

# HOW TO TELL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL

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## Overview *(background and orientation just for you as the leader)*

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If you've ever had to learn a foreign language, especially as an adult, you know that it can be tough going. The Lutheran Course begins with a grammar lesson in speaking Lutheran. The vocabulary list only includes a few words like "law" and "gospel." You don't have to learn to say, "Where is the bathroom, please?" in Lutheran. In this session's video presentation, James Nestingen speaks about Christ Jesus as the subject of the verbs. It's all about learning a new way of speaking. Because those who know they are both sinners and saints have completely different ways of describing themselves, the world, and their relationship with God, it means learning a new vocabulary. Nestingen uses the Latin phrase, *opinio legis*, to describe the insidious way in which the law continues to create doubt in our hearts through "if-then" vocabulary. *If* I offer God a life of good deeds (or at least good intentions), *then* I'll be given God's blessing in return. By contrast, the gospel uses "because-therefore" vocabulary. *Because* Christ has died for the ungodly, *therefore* the sinner (that is, you and I) can hope for redemption. The cross is the prior condition. Upon the cross all salvation rests, through it all hope arises, and because of it all truly good works are done. Nestingen goes on to suggest two uses for the law: to keep order in the world, and to drive our consciences toward the gospel.



*The law continues to create doubt in our hearts  
through "if-then" vocabulary . . .  
The gospel uses "because-therefore" vocabulary.*

## Preparation

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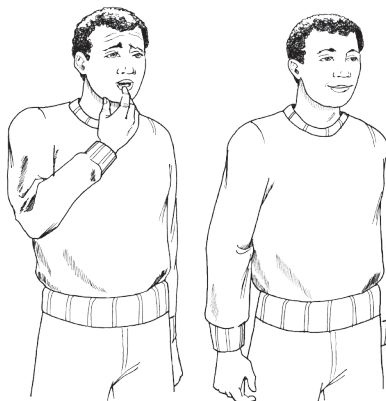
*Objective:* Each participant will understand the Lutheran distinction between law and gospel, and the Lutheran proposal to view the gospel through the lens of grace as a gift.

*Materials needed:* anything necessary for singing (instruments, songbooks, etc.), copies of the Table Talk questions for Session 1 (p. 102), copies of the Session 1 handout (p. 101), and a copy of *The Lutheran Handbook* and *The Lutheran Course Workbook* for each participant.

*Prepare yourself for the session:* Read through all the Session 1 material in this leader book and the workbook. Also view the Session 1 video presentation if possible.

*Prepare the room:* Have the video set up, make sure everything works, that it is properly cued and ready to play.

*The law accuses  
and demands.*



*The gospel  
liberates  
and frees us.*

## Table Talk



Because this is the first session, plan on having stick-on or pin-on name tags available as participants arrive.

Participants will be discussing these questions:

- When you hear the word, “Lutheran,” what’s the first thing that comes to mind?
- What’s the funniest story you’ve ever heard about someone getting pulled over by the police while driving?
- Have you ever been called to jury duty? If so, what was it like?
- If you weren’t here at this gathering, where would you be and what would you be doing right now?

You will need to have a set of four Table Talk cards laying face down on each table where participants will sit as they gather or eat. To make the cards, photocopy page 102 and cut on the dotted lines.

Suggest that one person pick up a card at random, provide an answer, and pass it to the person to their right, who will also answer and pass the card on. When that card has gone around the table, someone else can pick up another and repeat the process until the time is up.

## Large Group Stuff



### *Opening*

Begin with some instrumental music as people are gathering. At the appointed beginning time, have the group sing something lively, then sing something livelier still, then begin to settle into a more mellow mood. Some suggestions for this session are *With One Voice* (WOV) 791, 744, 612, 717, 731.

Have a brief reading from scripture. Suggestion for this session: Romans 5:1-11.

Pray. Participants may be invited to offer petitions. Conclude with your own prayer thanking God for the gift of the gospel of Christ.

### Introduction

Briefly introduce the video presenter as James A. Nestingen, Professor of Church History at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he has taught for over a quarter century. Nestingen has many published works and lectures on Luther's catechisms and confessional Lutheran theology. His books include *Manger in the Mountains* (1999); *The Faith We Hold* (1983); *Martin Luther: His Life and His Writings* (1982); *Roots of Our Faith* (1978); and *Free to Be* (with Gerhard Forde, 1975).

Point out question 1 in the Large Group Stuff in the workbook (p. 8) and prepare participants to follow along.

Explain that James Nestingen will introduce a Latin phrase, *opinio legis*, which might literally be translated as, "speculation about the law." He uses this term to draw a distinction between the law and the gospel.

According to Nestingen, Lutherans propose to see all of the Bible through the lens of the gospel. The gospel always begins with what God has done for us. The *opinio legis* always tries to draw us back to what we must do for God. The "speculation" is always about the question, "Have I done enough?" The answer to that question is always, "No." But God in Christ has done everything.

(Resist the temptation to preach, just set it up and let the video take it from there.)

### Video

Play the DVD. When the commercial for "Law & Gospel brand laundry detergent" has finished, stop the machine.

### Workbook

Point out that the first two workbook pages in each session are for Large Group Stuff (large group use), and the next two pages in each session are for Small Group Stuff (small group use).

Ask if there are any initial questions or reactions to the video presentation and commercial (see p. 24).

- ① Ask for volunteers to share what they wrote in the blanks for question 1. There are *no wrong answers* to this question, but what the authors had in mind would be something like this:

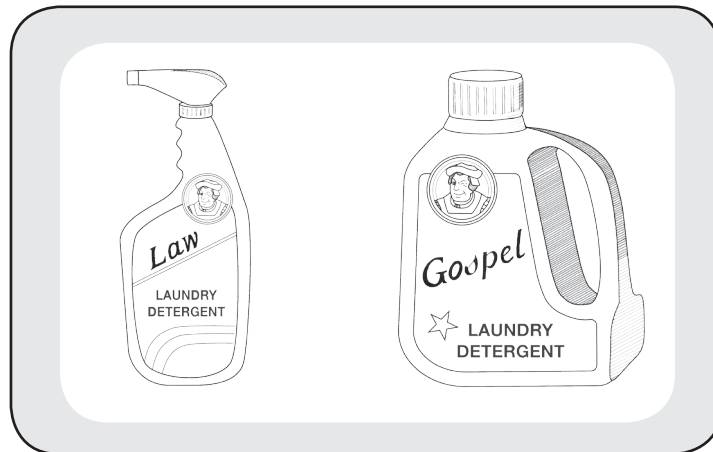
- “Justification by faith” is *Christ’s work, a free gift, etc.*
- Law is an *if-then* proposition, Gospel is a *because-therefore* fact.
- The *opinio legis* is a false belief that *the Law will set everything right, etc.*
- The same Word of God can function as both Law and Gospel, depending upon *the way one hears, one’s need at the moment, one’s conscience, the opinio legis, etc.*

② Distribute copies of the Session 1 handout (p. 101). This question follows directly on the end of question 1, above.

Point out that in the first scripture passage, there is a command (“Go!”) and there are also promises (“I will bless you . . .”). One way to read this passage is “if-then”: *If you go, then I will bless you.* But another way to read the passage is “because-therefore”: *Because Abram and Sarai trust the promises, therefore they are set free to go on a journey to an unknown land.*

Go through the other scriptures, but let participants suggest ways each might be read as “if-then” or “because-therefore.” Do not make people choose which reading they prefer, just help them to see the difference in interpretation of each passage. You do not need to go through all of these passages, just enough for participants to grasp the concept. If you are splitting the session between two time periods, such as Sunday mornings, be sure to save several of these scripture texts to use as review at the beginning of the next time together.

Conclude Large Group Stuff with another song or two. Suggestions: WOV 715, 724.



*As seen in the video commercial, Law & Gospel brand laundry detergent gets out today’s tough stains with the dual action of God’s Word.*

## Small Group Stuff

Dismiss the groups for Small Group Stuff (the “ride home” portion of the session in small groups) and let them know what time to return for Wrap-up. Relax.

## Wrap-up

After the small groups return, remind participants not to violate any confidences in talking about their small group time together with the larger group.

Ask participants what insights they gained into the Lutheran language of “law” and “gospel” as they talked in their small groups. What questions do they still have?

It is quite possible that some will be insistent that “there is no free lunch” and that God demands certain things from us in order that we might be saved. Don’t be too aggressive in challenging this view. Simply ask these participants to try to keep their minds open as this concept continues to be worked out in the rest of the course.

Be sure to announce the reading for the next session: *The Lutheran Handbook*, pages 52–61 and 131–133. (Of course, participants can read more of the Handbook if they get started and can’t stop!)

Suggestion for a closing song: WOV 699.