

A Reformation Day Meditation: The Law, the Gospel, and Martin Luther

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by David Schrock

Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. – Hebrews 13:7 –

On Monday, October 31, the world celebrates Halloween. But Protestants with a sense of history will celebrate the birth of the Protestant Reformation. On October 31, 1517 the Augustinian Monk, Martin Luther, “published” his grievances against the Roman Catholic Church’s system of indulgences. In an era before “open letters” and the Internet, Luther “published” his “[95 Theses](#)” to the Wittenberg Castle Door.

We celebrate this event not because it divided Protestants from Catholics, but because it recaptured the gospel from the clutches of a corrupt church. The Protestant Reformation esteems the centrality of Christ, the authority of Scripture, and salvation that comes entirely by God’s grace through Spirit-empowered faith. In other words, the Reformation reclaimed five solas: Solus Christus (in Christ alone), Sola Gratia (by grace alone), Sola Fide (through faith alone), Sola Scriptura (from the Scripture alone), and Soli Deo Gloria (for the glory of God alone).

Next year marks the 500th anniversary of this monumental event. In remembrance of this, OBC will take time in 2017 to consider its historical and theological significance. For some of you, you may be interested in attending “[No Other Gospel](#)” a conference in Indianapolis (April 3–5) hosted by The Gospel Coalition. (Fittingly, the price goes up after October 31). For others, you may be interested in studying the five solas. Matthew Barrett has edited a new series on [The Five Solas](#) by authors like [Thomas Schreiner](#) and [Steve Wellum](#). I would commend them to you.

For now, let’s reflect briefly the gospel which the Reformation recovered.

Using the Law Lawfully Leads to the Gospel

In 1 Timothy 1:8 Paul says that the “law is good, if one uses it lawfully.” But what does that mean? Doesn’t the gospel simply eclipse and replace the law? Or is there a way in which the gospel stands upon the law, even as it pardons the lawless?

For those who care about God, his Word, and the salvation of sinners, the answer is not merely academic. It is the difference between condemnation under the law or self-justification through the law or something else entirely. A right reading of Scripture will show that a lawful use of the law, Paul’s point in 1 Timothy 1:8, leads to the condemnation of sinners (vv. 9–10), which in turn, leads desperate sinners to find hope in the “gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted” (v. 11). This is the logic of Paul and the Reformers who

learned their theology from him. As Luther says of the Law and the Gospel in his commentary on the Galatians.

The Law with its function does contribute to justification—not because it justifies, but because it impels the promise of grace and makes it sweet and desirable. Therefore we do not abolish the Law; but we show its true function and use, namely, that it is a most useful servant impelling us to Christ . . . ; for its function and use is not only to disclose the sin and wrath of God but also to drive us to Christ ([Luther on Galatians](#), in Philip Graham Ryken, [Galatians](#), p. 137).

To use the law “lawfully” is to read Scripture so that it’s light unveils our sin. This is how Paul moves in 1 Timothy 1:8, as he lists a sweeping array of sins after he says,, “the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient . . .” Therefore, as Luther continues, “Therefore the principle purpose of the Law in the theology is to make men not better but worse; that is, it shows them their sin, so that by the recognition of sin they may be humbled, frightened, and worn down, and so may long for grace and for the Blessed Offspring” (ibid.).

Rare is the day, therefore, when you read Scripture and feel good about yourself in yourself, by yourself. This would be to read the Law unlawfully and to miss the purpose and power of the gospel. By contrast, God’s law liberty is meant to cleanse your filth by creating a need for grace, not by congratulating our enfeebled efforts. The Law stirs up our need, which God then supplies in Christ. This is how we read the Bible.

At the same time that we see our sin more darkly, we encounter our Savior’s love more brightly. At the same time that we are humbled by our failings, we are strengthened by his faithfulness. This is the point of 1 Timothy 1:8–11 and many other passages in the New Testament.

For instance Galatians 3:22 says, “The Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.” Likewise, Romans 3:20 says, “through the law comes knowledge of sin,” which leads to the gospel truth that redemption is only found in Christ’s propitiation (3:23–26). Likewise, the praise of Romans 11:33–36 is predicated on the fact that Romans 11:32 says, “For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.” In short, while the Law cannot give life to sinners; it is used by God to lead us to the law-keeper who can, who canceled the penalty of our sins on the cross (Colossians 2:11–13) and rose again for our justification (Romans 4:23–25).

This is the point of the law—to lead sinners to Jesus Christ, the heart of the gospel. And this is how the law leads to the gospel.

We Remember the Reformation Because We Easily Forget the Gospel

For many centuries before the Reformation, the gospel was lost under the system of “grace” fashioned by the Roman Catholic Church. For though they spoke often about grace; it was grace suffused with works. The word of God was used unlawfully to secure control and obedience through fear. Assurance for the individual was impossible, because the sinner always wondered if they had done enough to merit God’s grace. In God’s grace, he raised up Martin Luther and other Reformers to recover the true gospel and to set the church on the foundation of the Word of God once more.

Five hundred years later we remember the Reformation, the church's great spiritual revival, because we desire our own spiritual renewal. We are prone to forget the gospel and we need every help to preach the gospel to ourselves. For that reason, we remember those who recovered the word of God; we consider the outcome of their way of life; and we seek to imitate their faith in the Christ-centered gospel of grace.

May God be pleased to bring Reformation again in our hearts, our church, our land.

For His Glory and your joy, Pastor David