

Law without gospel

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [June 30, 1999](#) issue

The Ten Commandments may soon, by decree, be posted on public school walls. Burnt into wood or graven as images in stone, or merely inked, they will contribute to American moral security. Soft-headed liberals react by pointing out how many Americans are left out by such government endorsements of a particular faith. Many schools have Muslim majorities. Their first "pillar"—"there is no God but Allah"—does not match the first "commandment"—Yahweh's "thou shalt have no other gods before me." And they will further point out that posting the Ten Commandments forces theism on Buddhists and monotheism on Hindus. Expect to hear from humanists and all those other people who don't really belong. Even most Jews will be nervous about this governmental sanction of their Law, ripped out of context. But they are only about 2 percent of us.

Those bleeding hearts waste little time noticing the diversity of interpretation among the Christian majority. Catholics and Lutherans will insist on their own numbering—we Lutherans chop the anticoveting commandments in two. Will schools use our numbering where we are in the majority?

Let's get to even nicer points of theology. Who worries about Lutheran consciences, or the distortion of Lutheran teaching that is implied by inscribing the image of the commandments on the classroom wall?

You see, we 8.6 million Lutherans in the U.S. believe—it is one of our "fundamentals"—that there is a distinction between God's law, codified in the two tables of the Ten Commandments, and the gospel, seen and heard in Jesus Christ. "The law always accuses us and thus always shows us an angry God" (Ap. IV, 295). The law is "the thunder-bolt by means of which God with one blow destroys both open sinners and false saints" (S.A. III, iii, 2). As for the Sabbath commandment, "The Holy Scriptures have abrogated the Sabbath and teach that after the revelation of the Gospel all ceremonies of the old law may be omitted" (A.C. XXVIII, 59).

Should we go along with the House bill and give children the law of God without the gospel? Listen to Lutherans interpret law and gospel: "Some, who hate the law

because it forbids what they desire to do and commands what they are unwilling to do, are made worse thereby . . ." (S.A. III, ii, 2). "Others become blind and presumptuous, imagining that they can and do keep the law by their own powers. . . . Hypocrites and false saints are produced in this way" (S.A. III, ii, 3). "The law shows only God's wrath and sternness; the law accuses us and shows how God wants to punish sin so terribly with both temporal and eternal punishment" (Ap. IV, 295). "But where the law exercises its office alone, without the addition of the Gospel, there is only death and hell . . ." (S.A. III, iii, 7).

The A.C., Ap. and S.A. refer to the Augsburg Confession, the Apology to the Confession, and Luther's Schmalkald Articles. Don't try to keep them straight. Just remember that by posting the Ten Commandments without also posting the gospel of Jesus Christ, the government is—in the eyes of the second-largest body in the Western church—accusing children, showing them an angry God, a destroyer, and, if they have normal desires but no gospel, they will be made worse, blind, presumptuous, hypocritical, false, accused, bound for death and hell.

Of course, we Lutherans may be wrong about law and gospel. But we do, or should, or did have rights of conscience to persist in our error.