

“Law: God’s good design for His human creatures”

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[1] How to think about the Law?

Where do we as Christians / Lutherans look for the answers and guidelines?

“We believe, teach, and confess that the only rule and guiding principle according which all teachings and teachers are to be evaluated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments alone, as it is written, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps. 119:105), and Saint Paul: “If . . . an angel from heaven should proclaim to you something contrary, . . . let that one be accursed!” (Gal 1:8) (FC)

Since we are going to look for answers in the Bible, we could as well try to summarize the whole Biblical narrative. How can we do it? The way it was done already since the early church, the same way it is done in our Book of Confessions (e.g. FC II.)

That is, in four main events, – Creation – Fall – Christ event – New Creation.

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Excursus on the need for the Big Four framework.

Biblical framework consists of the four main events, – Creation – Fall - Christ event - New Creation. What does this framework give us?

[1] Creation. God reveals that His first identity is the Creator, that God created and ordered His creation (Gen 1) and still preserves it (Col 1); that God’s creation is not just good, but “very good” (Gen 1:31), and that what we as human creatures are created according God’s design, we are created in God’s own image and likeness (Gen 1:26-27).

If Christians lose this part of God’s revelation, they can’t properly understand who God is, what His creation is, who we are, and what the Law is.

[2] **Fall.** God reveals what is wrong with this world, with God's very good creation, what sin is and what it does – making us to reject our Creator and His Word, desiring to be like gods ourselves so we can determine what is good and what is not on our own. (Gen 3:5)

If Christians lose this part of God's revelation, they can't properly identify what is wrong with this world and with us, we can't understand God's wrath and the depth of our corruption, we can't understand God's unconditional grace and His work of justification, redemption and reconciliation.

[3] **Christ event.** We learn that it was God the Creator Himself who came to us as one of us, to redeem and rescue His very good creation from the power of sin, death and devil. Salvation is an event of cosmic scale.

If we only look at the Christ event in an isolation from the rest of the Biblical narrative, we can't make sense of it, we can't properly understand the magnitude of this event, nor we can understand who Jesus was, what our salvation means, i.e. new creation and restoration of the goodness of God's creation, what the Church is, namely, Christ's body, nor what the role of the Law is for Christians.

[4] **New Creation.** We learn what God is about to do, what our ultimate hope is, and what the mission of the Church is, – to bring the Gospel to all people, so that they could be rescued from under the power of Satan and brought into the Kingdom of God's Son.

If Christians lose this part of God's message, we can't even understand what the Church is, and why she is here, then churches tend to become simply organizations fighting for social justice.

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Excursus on ways of thinking.

If we lose this framework we are at risk of losing our ability to think/act as Christians. The last century has witnessed one of the greatest shifts in society, that is, from **reality focused society**, to **desire focused society**. How can we see this?

[1] In **how people think**. When our focus shifts from using our reason thinking about issues in their context and considering consequences, to internal feelings. Not anymore “what do you think about it”, but “how do you feel about it”.

[2] In where people **look for moral guidelines**. When focus shifts from objective right and wrong to subjective feelings. What makes me feel good, or what feels good, or what makes others feel good, must be good.

[3] In **how we model our behaviour**. Focus shifts from trying to live up to external, objective standards of good, right, beautiful and virtuous, to trying to

change the world so that it suits me. ‘I’ll be like god...’ and the world will adjust to me.

Why is this so important for the Church to understand this?

If we lose Biblical “Creation – Fall – Christ event – New Creation” framework, the place doesn’t remain empty. Then we will embrace society’s way of thinking, which is desire focused. Then we will stop thinking and teaching about the Church as Christ’s body which is here to tell the truth and to bring people to salvation in Christ, but will begin to think and act as if the Church is here to give people what they want, and not what they truly need.

Then we don’t ask anymore what God (the Word of God) says about something, instead we focus on what do we (people) like, what makes us/them feel good, what may be appealing. The focus moves from objective and external “Creation – Fall – Christ event – New Creation” framework and our responsibilities as Jesus’ disciples to pleasing people according their subjective desires.

Now within this “Creation – Fall – Christ event – New Creation” framework we are going to look at what the Law is and what is its role for Christians.

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[2] What is the Law?

We may be used to think about the Law in the Bible as a legal term. Alternatively, we can use creation language to describe the Law. Remember, who is God? What is God’s first identity? How does He identify Himself in the Old Testament? As the Creator.

God is the Creator of heavens and earth. What does this mean? Creation wasn’t simply calling things out of nothing, but also ordering them. We can see it described in Gen 1. God orders His creation and prepares it for His human creatures.

We could say that Gen 1 describes how God establishes the laws that govern His creation and keep it going. We could call it **God’s order of creation**, or we could call it **God’s design** for His creation.

The same way as there are God’s laws that govern His creation (God’s design for His creation), there is also God’s design for His human creatures. The important thing is that this God’s design is something that is a part and parcel of His good creation. It is built into the very fabric of God’s creation, also in His human creatures.

Thing to remember! We can describe the Law using the language of creation, – God’s design, or the order of Creation.

Where is this written? Where can we see this God's design in the Bible? Everywhere. From the very beginning till the end.

[1] **God's image and likeness.** What is this?

Image describes our relationships with the Creator. Rephrasing we could say that the 'image' part indicates that we are **God's own representatives** over His creation. The 'Likeness' part indicates that human creatures are not created to do whatever we want or act in a way we want, but to live and act according the will of the One who created us, **to like and act as our God Himself would act.**

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What does this Image and likeness give to us? Numerous things:

- Identity – we are God's own representatives.
- Dignity and worth, – for as an ambassador represents his country and receives honour that is due to it, the same way we represent God the Creator and are to receive the same honour and attitude as the One whom we represent.
- Security and daily bread, for He has promised to provide for us.
- Meaning for our lives, – for now we know who we are and for what kind of life we are created.
- Joy – for this is what we experience when we live according God's design for our lives.

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Law as God's very good design: where is this written?

- We can see the same two dimensions, relationships with God and with our neighbours, described in the two Great Commandments given by Jesus (see Mt 22:35-40).
- Also when we look at the 10 Commandments, we can see how the first three describe our relationships with God, and the rest describe our relationships with our neighbours.
- **Luther's teaching on Two kinds of righteousness (2KR).**
 - o Luther called this teaching / anthropology "our theology" in his commentary on the letter to Galatians (1535).
 - o What is this righteousness? It is not so much a moral concept as it is a correspondence to some given standard. Both in the Old Testament and in the New 'righteousness' means 'being like we were created to be'.
 - o Remember, this teaching device where one hand points upwards, toward God (in these relationships we always receive – from the Father we receive daily bread, from the Son we receive the forgiveness of all our sins, from the Holy Spirit we receive faith and our new life) and towards the

neighbour (in these relationships we always give). Luther compared Christians with a tube, where from one end God pours in His blessings/gifts and from the other end we pour them over our neighbours.

Thing to remember! Image and Likeness = the Ten Commandments = the Two Great Commandments = God's very good design for His human creatures.

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How to think about the 10 Commandments?

The 10 Commandments are not some kind of arbitrary rules. They are God's gifts, God's wisdom, the Creator's design for our lives. They are very good.

Remember, what did Moses do with the tablets with the Commandments when he saw that Israel had made for themselves the golden calf? He broke them! That is, he withheld God's wonderful gift from His ungrateful and unfaithful people, the same way as parents withhold their gifts when their children have misbehave.

This about the Commandments this way:

- God is the Creator
- Everything is His gifts
- The 10 Commandments are given to us to protect God's good gifts.
- If we want to understand the Commandments, we need to understand what God's gift each of them protects and how to receive and enjoy it properly.

Thing to remember!

God > gift and its proper reception | commandment | < misuse of God's gift < idol

What are the gifts that the Commandments protect?

- 1st – God Himself
- 2nd – God's name, access to God, God's authority
- 3rd – God's presence and rest
- 4th – Parents and order
- 5th – Life and wellbeing
- 6th – Marriage and sexuality
- 7th – Possessions
- 8th – Reputation and truth
- 9th and 10th – Contentment and grateful heart

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[3] What does the Law do?

How does this Law, or God's design for His human creatures, or God's order of creation functions, what does it do?

Luther spoke of 'three uses of the Law'. Alternatively, we can speak about three functions of the Law. When we say 'uses of the Law' it may create an impression that we are in control of what the Law will do, while the language of 'functions' indicates that the Law is God's tool, not ours.

- 1st function – Curb – restrains the evil and promotes the good.
- 2nd function – Mirror – shows our sin.
- 3rd function – Guide – teaches God's wisdom and how to love God and our neighbor.

Thing to remember! The same very good Law functions in three different ways depending on situation, – curb, mirror and guide.

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1st function – curb.

The Law hasn't change after Fall. It is still very good. We have changed. Our desires are against the Law, for we want to be like gods ourselves (Gen 3:5). The Law is not the problem, our sin is. The Law still serves God's creation and keeps it going.

How does it work?

- Through our conscience – it accuses us when we have done something wrong or haven't done what we were supposed to. (Rom 2:15-16)
- Through our parents – they teach us from the very beginning what is right and what is wrong.
- Through law enforcement – if we disobey we will be punished. (Rom 13)
- Through rewards / God's blessings if we live according His design. (Rom 13)

Thing to remember! The Law curbs our evil through our conscience, parents, law enforcement, and rewards.

What are the effects?

- Order, peace and justice
- "Good people" – people who live moral lives.

Think! What happens when these ‘curbs’ are taken away? What often happens with children who grow up without parents/caregivers? They often end up in jail. What happens when law enforcement is not available? Think about the hurricane “Catherina” and New Orleans – after the hurricane, when police and army was paralyzed, crime skyrocketed.

Also, the Law crushes those who go against it. E.g. if you disobey your parent, you will not receive their blessings. If you commit adultery, there always will be consequences. Keep lying and you will find it hard to live in your community, etc. The same is true with all the other Commandments as well.

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2nd function – mirror. How does it work?

- When God’s Law is revealed to us
- It shows our sin – in thoughts, words and actions.
 - o Remember NASA project with your thoughts projected on the screen – how many would like to volunteer? ☺
- It accuses, makes sin alive, reveals God’s wrath.
- It prepares people to hear the Gospel, for they begin to realize that on their own they can’t stand before the Creator on the Last Day.

What are the effects? This function leads to repentance. It also can lead into despair on into prideful self-justification.

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3rd function – guide. How does it work?

- When we are justified, reconciled with our God and forgive.
- Then we want to please our dear Lord for everything that He has done and does for us.
- HOW do we love and please our God? The Bible is clear, – by keeping His Commandments (Ex 20, Deut. 5, etc.)
- Then we desire to learn God’s wisdom, His design for our lives. We desire to live in true freedom, that is, desiring the same thing that our Lord desires for us.

What are the effects? Living according God’s good design leads us into blessed life.

Thing to remember! The Law is God’s wisdom and God’s good gift to His chosen people.

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What does the Law not do?

Remember, the Law is good, even very good (Gen 1:31), holy and just (Rom 7:12), but nevertheless:

- The Law **can not** change our hearts.
- The Law **can not** save us.

The Law is good, very good, by it is not to be used to establish relationships with God the Father. This is not how relationships work. Parents love children first, and only then expect them to live good life. They don't expect children to live good lives, before they start loving them.

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[4] What is the role of the Law for Christians?

All three functions are present:

- Curb in daily life – when we don't want to obey the law.
- Mirror – preparing for confession and absolution and during the sermon.
- Guide – shows God's wisdom and instructs us how to love God.

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Let's take a look at Luther's emphasis on **the role of the Ten Commandments** in the Large Catechism, which is one of our confessional writings.

1st part: The 10 Commandments.

“Thus we have the Ten Commandments, a summary of divine teaching, as to what we are to do *in order that our whole life may be pleasing to God* [2KR], and the true fountain and channel from and in which everything must arise and flow that is to be a good work, *so that outside of the Ten Commandments no work or thing can be good or pleasing to God*, however great or precious it be in the eyes of the world.”

Notice, **we already are** pleasing to God through Jesus Christ, and that is a gift of God. However, here Luther speaks **how our whole lives / actions** can be pleasing to God.

2nd part: The Creed.

“The Creed sets forth to us everything that we must expect and receive from God, and, to state it quite briefly, teaches us to know Him fully. *And this is intended to help us* do that which according the Ten Commandments we ought to do.”

3rd part: The Lord's Prayer.

“For since we are so situated that no man can perfectly keep the Ten Commandments, even though he have begun to believe ... nothing is so necessary as that *we should* continually resort to the ear of God, *call upon Him*, and pray to Him, *that He would give, preserve, and increase in us faith and the fulfilment of the Ten Commandments.*”

Thing to remember! The 10 Commandments show us how to live God pleasing life. The Creed helps us to do it. In the Lord’s Prayer we pray for God’s help to be able to live according His Commandments.

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[5] Dangers of false teachings (regarding the role of the Law)

There are 2 dangerous trends:

- Self-justification by keeping the Law (legalism)
- Self-justification by neglecting the Law (antinomianism)
- Both, in fact, are very similar – so here we will look at the second one, – antinomianism.

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Antinomianism. It is very important to understand this false teaching.

Sadly, there are these two competing positions; one Biblical and true, the other, un-Biblical and false. My fear is that the un-Biblical and false is, in fact, much more widespread in Lutheran churches than the Biblical one.

[1] What is the Biblical position?

Our God is God the Creator. He created everything, and ordered His creation, establishing His laws for proper functioning of His creation; it applies both to the creation in broader sense, and to His human creatures. When God had finished His work of creating and ordering, He looked at it and said: “This is very good.” (Gen 1:31)

We often call this God’s very good design and ordering for His human creatures – the Law. We have it briefly summarized in the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments teach/reveal to us, what God’s unchanging will for our lives is.

After the Fall the same very good Law functions in a different way as well – it shows us our sin, our rebellion against God’s will. And once we learn that by our rebellious lives we earn only God’s wrath, the same Law leads us to Christ, for we need the Saviour to rescue us from the coming judgment.

In Jesus Christ, the Triune God grants us unconditional, unmerited grace and forgiveness of all our sins to all who repent and desire His forgiveness. God's forgiveness restores our relationships with our Creator and Saviour, and that is the beginning of our new lives as God's beloved children.

When we hear the Gospel, when we receive the Sacraments, we also receive the Holy Spirit, and He changes our hearts, with the result that we desire to live according the holy will of our Heavenly Father and Saviour Jesus Christ.

With these new hearts Christians then joyfully seek for God's will so that they could strive to lead fully human lives in God pleasing way. Now God's Law as summarized in the Ten Commandments becomes for us the sweetest wisdom of God and the source of joyful and blessed life for us, and for those around us.

We can say that to live according the Law = being a fully human = to love your God and to love your neighbour. (Mt 22:35-40, Rom 13:9-10). The Law (the Ten Commandments) teach us/give as the framework for how to love God and neighbour. We can't love God and neighbour not knowing "how", or by doing something that is contrary to God's good design for our lives.

Now is the time to ask the question: "*Where is this written?*" See Gen 1:26, Ex 20, Deut. 5. Mt 5:17-18, John 14:15, 21, John 15:10, 1 John 5:2-3, 2 John 4-5, also Ex 20:5 and Deut. 5:10. Rom 7:12, Ps 1. Ps 119. Mt 22:35-40, etc. Book of Concord, Formula of Concord, Article VI. "The Third use of the Law."

What about this position?

It is Biblical, it is Trinitarian, for we acknowledge the work of God the Creator (designing our lives), of God the Redeemer (saving us from our sin), and of God the Comforter (restoring our humanity, changing our hearts, giving us true faith and helping to live God pleasing life).

It gives us good conscience for being forgiven, and good conscience for we know how to live God pleasing life. It leads to wise, fulfilling, joyful life where, as forgiven and restored children of God, we can grow in holy life by the power of the Holy Spirit, guided by God's holy will for our lives.

[2] What is this un-Biblical position?

It goes roughly like this. Before Jesus people were governed by the Law. That was the age of the Law. This was the way of the Old Testament.

Now we have Jesus. Now this is the age of the Gospel. The Gospel is more important, the Gospel trumps the Law.

The Law is baaad, the Gospel is goood. Jesus brought us the Gospel to free us from the Law. Now we are free to life new lives, for we are not under the Law anymore.

What about this position?

It sounds appealing, and it contains a good share of truth, the proponents of this position speak a lot about love, and freedom, and the Gospel. The Law is bad, oppressive, obsolete, the Gospel is good, for it takes the Law away.

It is *un-Biblical*. It ignores the whole Biblical narrative disconnecting what Jesus did from the Biblical story. (Put it this way, this position believes that the Son of God didn't come to restore our humanity, but to abolish God's good design for our lives. Compare it with Mt 5:17).

It uses God's forgiveness as an excuse to go back to Gen 3, – 'we'll be like gods, we will know what is right and what is wrong'. We don't need God's Word, His Commandments to guide us, we are free, we know better, we can make our own choices. (Gen 3!). And because God forgives everything, there are no more expectations for Christians to lead a holy life. (Think about Paul's letters where he urges Christians to live new life and describes how to do it.)

IMPORTANT: in this approach, if only we label some parts of God's Word as 'law', we can ignore what God says, for we are not under the Law anymore. And because now we are free from the Law, we can come up with our own ways of how to love God and how to love our neighbour; for it is not God anymore, who determines what is right and what is wrong, but us.

Concluding.

This is where the Church in the West and many in the LCA as well are right now. We are back to Gen 3. We know better. We'll be loving in our own way.

But what if two people disagree about what is right and wrong? There are no criteria (God's will) anymore to evaluate it. Then we introduce the new 1st commandment: "Don't judge!"

Then we privatize love and whoever objects our ideas about right and wrong, we call them unloving, or judgmental, etc. Does this sound familiar?

One of regular objections is that we can't keep God's Law anyway, so let's ignore it all together. Just think about it carefully: can you be a perfect spouse, parent, employee? Of course, not! So, does it mean that we don't even need to try?! Of course, it doesn't mean that! We will still do our best. The same is true about God's Law/His wisdom for our lives.

The Bible is very clear that there are only two groups of people: those who love God and keep His commandments, and those who hate Him and ... ignore God's commandments and do what they want. (Ex 20:6, John 14:21, 2 John 4-5, etc.)

This is important. Be as good Christians as you can, rejoice in doing it and have good conscience for you know that [1] you are forgiven, and [2] how to live God pleasing life.

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Just a few quotations about God's very good design for our lives.

- Those who love me ... keep my commandments. (Exo 20:6)
- Blessed is the man [...] who delights in the Law of the LORD, and on His Law meditates day and night. (Ps 1:1-2)
- If you love me, you will keep my commandments. (John 14:15)
- For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. (1John 5:3)

For fun!

Excursus on four universal experiences.

We discussed that there are four human experiences that are truly universal.

[1] The sense that there is something higher. We feel it looking at countless stars, or breath-taking sunsets, or wonderful complexity of life. That's why in all languages there is this word – 'god'. (Rom 1:18-20)

[2] Our conscience. Our sense of accountability. We all have it. Every human being has it. What is this voice that speaks within us? The strangest thing is that it usually speaks against what we desire; accusing us of what we have or haven't done, and warning us not to do what we sometimes desire. (Rom 2:14-16) The Bible calls it - the law written on our hearts.

[3] Our self-consciousness. You are the same you that you were 20 years ago. And you will be the same you in 20 years. Everything around us changes. Environments, situations, even our bodies, but this sense of self remains the same. The Bible calls it eternity in our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11). We live as if we are eternal, as if we are never going to die.

[4] Brokenness of the world and of human beings. We all know that something is wrong with the world and with us. This explains why we have in our language words like 'unfair, injustice, wrong, evil', etc. We realize that so many things do not happen the way they should. We differ, of course, in how we explain what is wrong with the world.

Because we all have these universal experiences, we need to make sense of them and put them in some sort of a framework. This is how all religions, philosophies and worldviews have come into being; trying to make sense of these experiences.

Jesus Christ is the ultimate answer to all these questions. He is the Truth, and the Biblical narrative explains all these experiences.

[1] There is God and He wants to be known. [2] We are accountable before the holy God and we all will stand before Him. [3] This life is not all that there is, that's correct. [4] And, yes, it is our sin that explains the brokenness of the world and human creatures.

These four are a good way to start a conversation with non-Christians. Then we can ask for their explanations and where do they get them from, and to witness what we believe and why.

Soli Deo Gloria!