

# The Distinctions Card

*Under the Word · A teaching reference*

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## Before it is a fallacy, it is an erased line

Almost every error you will meet is one of two things: **a line God drew that has been rubbed out, or a line drawn where God drew none.**

Rub out the line between Law and Gospel and you get despair or license. Draw a line where God drew none — between the water and the promise, between the bread and the body — and you get a sacrament with nothing in it. So the questions below are not debating tools. They are how the lines get erased, which is why a teacher should be able to spot them.

**Run every one of these on yourself before you run it on anyone else.** The errors you cannot see are, by definition, the ones inside your own house.

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## Seven ways a line gets erased

**Equivocation** — one word, two meanings, swapped mid-argument. *In the house:* **faith** meaning trust in a promise, and **faith** meaning a spiritual act I perform well enough to count. **Free** meaning uncoerced, and **free** meaning able to turn toward God unaided. *Ask:* is this word carrying the same meaning it had two sentences ago?

**Category error** — applying the rules of one realm to the other. *In the house:* the Gospel's gift restated as a demand to be met — which is the engine of decision theology, and the moment it happens it has stopped being Gospel. It runs the other way too: the Christian who thinks his baptism excuses him from competence at his job. *Ask:* is this a gift being turned into a requirement, or a requirement being turned into a gift?

**False dilemma** — a fork in the road where God laid down a distinction. *In the house:* reason or faith. Assurance or perseverance. Scripture or the Confessions. Grace or effort. *Ask:* am I being asked to choose between two things I am supposed to hold?

**Genetic fallacy** — locating an argument's origin and treating that as a refutation. *In the house:* *that sounds Reformed*, or *that sounds Catholic*, said as though it settled something. Sometimes a useful early warning. Never an answer. *Ask:* have I said why it is wrong, or only where it came from?

**Ad hominem** — the man who cited the text is a fool, therefore the text does not say what it says. *Ask:* would this still be true if a better man had said it?

**Appeal to emotion** — *I felt God leading me*, which is the version we point at; and *that hymn moved me to tears, so it must be sound*, which is the version we do not. *Ask:* is the feeling evidence, or is it a response to something that has to be true on other grounds?

**The quotation used to end a conversation** — deploying a famous line to close down a sincere question. Using *reason is the devil's whore* to silence an honest inquiry is itself the abuse the phrase was coined to describe. *Ask:* did I just answer him, or did I just win?

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## The wall: contradiction or mystery?

Sooner or later a class will meet two things that are both taught and cannot be fitted together. Someone will ask you to fit them.

**A contradiction** asserts a thing and its opposite, in the same respect, at the same time. It must be rejected — not merely because logic says so, but because God does not lie and cannot deny himself. A God who contradicted himself would be a God whose promises meant nothing.

**A mystery** stands above reason. Reason did not generate it, cannot verify it, and cannot explain the mechanism — and has no standing to refuse it, because the claim never rested on reason's evidence in the first place.

**How to tell them apart:**

| **A contradiction is found by examining the claim. A mystery is found by examining yourself.**

When we say *that can't be*, we almost never mean we have located a formal contradiction. We mean *I cannot see how*. Those are different sentences, and the distance between them is everything.

**What to do at the wall.** State both halves plainly. Decline the synthesis. That refusal is not evasion or a failure of nerve — inventing a synthesis requires information nobody has, and it always costs one of the two halves. **The half that gets quietly dropped is the one that was comforting somebody.**

Where the confession states both and refuses to explain, you may do the same, and say so out loud.

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## Reason's actual job

Not the enemy of faith and not its foundation. It has an office, and the office is real work.

**Ministerial reason** serves the Word: it arranges what Scripture says, compares passage with passage, sorts, defines, and notices when two things have been confused or one thing has been split.

**Magisterial reason** sits over the Word and rules on what Scripture is permitted to have said. That is not thinking. That is a coup.

**Knowing where your competence ends is part of competence.** A nurse who says *that is the physician's call* has not failed at nursing. She has done it correctly.

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## The last thing on this card

You are not required to win an argument. The faith was not established by one and will not be dismantled by one.

You are required to refuse to let the lines be rubbed out — to notice when a tidy version has quietly dropped a half, and to say so, even when you cannot construct the tidier reply.

**Tidiness is a rhetorical advantage. It is not evidence of truth.** God has said things that do not tuck in, and the tucking-in is precisely how the errors get made.