

## **Luther's Use of the Law as Contrasted with Calvin's**

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### **Abstract**

Both Luther and Calvin were important figures during the Reformation; their theologies—especially their understanding of the Law—had and continue to significantly impact the shaping of theological thought. How did these two reformers understand the concept of the Law? Given Luther and Calvin's position on double predestination, what is the usefulness of the Law as applied in the life of the believer? Their understanding of the Law categorizes some believers beyond the reach of grace and infringes on the doctrine of righteousness by faith alone. Luther advocates for two uses of the Law, while Calvin contends for a third use. Contrary to the belief that they were far apart in their interpretation of the Law, this article argues that Luther and Calvin were aligned in their understanding of the Law as applied to the believer's life than we could predict. What impact would the use of the Law have on the believers if they were predestined as elect or reprobate before applying it? Such understanding impedes the believers' expression of their faith and consequently challenges the biblical understanding of righteousness by faith alone.

**Keywords:** Luther, Calvin, righteousness by faith, predestination, law

### **Introduction**

In Jewish and Christian theology, God is understood to be both the God of justice and judgment on the one hand and of mercy and grace on the other. Over the years, Christian theology has been overwhelmed by this paradox. The punitive aspect of judgment for the ungodly often casts a shadow on his mercy. In giving his Law at Mount Sinai, God intended to remind his people of their obligation to obey it, as Joshua 1:8 states: "Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you

may be careful to do everything written in it. Then, you will be prosperous.”

Throughout Christendom, the hermeneutic of the Law of God underwent several controversies. One pivotal moment occurred in the 16th century when Martin Luther nailed the 95 Theses at the door of the Wittenberg church in 1517. These theses centered on the issue of justification by faith alone, bringing a vast and lasting change in the religious landscape.

This paper expounds on Luther's two uses of the Law as contrasted with Calvin's third use.<sup>1</sup> How do Luther's two uses of the Law compare with Calvin's third use? What are the impacts of the Law on the lives of the believers among the elects or reprobate? How does their predestined state square with our understanding of righteousness by faith alone taught in Scripture? Because Luther pioneered the Reformation, the first section of this paper is devoted to his understanding of the Law as applied in the believer's life, followed by Calvin's third use. The third section evaluates the function of the Law and its implication for righteousness by faith alone. Let us begin with a brief historical background of both reformers.

### **Historical Background**

Undoubtedly, Calvin and Luther stand as monumental figures, each leaving an indelible mark on the history of Christendom. Despite their geographical and temporal separation, their influence was profound; even if they never had the opportunity to meet in person, their connection was forged through their mutual friend

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<sup>1</sup> For Luther, the first use of the law helps control violent outbursts of sin and keeps order in the world. In its second use, the law accuses us and shows us our sin. For Calvin, the third use of the law, being also the principal use, and more closely connected with its proper end, has respect to believers in whose hearts the Spirit of God already flourishes and reigns. The law is written and engraved on their hearts by the finger of God. See Luther, Martin *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House 1911).; Calvin, John and Henry Beveridge, *Institute of the Christian Religion* (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 2.7.12-15.

Melanchthon.<sup>2</sup> Luther, a German, and Calvin, a Frenchman who later settled in Switzerland, operated in two distinct worlds.

Calvin was, in a sense, a second generation of the Reformation. Lutheranism already had its classic formation in the Augsburg Confession. Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), the founder of the reformed tradition, had lived and died before Calvin, who was to give his name to that tradition, had become a protestant. Luther was born in 1483 and died in 1546. Calvin was born in 1509 and died in 1564. With this in mind, Francois Wendel argues that Luther's early writing was already in circulation in France when Calvin was a university student and provided one of the early evangelical influences in his life.<sup>3</sup>

Luther had some impact on young Calvin. Luther eventually became aware of the French reformer and a few of his writings, notably Calvin's short treatise on the Lord's Supper of 1543, which impressed Luther positively.<sup>4</sup> They never really dialogued or debated with each other.

Despite mutual respect, Calvin never ceased to render homage to Luther and his Work.<sup>5</sup> Paul C. Empie and James I. McCord contend that the controversy over the Lord's Supper was the critical issue

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<sup>2</sup> Hesselink John, *Reading in Calvin's Theology*, Donald McKim, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 1984), 179.

<sup>3</sup> Wendel, Francois, *Calvin: Origins and Development of his Religious thought* (New York: Harper and Row E.T., 1963), 19, 38.

<sup>4</sup> Reid, J. K. S. *Calvin's Theological Treatises* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 140ff.

<sup>5</sup> Wendel, 133. On the following page Wendel quotes a passage from Calvin's "Last warning to Wespthal" in which Calvin writes "I would wish that whatever faults may have been mingled among the great virtues of Luther might rather have been buried; and in truth to keep me from touching upon them, more than the great honor and reverence I bear towards the many excellent gifts with which he was endowed but to wish to embrace the vices for the virtues, that would indeed be contrary to all good." (The original version of this treatise is in Alfred Erichson *Ioannis Calvini Opera*, vol. 9, Legare Street Press, 2023, 328.)

that separated Luther from Calvin.<sup>6</sup> As John Hesselink has pointed out, Luther and Calvin's different approaches to the relationship between Law and the Gospel may have been a more significant barrier. However, it never became a matter of controversy.<sup>7</sup> How do Luther and Calvin apply the Law in the believer's life? Luther and Calvin contend that believers are predestined for salvation or damnation. In the third section, we will discuss its usefulness and implications for the biblical concept of righteousness by faith alone. As we mentioned earlier, the two reformers' use of the Law, given their adherence to the doctrine of the double predestination of the believer, challenges the biblical understanding of righteousness by faith alone. Furthermore, categorizing some believers as unrighteous forever placed them beyond the reach of grace, unlike the Gospel of grace available to all who believe as John 3: 16 states, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

### **The Meaning of the Law in Luther's Theology**

Luther begins by creating a gulf between the Law and the Gospel. In his first Psalm lecture, Luther said: "The law is the word of Moses to us, while the Gospel is the word of God to us."<sup>8</sup> In developing his view of Law and the Gospel, Luther distinguished the double function of the Law.<sup>9</sup> Luther's theological Work as a reformer, whether in sermons, biblical commentaries, polemic

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<sup>6</sup> Empie, C. Paul, and James I. McCord, *Marburg Revisited : A Reexamination of Lutheran and Reformed Traditions* (Minnesota : Augsburg Publishing House, 1966).

<sup>7</sup> Hesselink, John, *Reading in Calvin's Theology*, Donald K. McKim, ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), 179.

<sup>8</sup> *Luther's Work*, vol. 11, 160. This clearly portrays the difference between law and gospel in Luther's perspective. The law remains outside and speaks of figures and visible shadows of things to come; while the gospel comes inside and speaks of internal, spiritual, and true things. He recognized the hostility between the two: "the law kills, while the gospel makes alive.

<sup>9</sup> See G. Ebeling "On the Doctrine of the Triplex Usus Legis in the Theology of the Reformation," In *Word and Faith* (Minneapolis, MN, Fortress Press 1963), 62-78, esp. 69-76.

treatises, or catechetical and confessional works, reflect the same existentially divided human reality, such as letter and spirit, reason and revelation, secular and spiritual kingdoms, bondage and freedom. However, the familiar word-pair- Law-Gospel is the most appropriate language for a comprehensive reference to this dichotomous but dialectically related reality.<sup>10</sup> This dichotomy is well established in Luther's first and second uses of the Law. For Luther, the first use of the Law is thus for unrighteous men, while the second is for the righteous. The term used has very little to do with instrumentality. It is, as Gerhard Ebeling suggests, a term for indicating an existential relationship.<sup>11</sup> For Luther, he further contends that Law is an existential category that sums up the theological interpretation of a human being as it is. Law is not an idea or an aggregate of principles but the reality of fallen humanity.<sup>12</sup>

The term *usus* refers to the proper distinction between the Law's various functions and effects. The question of who then uses or applies to can be variously answered. In the second Antinomian Disputation, Luther had this to say: "Both the devil and Christ use the Law to terrify, but the goals are quite different, entirely

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<sup>10</sup> Dowey, Edward A. "Law in Luther and Calvin," in *Theology Today* vol. 41, 2, 1984, 146.

<sup>11</sup> Ebeling, 71.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 75. He thinks that the term '*usus legis*' seems to be a theological concept coined by Luther. This terminology is found neither in Augustine, nor in the Scholastics. He points out though that it was Luther who first gives 1Tim 1: 8, a significance that goes far beyond the sense of the New Testament passage.

opposed.”<sup>13</sup> Consequently, Luther assigns the Law two functions: the civic use (first use) and the theological use (second use).

### Civic Use of the Law

Luther's use of the Law is built on Galatians 3:19; here, we have a key passage concerning the Law. Why, then, the Law? asked the Apostle. The answer is that it was added because of transgressions... here again, Luther finds the primary purpose of the Law of Moses and the true function and chief and proper use of the Law. By political use, external order on earth is to be maintained, and peace and securing justice are preserved. The Law also has the task of inculcating the divine commandments and instructing consciences. In its first use, it furnishes instructions on how to punish evildoers.<sup>14</sup> Luther argues that there are two kinds of unrighteous men: those who are not to be justified and those who are to be justified. The civic use of the Law restrains those who are not to be justified, for they are bound with the chains of the laws, as wild and untamed beasts are bound with ropes and chains.<sup>15</sup> If the Law in its political sense is obeyed, then an external civic righteousness is achieved, which Luther assigned the highest value. In the second Antinomian Disputation, he wrote: Political righteousness is good and worthy of praise, though it cannot stand in the sight of God.<sup>16</sup> Another word from the same Disputation reads: Among men, temporal righteousness has its honor and its reward in this life, but not with

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<sup>13</sup> Lohse, Bernhard. *Martin Luther's theology*, trans. and ed., Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 270. See also Franklin Sherman's "Introduction to Luther's Treatise," "Against Antinomians," *Luther's Works*, vol. 47 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 101-106. The antinomian controversy which began in 1527, challenged the application of the Decalogue to Christians and led to the controversies about the third use of the Law.

<sup>14</sup> Pelikan, Jaroslav. *Luther's Work 26* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 309.

<sup>15</sup> Luther's Work 26, 344.

<sup>16</sup> D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Weimar, 1883), 459.

God.<sup>17</sup> He further points out that unrighteous men are under the civic use of the Law and are under it forever. At the same time, those who will be justified are under it theologically (second use) or spiritually for a time, that is, until faith comes when the Law ceases.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, All the passages in which Paul treats the spiritual use of the Law must be understood about those who are to be justified, not about those who have already been justified.<sup>19</sup> This is the class for whom the Law is the pedagogue or custodian until Christ comes. The reference to Luther's double predestination undermines the biblical concept of righteousness by faith alone. Furthermore, if the Law restrains the sinner forever, as Luther claims, and there is an opportunity to be redeemed, does it not contradict the biblical teaching about righteousness by faith alone?

This concept applies to Luther's use of Law. The civic or political use is almost as horrendous in its expression as the theological use. As Luther has pointed out:

God has ordained civic laws, indeed all laws, to restrain transgression...

When I refrain from killing or from committing adultery or from stealing, or when I abstain from other sins; I do not do this voluntarily or from the love of virtue but because I am afraid of the sword and of the executioner... Therefore, just as a rope holds a furious and untamed beast and keeps it from attacking whatever it meets, so the Law constrains an insane and furious man lest he commits further sin.<sup>20</sup>

Since the Devil reigns in the whole world and drives men to all sorts of shameful deeds, God has ordained civic ordinances to bind the hands of the Devil and keep him from raging at will.<sup>21</sup> Luther, after 1518-1519, needed three basic propositions to cover

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 441.

<sup>18</sup> Luther's Work 26, 345.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 347.

<sup>20</sup> *Luther's Work* 26, 308.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 308.

his theory of justification and sanctification: 1. The Christian is totally just in Christ; 2. The Christian, like all other men, is a sinner before God and apart from Christ; 3. The Christian in the world is engaged in the process of sanctification.<sup>22</sup> His doctrine of justice is relevant only to the first and third propositions, while his doctrine of the Law is relevant only to the second and third propositions; through the theological use of the Law (second use), God shows all men that they are condemned apart from Christ, and through the civil use of the Law (first use), he provides for the order and discipline of the world.<sup>23</sup> Since the Devil reigns in the whole world and drives men to all sorts of shameful deeds, God has ordained civic ordinances to bind the hands of the Devil and keep him from raging at will.<sup>24</sup>

### Theological Use of the Law

The second use of the Law, the true function, the chief and proper, the absolute use of the Law, is that which is to reveal to humanity sin, misery, wickedness, ignorance, hate, and contempt of God, death, hell, judgment, and the well-deserved wrath of God.<sup>25</sup>

He further argues that in this function, the Law is a hammer that crushes rock, fire, wind, and a great and mighty earthquake that overturns mountains.<sup>26</sup> As Bernhard Lohse has pointed out, the theological use of the Law is the Law in its spiritual sense. This use shows people their sins "to convict" them of sin. In this connection, Luther often spoke of the "convicting use of the law."<sup>27</sup> In his commentary on Galatians 4:6, Luther wrote: "But amid this, these terrors of the law, thunderclaps of sin, tremors of death, and

<sup>22</sup> Cranz, Edward F., *Harvard Theological Studies*, vol. 19: "An Essay on the Development of Luther's Thought on justice, law, and Society" (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 96.

<sup>23</sup> Cranz, Edward F., *Harvard Theological Studies*, 96.

<sup>24</sup> *Luther's Work* 26, 309.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 309f.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 310.

<sup>27</sup> D. Martin Luthers Werke, 456.



soaring of the devil, Paul says, the Holy Spirit begins to cry in our heart: “Abba Father.” Moreover, his cry vastly exceeds and breaks through the powerful and horrible cries of the Law, sin, death, and the Devil. It penetrates the clouds and heaven and reaches God’s ears.<sup>28</sup>

The lectures on Hebrews stressed the theological use of the Law. In Hebrews 1: 8, Luther said it was the rod of justice and discipline that preserves nothing of the old man, destroys him completely, and makes him new, until hatred of himself utterly roots out of love of himself through faith in Christ.<sup>29</sup> According to Walter Wagner, Luther had a positive use of the Law (a third use) inherited from Augustine’s on the Spirit and the letter. He argues that the Moral Law was written only in nature or in stone for Israel; it was absent from human hearts and functioned as a fearsome letter. Thus, when reinscribed by the Spirit’s finger on the hearts of those declared justified in Christ, it moves them to true worship and works of love. He further points out that the letter continued to condemn the old Adam remaining in the believer, but the Spirit used the commandments he had once again written within the elect.<sup>30</sup>

Edward A. Dowey suggests that Luther’s apprehension of the Law as a curse and killer, based on Scripture and his experience as a monk and a priest, made it forever impossible for him to consider a third, positive use for the Law.<sup>31</sup>

In dealing with Galatians 3: 19, Luther argues that in its theological or spiritual use, the Law of Moses was given not only to “increase transgressions” but also that “through it, sin might be multiplied, especially in the conscience.”<sup>32</sup> In Luther’s opinion, the Law was given to attack the presumption of righteousness, reveal

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<sup>28</sup> *Luther’s Work* 26, 381.

<sup>29</sup> *Luther’s Work* 29, 119.

<sup>30</sup> Wagner, Walter H., 49.

<sup>31</sup> Dowey, 151.

<sup>32</sup> Pelikan, 309.

sin, work wrath, accuse, terrify, and reduce men's minds to despair. Moreover, that is as far as the Law goes.<sup>33</sup>

Whatever the case, the positive use of the Law does not receive the same emphasis as spelled out in the Swiss reformer. It is probably here that the great debate between Calvin and Calvinism begins. Whenever the Law is mentioned in Calvin's theology, it creates a very different connotative field of force with regard to the life of the believer. I will address the third use of the Law in Calvinism next.

### **The Meaning of the Law in Calvin's Theology**

From Calvin's earliest reformatory writings, more especially the first edition of his *Institutes* (1536), there can be found (at places, even verbatim) a doctrine of justification derived from Luther's *Babylonian Captivity*.<sup>34</sup> Calvin's *Commentary on Galatians* suggests that the ideas are similar in the first two uses:

The Law justifies him who fulfills all its precepts, while faith justifies those who are destitute of the merit of works and rely on Christ alone. To be justified by our merit and to be justified by the grace of another are two schemes that cannot be reconciled: one must be overturned by the other... You will more easily unite fire with water than reconciling these two statements, that men are justified by faith and that the Law justifies them.<sup>35</sup>

A close observation of this quotation suggests that it is similar to Luther's argument on righteousness by faith alone. Like Luther's, Calvin's civic use of the Law aimed to express God's providential

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<sup>33</sup> Pelikan, 312-13.

<sup>34</sup> Ebeling, Gerhard. *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 66f. The first use, which "condemns every man of his own unrighteousness" is spelled out in (*Institutes* II. VII. 6).

<sup>35</sup> McNeill, John T. *Calvin: Institutes of Christian Religion*, vol.1 (Louisville, London: The Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 358, 359.

restraint of the wicked in human society through statutory laws, punishment of violation, and such.

“The law restrains malefactors and those who are not yet believers...the second function of the law is this: at least by fear of punishment to restrain certain men who are untouched by any care for what is just and right unless compelled by hearing the dire threats of the law...but this constrained and forced righteousness is necessary for the public community of men, for whose tranquility the Lord herein provided when he took care that everything is not tumultuously confounded.”<sup>36</sup>

At this point, the two reformers moved along, but Calvin’s main emphasis was on the believer’s life.

### **The Third Use of the Law in Calvin’s Theology**

The Calvinistic third use of the Law presupposes its first and second use. Calvin alluded to the first function of the Law as convicting and condemning man, rendering him inexcusable and desperate concerning his resources for righteousness and salvation. Through this office, the Law may lead to Christ. The second function is to restrain by threats of punishment those who have no regard for rectitude and justice. This is especially necessary ‘for the good society.’ In these first two functions, the Law touches all men in some measure.<sup>37</sup> The highest office is that which the Law performs only concerning God’s elect, those justified by grace. For them, even though the Law is engraved on their hearts by the finger of God, the external and written Law is still the best instrument for enabling them daily to learn with greater truth and certainty what the will of the Lord is, which they aspire to follow and to confirm them in this knowledge.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> McNeill, John T. *Calvin*, 358, 359.

<sup>37</sup> John McNeill, Book II, 7 these quotations are taken from Book II of the institutes.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

Calvin's understanding of the word "Law" does not only include the Ten Commandments but also the various bodies of civil, judicial, and ceremonial statutes. Of these, the moral Law, the "true eternal rule of righteousness," is the most important.<sup>39</sup>

When Calvin defines his terms, he does so in the context of using them for illumination of some aspects of life under God:

What I have said will become plain if we attend, as we ought to two things connected with all laws. The enactment of the Law and the equity on which it is founded and rests now, as it is evident that the natural Law, and of that conscience which God has engraved on the minds of men, the whole. The whole of this equity of which we now speak is prescribed in it. Hence, it should be the aim, the rule, and the end of all laws.<sup>40</sup>

In trying to understand the meaning implied in all his uses, the most obvious thing we note is that Law is a rule of conduct, a directive, and an imperative. However, it is founded on rightness and righteousness. Calvin notes that the lawgiver gives Law its character as Law. He states that: "...as a necessary remedy, both for our dullness and our contumacy, the Lord has given us his written law, which by its sure attestations, removes the obscurity of the law of nature, and also, by shaking off our lethargy, makes a more lively and permanent impression on our minds."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> John McNeill, Book II, IV. XX. 15.

<sup>40</sup> Institutes Book IV, XX, 16.

<sup>41</sup> Institutes, Book II, VIII, 6.

Both Calvin and Luther received available terminology largely inherited from Christian and classical antiquity.<sup>42</sup> Calvin's third use of the Law is "the principal use, which pertains more closely to the proper purpose of the law, finds its place among believers in whose hearts the spirit of God already lives and reigns."<sup>43</sup>

In this setting, the Law helps believers to "learn more thoroughly each day the nature of the Lord's will to which they aspire, and to confirm them in the understanding of it."<sup>44</sup> The Law teaches the elect how to live as Christ's disciples. God elects and adopts some to be spared by his wrath. The elects are justified solely based on God's decision. The elect also begins a life-long process of sanctification to purge their sinful nature and to embody and embrace the moral Law. For believers, the Law serves as "a whip to an idle ass." God elects a remnant who truly becomes set apart in morals and manners over time from the reprobate. The life of the elect will bear some fruit. As a condition precedent or subsequent, God does not require the fruit.<sup>45</sup> If God has genuinely elected some to be saved, one may question the usefulness of Luther's two uses of the Law and Calvin's third use.

Calvin lengthily comments on the Decalogue under the rubric of the third use, taking each command. He elaborates by turning the negative form into positive admonitions, transforming the particular into the general, and expounding the outer prohibition in an "inner"

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<sup>42</sup> Dowey, 147. In his discussion of Law, Thomas Aquinas found it necessary to distinguish four kinds of Law in addition to positive or civil Law: eternal Law which is in the mind of God, Divine Law which God reveals to man, natural Law which is the image of the eternal Law as it is knowable to man naturally, and human Law which sometimes seems to mean common Law or the Law of nations and sometimes seems to mean elaboration of natural Law. For more in *Summa Theologica*, I-II, Q 90-96. This implies that Calvin's concept of the Law is built on Aquinas. He defines divine Law and moral Law to refer generally to the special revelation of the universal orderly will of God for creation, particularly as republished for the chosen people in the Decalogue and commended upon by Jesus, prophets, and apostles.

<sup>43</sup> Institutes, II. Vii. 12.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, II. Vii. 12.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, II. Vii. 12.

spiritual manner. His discourse on "The life of a Christian," which has sometimes been published separately as guidance for believers, further expands the third use.<sup>46</sup>

For Calvin, the Law and all work remain always non-meritorious; the Law continues to be a conviction of sin so far as is necessary in the imperfect lives of the believers on earth. However, Calvin chiefly emphasizes that love is the summary precisely of Law and, therefore, is not antithetical to it.<sup>47</sup>

"The law of God contains in itself that newness by which his image can be restored in us."<sup>48</sup> In his sermons, the moral Law is preeminently punitive and accusatory, terrifying the soul and condemning every form of human pride. Preaching the Law teaches the awful truth, frightens the conscience, and bids the hearer to shape up.<sup>49</sup> What are the implications of Luther and Calvin's use of the Law on righteousness by faith alone, given their teachings on the double predestination of the believer?

### **Luther and Calvin's Use of the Law: Implications for Righteousness by Faith Alone**

Contrary to the popular view that Calvin and Luther held different views on the Law, their exposition on the use of the Law gives enough evidence that Calvin's theology frequently displays a deep affinity with Luther. For Luther and Calvin, the impossibility of satisfying the Law's demands destroys the belief that humanity contributes to its salvation. Contrary to this assertion, humans have a role to play in their salvation, as the Apostle Paul states in Philippians 2:12: "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling."

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<sup>46</sup> Institutes, III. 6-10.

<sup>47</sup> Institutes, II. Viii. 51-57.

<sup>48</sup> Institutes, III. Vi. I.

<sup>49</sup> Institutes, II. Vii. 12.

Calvin embraces Luther's dialectical viewpoint: apart from faith in Christ, the Law humiliates and condemns, establishing universal guilt, vindicating God's righteous judgment against humanity, and leaving no one to complain. Calvin felt that preachers should terrify sinners with threats of God's eternal wrath as well as console the elect with the relief of God's mercy, rescue, and peace. Homiletically, Calvin and Luther were of one mind accusing the damning, punitive nature, and use of the Law. If God has preselected the elects and the reprobates to their respective fate, then what use is Law to them if they are unable to change for the better? Luther and Calvin think that the civic use of the Law is required to restrain the reprobate from causing further harm.

Luther's third use of the Law inherited from Augustine is similar in form to Calvin's third use of the Law. They claim to have a dualistic approach to the Law (Letter and Spirit). The Law is written in the heart of the few privileges and moves them to worship. Both reformers understanding and application of the Law are antithetical to the biblical notion that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." In addition, a select group of believers whose Law has been written on their hearts by the finger spirit of God. Luther and Calvin do not explain how this category of believers was selected. As we have already argued, the reformer's application of the Law in the life of the believers stands out against the biblical notion of righteousness by faith alone and unnecessarily cast believers into two classes of worshipers."

It appears at times that Luther sounds antinomian. In his famous quote: "Whoever knows well how to distinguish the Gospel from the Law should give thanks to God and know that he is a real theologian. I admit that in times of temptation, I do not know how to do as I should."<sup>50</sup> He emphasizes the difference between Law and Gospel to identify the two kingdoms, one temporal and the other spiritual.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Luther's Work 26, 114.

<sup>51</sup> Luther's Work 35, 164. See also Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966).

In this dualism, Luther connects the Law with the temporal kingdom and the Gospel with the spiritual one. Because the righteousness of another justifies man, Christ is the end of the Law. Having fulfilled the commandments for us is confirmed in his statement, "The commandments must be fulfilled before any works can be done."<sup>52</sup>

To this end, Luther emphasizes grace more, which he equates with the Gospel. Consequently, Luther avoids the third use of the Law, as already stated above. Furthermore, he notes, "As long as we live in the flesh, we only begin to make some progress in that which shall be perfected in the future life."<sup>53</sup>

For Calvin, it may be said that Law in the new life under the Gospel is the structure of love. Once the legal curse is removed and all justification by works of any kind is banished, the Law can return to its original and proper role of articulating God's love and thus helping in the Christian life.

Luther's language describing the Law's second function and Calvin's third use are strikingly similar. They both call it their principal use. For Luther and Lutheranism, the Calvinistic version of the third use of the Law fails to perceive the radicality of Luther's first use and risks a new form of legalism in the doctrine of salvation. Luther's view elevates the accidental, sin-caused function of the Law into its all-inclusive role at the expense of what God meant to be the Law's proper function both in creation and redemption—that is, love.

The concept of the Law in Lutheranism raises images of a theology of self-salvation and a devilish perversion of the divine promise against Calvinism, which raises images of order and structure, indeed the very structure of God's love in both creation and redemption.

Evaluating both reformers' Galatians commentaries will shed more light on the differences between them in their use of the Law.

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<sup>52</sup> Dillenberger, John. *Martin Luther: Selections* (Anchor Books, 1961), 62.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.



Some key texts within the Pauline corpus foster this process. Man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Jesus Christ. Gal 2: 16 conveys the same meaning in both reformers—justification is not by works but by faith. Luther writes that when we are involved in a discussion of justification, there is no room for speaking about the Law.<sup>54</sup> Calvin is even more emphatic: We must ascribe nothing or everything to faith or works.<sup>55</sup>

There appear to be some divergences in the handling of Galatians 3: 19. Here, Luther argues for a civic and theological or spiritual use to condemn man and render him miserable.<sup>56</sup> Commenting on the phrase “added because of transgressions” in Galatians 3:19, Calvin argues that the Law has many uses, but Paul confines himself to one which serves his present purpose. He did not intend to inquire how many ways the Law is advantageous to men.<sup>57</sup>

“Readers must be put on their guard on this matter, for I see many make the mistake of acknowledging no other use of the Law than what is expressed here. However, elsewhere, Paul himself applies the precepts of the Law to teaching and to exhortation (2 Tim. 3: 16). Therefore, this definition of the Law is not complete, and those who acknowledge nothing else in the Law are wrong.<sup>58</sup>

Though there is no evidence that Calvin was addressing Luther at this point, there remains a possibility for such a thing, for Calvin might have read Luther’s Commentary, published thirteen years before his own. Another disagreement is on their rendering of Galatians 3: 25. Calvin is concerned that the Apostle seems to be abolishing the Law, which for him is the proper and principal use when he says, “But now that faith has come, we are no longer under

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<sup>54</sup> Luther’s Werke, 56.

<sup>55</sup> Luther, M. (1999, c1968), vol 29: *Luther’s Works*, vol 29: Lectures on Titus, Philemon, and Hebrews (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, ED.) Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 118.

<sup>56</sup> See footnote 13, 14, 24, 25.

<sup>57</sup> *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), on Gal 3: 19. Calvin makes some remarks that seem like a rebuke to Luther.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

a custodian,” that is under the Law. Calvin quickly explains, The Law, insofar as it is a rule of living well, is a bridle which keeps us in fear of the Lord, as spur to correct the slackness of our flesh, in short, so far as it is profitable for teaching, correcting, reproofing that believers may be instructed in every good work, is as much in force as ever and remains intact.<sup>59</sup>

There is nothing like this in Luther, at least not in his discussion of this verse. Nor does Luther use Calvin's phrase here— “a rule of living well.”<sup>60</sup> Which he uses again and again in his writings to suggest the normative function of the Law. For Luther, there are indeed only two uses of the Law; he writes,

Therefore, if you consider Christ and what he has accomplished, there is no law anymore. Coming at a predetermined time, he truly abolished the entire Law. But now that the Law has been abolished, we are no longer held in custody under its tyranny; but we live securely and happily with Christ, who now reigns sweetly in us by his Spirit.<sup>61</sup>

Luther and Calvin oppose the Law's continuing function in believers' lives. For Luther, the Law almost always has an accusatory function. However, Calvin can speak of the Law in a much more positive and friendly fashion because he sees the curse and threats of the Law as being fundamentally a thing of the past for the Christian since, in Christ, the accusatory aspects of the Law have been done away with. For the Law tends to point back to the older man as a sinner, for Calvin, the Law points forward to the Christian's renewal in Christ.

The differences between the two reformers regarding the use of the Law are not insignificant. However, these differences are sometimes carried out of proportion. A general view of both

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<sup>59</sup> See *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*.

<sup>60</sup> See Institutes II, 7, 12 where Calvin explains the third use of the Law: “Even for a spiritual man not yet free from the weight of the flesh, the law remains a constant sting that will not let him stand still.”

<sup>61</sup> Pelikan, 349.

theologies suggests they are closer than most theologians think. Commenting on Galatians 5: 13— “Do not use your freedom for an opportunity for the flesh”—Luther concludes in a surprising note: “Now Paul shows beautifully based on the Decalogue what it means to be a servant of love.” Then, in verse 14, he says, “This is the natural way to interpret Scripture and the commandments of God.”<sup>62</sup>

As Karl Barth has pointed out, Calvin is the theologian of sanctification, and Luther is that of justification.<sup>63</sup> On this subject, Calvin sees justification and sanctification as a unit, and in so doing, draws close to Luther when he writes:

“You could not grasp justification without grasping sanctification also. For he is given unto us for righteousness, wisdom, sanctification, and redemption (1 Cor. 1: 30). Therefore, Christ justifies no one whom he does not at the same time sanctify.”<sup>64</sup>

## Summary and Conclusions

### Summary

At face value, the use of the Law by Calvin and Luther points to a different interpretation in their respective traditions. Luther attributed two possible uses to the Law: its civil or political use to restrain the wicked both for public peace and preserving everything, mainly to prevent the course of the Gospel from being hindered by the tumults and sedition of wild men. The other theological or spiritual use makes people conscious of their obligation and, hence, repent of their sins. It is also to reveal to man his sin, blindness, and the well-deserved wrath of God.

Calvin goes further and opts for a third use of the Law. He argues that the first use of the Law is punitive precisely to reveal

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<sup>62</sup> Pelikan, see comments on Galatian 5: 14; and 15.

<sup>63</sup> Barth, Karl Church Dogmatics, IV, 2, 509.

<sup>64</sup> Institutes, III, 16, 798.

humanity's actual condition before God and to motivate sinners to flee to Christ's mercy naked and empty-handed. In its second use, the Law restrains and regulates wicked behavior for the public good. He argues that the third use of the Law is for believers to guide them in their spiritual journey to live a holy life until Christ's coming. However, of what use is the Law for the elect or reprobate believers whose destinies are predetermined?

### **Conclusions**

As we have pointed out throughout this study, Calvin and Luther differ profoundly in their roles, functions, and uses of the Law. However, an overview of their entire theology is quite surprising. Their commonality on justification by faith alone, on good works, as spelled out in their Galatians commentaries, notably their shared understanding of the interpretation of Galatians 5: 14 and 6: 2, and the likes tend to suggest that they are not far apart as some would imagine.

Calvin's third use is similar to Luther's two uses (civic and theological). Those under the civic use of the Law are under it forever. Luther and Calvin fail to specify how the believer falls under elect or reprobate forever. This renders the gift of God to humanity to be expressed by faith obsolete, contrary to John 12:32, which reads, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

For Luther, those under the civic use of the Law are doomed and cannot obtain righteousness, which is contrary to the biblical teachings found in John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Does John 3:16 include reprobate? One would think yes.

Galatians 2:24 states, "The Law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith." James 1:23 maintains that the Law functions like a mirror to reveal our sinfulness to us since, according to Romans 3:20, "by the law is the knowledge of sin." The death of Christ on the cross makes provision

for human salvation by faith alone, as Ephesian 2:8-10 reads: “For it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this not from yourselves; it is the gift of God, not by works so that no one can boast. 10 For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance as our way of life.” Luther and Calvin’s teaching on predestination does not harmonize with the biblical teaching on righteousness by faith alone, which allows the sinner to express their faith by accepting or rejecting God’s offer of salvation. In their explanation, Luther and Calvin argued that Law leads the believer to Christ. If the believers are already elected, what purpose is the use of the Law?

“The Law demands righteousness, and this the sinner owes to the Law, but he is incapable of rendering it. The only way in which he can attain righteousness is through faith. By faith, he can bring the merits of Christ to God, and the Lord places the obedience of His Son on the sinner’s account. Christ’s righteousness is accepted in place of man’s failure, and God receives, pardons, justifies, the repentant, believing soul, treats him as though he were righteous, and loves him as He loves His Son.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ellen White, *Selected Message I*, 367.