

# Law and Gospel: How to Read and Apply the Bible - A Reader's Edition

by C.F.W. Walther, Christian C. Tiews (Translator)  
Concordia: St. Louis

Concordia is to be applauded for providing a fresh reworking of Dau's 1929 translation with abundant supporting material that helps make Walther's classic more accessible to 21st century readers.

One feature that makes this Reader's Edition more accessible is the front matter that sets the context for Walther's Friday evening lectures. Included in the front matter are:

- A brief biography of Walther;
- A timeline of key events in world and church history from Luther to Walther;
- A timeline and brief commentary on the history of the teaching of law and gospel in the church from the apostles to the time of Walther; and
- A tracing of the philosophical and ecclesiastical setting that helps explain some specific emphases found in Walther's lectures.

The appendices at the end of the volume also add significantly to its value. Particularly helpful are the extensive glossary of terms and the Index of Persons and Groups. While useful for any reader, these appendices may be especially appreciated by the lay reader who may not be familiar with some of Walther's theological language or with the stream of names and events from Walther's day and from prior church history. Walther often quickly references such names and events as examples with little or no explanation. While long explanations would have seemed pedantic to his initial audience of theological students, the explanations provided by the editors of this Reader's Edition provide a valuable resource for present day readers.

As helpful as this supporting material is, this reviewer had one concern. Especially in the front matter, it is his impression that there was a strong reticence to say anything that would reflect poorly on Walther (the notes in the midst of the lectures offer a more balanced approach, see, for instance, footnotes on pages 229 and 435-436). We rightly thank God for all he used Walther to accomplish in the church, but this reader was at times uneasy by what he felt bordered on the worship of men.

For instance, while the front matter notes the strong currents of pietism at work in Walther's day in the church at large both in Europe and the United States, it is curious that there is no discussion on whether Walther himself remained impacted by the pietism under whose influence he fell for a time as a student. That is a curious omission since that debate has surfaced over the years within the LCMS. (See, for example, "The Preaching of C. F. W. Walther in View of the Doctrine of the Church" by John C. Wohlrabe, Jr., in *The Pieper Lectures: Preaching through the Ages*, Concordia Historical Institute & The Luther Academy, 2004). The practical importance of raising that issue becomes apparent, for instance, when it comes to noting that it remained Walther's practice to address at least a portion of each Sunday morning sermon to the unconverted within the congregation. A failure to recognize that practice in his preaching, also reflected in portions of *Law & Gospel*, can easily result in preaching the law of God to believers as if they have ceased to be the people of God.

Along with that tendency to place Walther on a pedestal, at times in both front matter and elsewhere this reviewer detected a bit of a related spirit of boasting about Lutheran orthodoxy. Those reading this book from other denominations might at times get the impression that the Lutheran church's nose is up in the air rather than her hand being out to share the truth graciously entrusted into frail hands.

But those concerns do not change the fact that this is an exceedingly helpful volume. That becomes especially apparent once the reader reaches the lectures themselves. In this edition's Foreword, the editors note that it "omits some of Dau's language and editorial choices and makes Walther sound more like Walther than a British academician" (ix). Those editorial choices mean that the literary stiffness and formality of the Dau edition have been softened to enable the reader to catch a glimpse of Walther's lively oral presentation style. Instead of reading what has the feel of an academic essay, this edition seeks to capture the spirit and life experienced by those who gathered for these Lutherstunden. Here is just one sample of the difference between the Dau edition and the Reader's Edition.

But does not the Gospel demand faith? Yes; that, however, is just the same kind of command as when you say to a hungry person, "Come, sit down at my table and eat." The hungry person will not reply: "Bosh! I will not take orders from you." No, he will understand and accept your words as a kind invitation. That is what the Gospel is – a kind invitation to partake of heavenly blessings. (Dau, 9)

What if someone says, "But the Gospel demands faith!" Well, just picture someone who is hungry. You tell him: "Come, sit down at my table and eat." That hungry person would hardly reply, "Who are you to boss me around?" No, he would understand and accept your words as a kind invitation. That is exactly what the Gospel is – a kind invitation to partake of heavenly blessings. (Reader's Edition, 14).

Also helpful in the Reader's Edition are the notations found in margins and footnotes. The footnotes serve various purposes. At times they explain the background for Walther's arguments as well as regularly helping the reader to understand a particular translation challenge as the original German stenographers notes are rendered into readable English. Latin and Greek references in the original lectures are also given explanation since the translation simply renders them into English. Footnotes give biblical references for where Walther is only making a brief allusion. The footnotes often give brief explanations of theological terms and persons mentioned while pointing to fuller explanations in the glossary or Index of Persons and Groups.

Marginal notes also serve multiple purposes. They provide brief flow of thought notations for each lecture (although their frequency and helpfulness seemed uneven). The margins also list references for scriptural and confessional quotations in each paragraph as well as bibliographic references for the many Luther quotations found in the lectures.

Another change from the Dau edition is that the Reader's edition is arranged by theses rather than by evening lectures. Each thesis essentially becomes its own chapter. This reader found that to be a positive change. It is the progression of the theses that is at the heart of the lectures, not the number of evening lectures each thesis may have spanned.

However, as carried out in the Reader's Edition, this arrangement by thesis does yield one curious by-product. Since the Reader's Edition follows the rubric of beginning each new chapter only when Walther arrives at the wording of the thesis itself, an artificial division is regularly created whereby Walther's introduction to a new thesis is severed from the thesis to which it belongs.

For example, on pages 47-48 the chapter on the second thesis comes to a close with the beginning of the sixth evening lecture. By editorial formatting, this part of the sixth evening lecture appears to form Walther's closing remarks for thesis two. In reality, however, Walther is already introducing the third thesis. But, because Walther has not yet articulated the third thesis, this edition's rubric makes Walther's introduction to thesis three appear as his concluding thoughts on thesis two. Only after a page break and the beginning of a new chapter bearing the title "Thesis III" does the lecture continue. If someone is not reading the book cover to cover, and instead opens the book to read a particular thesis, that reader will at times miss Walther's own way of introducing that thesis. This formatting oddity could have been avoided by making the chapter break at the place where Walther finished discussing the previous thesis and began the discussion of the next.

Without disparaging the overall helpfulness of the footnotes, this reader noted a few specific problems.

- Footnote 2 on page 52 presents an unbalanced discussion when it claims that “Luther supported the view that Absolution is a sacrament.” That comment fails to note the fluidity of usage by Luther and others as they moved away from the sacramental system of Rome and wrestled with a two or three part definition of sacrament. Luther’s refraining from using the term sacrament when treating confession and absolution in the Small Catechism is sufficient evidence that this footnote’s statement is less than complete.
- Footnote 4 on page 80 quotes the Brief Statement’s (1932) conviction that the biblical prophecies concerning the Antichrist “have been fulfilled in the Pope of Rome.” The footnote adds that this remains the confession of the LCMS to this day. This reader would hope that statement is accurate, but it seems to gloss over some official actions and writings of LCMS leaders since the Brief Statement that call into question that continuing confession. This author would call attention to a footnote on page 25 in the otherwise excellent study on end times by the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations (*The End Times: A Study on Eschatology and Millennialism*). There the confession of the papacy as the Antichrist of Scripture comes across as historically conditioned. The 1983 joint Lutheran-Catholic statement on justification is advanced as evidence that Rome could revise “Tridentine dogma.”
- Footnote 51 on page 140 either has a typographical error (substituting “divine” for “human” in regard to the two natures in Christ) or it reveals a faulty understanding of the majestic genius in the communication of attributes in the person of Christ about which Walther was speaking.

Despite these concerns, Concordia’s Reader’s Edition of Law & Gospel is a worthwhile addition to any pastor or lay person’s library. The fresh reworking of Dau’s translation, together with the copious explanatory notes found before, with, and after the lectures, make this a useful tool for growth in the critical skill of rightly distinguishing law and gospel.