—not its root, not its cause, not its supplement. A living faith inevitably produces good works, just as a

living tree inevitably bears fruit. But the fruit does not make the tree alive; the tree's life produces the fruit. In the same way, good works do not make a person righteous before God; the righteousness of Christ, received by faith, produces good works in the life of the believer.

This means that good works are done *in freedom and gratitude*, not in fear or calculation. The Christian does not ask, "How many good works do I need to do to be saved?" but rather, "How can I serve my neighbor out of love, since Christ has already done everything necessary for my salvation?" The motivation shifts entirely—from self-preservation to self-giving, from earning to thanking.

Article XX of the Augsburg Confession provides an extended treatment of this topic, noting that true good works flow from faith and are done in vocations—the callings and stations of daily life (parent, spouse, worker, citizen, neighbor) where God places us to serve others. This is a profoundly liberating teaching: you do not need to do extraordinary religious works to please God. Changing a diaper, doing honest work, caring for an aging parent—these are the good works God has in mind, and faith ennobles all of them.

4. Common Errors to Watch For

As a Sunday school teacher, you will encounter—in curriculum materials, in popular Christian culture, and sometimes in your own thinking—a number of errors that distort the doctrine of justification and the Law/Gospel distinction. Here are the most common:

Decision Theology

This is the teaching that a person is saved by making a "personal decision for Christ" or "accepting Jesus into your heart." While this language is ubiquitous in American evangelicalism, it fundamentally distorts justification by making the human decision the decisive factor in salvation. It turns faith from a receptive trust created by the Holy Spirit into an act of the human will. The Scriptures teach the opposite: "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16). The problem with decision theology is not that it values personal faith—Lutherans absolutely affirm personal faith—but that it locates the *origin* of faith in the human will rather than in the Holy Spirit working through the means of grace.

In your teaching: Be careful with language like "ask Jesus into your heart," "make a decision for Christ," or "give your life to Jesus." Instead, teach that the Holy Spirit creates faith through Baptism and the Word, that Jesus has already given His life *for us*, and that we are called to believe the promise—a promise the Spirit Himself enables us to trust.

Moralism

Moralism reduces Christianity to ethical instruction: "Be nice," "Do the right thing," "Be like David" (or worse, "Be like Jesus" without explaining how Christ's righteousness is given to us). Moralism teaches Law without Gospel. It

may produce outwardly decent behavior, but it cannot produce faith, forgiveness, or salvation. People raised on moralism—whether children or adults who have sat in churches for decades—come to believe that God is primarily a rule-enforcer, and they either become self-righteous (if they think they’re keeping the rules) or despairing (if they know they’re not). Adults in your class may carry this moralistic framework without even realizing it, because it is the default mode of much of American Christianity.

In your teaching: When teaching Old Testament narratives, resist the temptation to reduce them to moral lessons. David and Goliath is not primarily about “being brave.” It is about God delivering His people through an unlikely deliverer—a foreshadowing of Christ. Every Bible story points to Christ and His work. Teach the moral implications, yes, but always in light of the Gospel, never as a substitute for it.

Synergism

Synergism is the teaching that human beings cooperate with God in salvation—that salvation is partly God’s work and partly ours. This error takes many forms: “God does His part, and you do your part.” “God helps those who help themselves.” “Faith is your contribution to salvation.” All of these are false. Scripture is clear: salvation is *monergistic*—the work of God alone. “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9). Even faith is God’s gift, not our contribution.

In your teaching: Watch for language that implies a partnership between God and the sinner in salvation. Phrases like “let God work in your life” or “open your heart to God” can subtly imply that the sinner has a switch to flip that enables God to act. Teach instead that God acts first, decisively, and completely—and that He does so through Baptism, the Word, and the Supper.

Antinomianism

Antinomianism (from the Greek for “against the law”) is the error that, because we are saved by grace, the Law no longer applies to Christians. This was rejected by the Reformers emphatically. While the Law cannot condemn the believer (because Christ has borne the condemnation), it still functions as a guide for the Christian life and continues to reveal remaining sin in us. The Christian is simultaneously saint and sinner (“*simul justus et peccator*”), and the old Adam needs the Law’s discipline until the day we die.

In your teaching: Do not skip over the Commandments in your teaching. The first three parts of the Small Catechism exist in deliberate order: Commandments, Creed, Lord’s Prayer—Law, then Gospel, then the life of prayer that flows from both. Teach the Commandments honestly and fully, then point to Christ.

Enthusiasm (Schwärmerei)

Luther used the term *Schwärmerei* (“enthusiasm” in the old sense of “claiming direct divine inspiration”) to describe those who bypass the external Word and sacraments and claim that the Holy Spirit works directly, apart from the means of grace. This error is alive and well in much of contemporary Christianity: “God told me,” “I felt the Spirit leading me,” or “I just have a peace about it” are all forms of enthusiasm when they are treated as authoritative apart from Scripture.

In your teaching: Teach that the Holy Spirit works through means—specifically, through the Word and Sacraments. Personal feelings and experiences are real, but they are not the basis of doctrine or the ground of assurance. A Christian’s assurance of salvation rests on the objective promises of God delivered in Baptism, Absolution, and the Lord’s Supper—not on subjective feelings that fluctuate daily.

5. Practical Guidance for Teaching

4. **Always teach both Law and Gospel.** Every lesson should include both. If your lesson is all Law (“be good, do right, try harder”), you have left your students without hope. If your lesson is all Gospel without first establishing the reality of sin, you have given them a solution to a problem they don’t know they have.
5. **End with the Gospel.** The last word your students hear should be good news, not accusation. The Gospel is the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16)—let it have the last word.
6. **Be specific with the Gospel.** Don’t settle for vague reassurances like “God loves you.” That is true, but it is not the Gospel. The Gospel is specific: Christ died for your sins. You were baptized into His death and resurrection. Your sins are forgiven for His sake. The more concrete and specific you are, the more powerful the Gospel becomes in the ears of your students.
7. **Point every story to Christ.** The Bible is not a collection of moral fables. It is the unfolding story of God’s rescue of sinners in Christ. When you teach Abraham, Isaac, Moses, David, or Jonah, show how each account points forward to Christ—His sacrifice, His deliverance, His kingdom. This is not eisegesis (reading into the text); it is the way Jesus Himself taught the Scriptures (Luke 24:27).
8. **Watch your language.** Small shifts in vocabulary can carry large theological consequences. “Jesus died for your sins” is Gospel. “Jesus died for your sins, so you should live a better life” turns the Gospel into a condition. “God forgives you” is Gospel. “God will forgive you if you really mean it” is Law masquerading as Gospel. Choose your words with care.
9. **Use the Catechism.** If you are ever unsure how to explain a doctrine to your students, check the Small Catechism. Luther’s explanations are

models of Law/Gospel clarity. Read them, internalize them, and let them shape your teaching language.

Conclusion

The doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone for Christ's sake alone is not one doctrine among many. It is the doctrine that defines everything else. It tells us who God is (a justifier of the ungodly), who we are (sinners who cannot save themselves), and what Christ has done (everything necessary for our salvation). The proper distinction of Law and Gospel is the method by which this doctrine is rightly taught and applied.

As a confessional Lutheran lay teacher, you are entrusted with the most important message in the world. Teach it faithfully. Teach it clearly. Teach it with the confidence that comes from knowing that this message is not your invention but God's own Word, tested by the church through centuries of confession, and delivered to you as a gift to share.

"For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." — 1 Corinthians 2:2 (ESV)

For Further Reading

- *The Augsburg Confession, Articles IV, V, VI, and XX* — The primary confessional texts on justification and good works.
- *Luther's Small Catechism* — Especially the explanation of the Second Article of the Creed.
- Walther, C. F. W., *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* (Concordia Publishing House). Essential reading for any Lutheran teacher.
- Kolb, Robert, *The Christian Faith: A Lutheran Exposition* (Concordia Publishing House, 1993).
- Engelbrecht, Edward, *The Church from Age to Age: A History from Galilee to Global Christianity* (Concordia Publishing House, 2011). Good background on the Reformation's doctrinal context.

QUICK-REFERENCE SUMMARY

Justification & Law/Gospel

For Sunday School Teachers — Keep This at Your Desk

JUSTIFICATION IN ONE SENTENCE

God declares sinners righteous freely, for Christ's sake, through faith alone—not because of anything we do, decide, or contribute, but entirely because of what Christ has done for us.

LAW vs. GOSPEL AT A GLANCE

| THE LAW | THE GOSPEL |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Shows what God demands | Shows what God gives |
| Reveals our sin | Reveals our Savior |
| Accuses and condemns | Forgives and frees |
| Demands perfect obedience | Declares Christ's obedience ours |
| Drives us to despair of self | Drives us to trust in Christ |
| Says "Do this" | Says "It is done" |
| Produces fear or self-righteousness | Produces faith, love, and gratitude |

THE THREE SOLAS

| Sola | Meaning | In Plain Language |
|-----------------------|--------------|---|
| <i>Sola Gratia</i> | Grace Alone | God saves us because He is merciful, not because we deserve it. |
| <i>Sola Fide</i> | Faith Alone | Faith receives salvation as a gift; it does not earn it. |
| <i>Solus Christus</i> | Christ Alone | Only Christ's life, death, and resurrection save us. No one and nothing else. |

THE QUICK TEST

| ✓ TEACH THIS | ✗ NOT THIS |
|---|--|
| God declares you righteous for Christ's sake. | God makes you righteous by changing you inside. |
| Faith receives what Christ has done. | Faith is your decision to follow Jesus. |
| The Holy Spirit creates faith through Word and Sacrament. | You have to open your heart and let God in. |
| Good works are the fruit of faith, not its cause. | You are saved by faith, but you stay saved by works. |
| David and Goliath points to Christ who fights for us. | David and Goliath means you should be brave. |
| Christ died for your sins (specific, concrete | God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your |

| | |
|---|---|
| Gospel). | life (vague). |
| Your assurance rests on Baptism and God's promises. | Your assurance rests on your feelings or your commitment. |

The last word in every lesson should be Gospel. Always.

More from Larry Herzog Jr.

If this guide was helpful, here's where to find more like it.

The Newsletter

Ordinary Means — a weekly confessional Lutheran newsletter for lay teachers, weary evangelicals, and serious laypeople. Free to subscribe at newsletter.larryherzogjr.com.

Books for the Reader Who Wants to Go Deeper

- ***The Hollow Altar: A Confessional Lutheran Invitation to Weary Evangelicals*** — for the reader who has loved Christ inside evangelicalism but kept running into things their tradition couldn't quite explain.
- ***Judeo-Christian Values?: A Confessional Lutheran Reckoning with Dispensationalism, Christian Zionism, and the Gospel They Replaced*** — a timely volume on where modern evangelical eschatology actually came from.
- ***Ad Fontes: Textual Criticism for Lutheran Laity*** — why we can trust the text of Scripture in the first place.
- ***What Horse?: Common Misconceptions About What the Bible Actually Says*** — for the reader who has heard things “the Bible says” their whole life and started to wonder.

Bible Study Series for Adult Sunday School and Small Groups

- ***Pauline Captivity Letters*** — Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon.
- ***Letters to the Church Under Pressure*** — James, 1 Peter, 1-3 John, Hebrews.

All available on Amazon. Each volume includes discussion questions, doctrinal notes, and clear Law/Gospel handling of the text — built for the person who has to teach the lesson on Sunday morning.

About the Author

Larry Herzog Jr. is a confessional Lutheran layman in Valley City, North Dakota — but he got there the long way. He came to Christ as a college-age atheist through an online debate on the reliability of Scripture, then spent over two decades working through North American Baptist, Evangelical Free, Nazarene (where he served as an associate pastor), a Calvinist Baptist church, and Reformed Baptist seminary before finally landing in confessional Lutheranism (AFLC). He teaches adult Sunday school and leads Bible studies at Grace Free Lutheran Church. His weekday job is cybersecurity.