

## Gospel Discipline

Carl Moser

**D**ISCIPLINE IS BOTH A SOCIOLOGICAL and a theological necessity. Discipline, the attempt to control a person's behavior to a reasonable standard, is a theological necessity because all people are sinners. As a result, children disobey. It is a sociological necessity because children need to know not just what the teacher says about classroom standards, but especially to what degree the teacher enforces what she says. The degree of enforcement more clearly indicates to children the reality of the rules than the words spoken by the teacher. For the class to find out the degree of the teacher's enforcement, some pupils need to misbehave.

Thus it follows that teachers in Lutheran schools need to use discipline techniques. As Lutheran school educators we evaluate what we do in light of what we believe. We proclaim that we teach according to what we believe not only in religion class, but also throughout the day. A great deal of our teaching is done by our example. The example of the Christian teacher is one of the most distinctive and important facets of Lutheran education. Therefore it is important that we not only teach, but also act according to what we believe are the appropriate ways to act.

It is easy for us to read from the Catechism what Lutherans believe. It is much more difficult to understand how we should act according to those beliefs. That is particularly true in the case of discipline.

### How are Lutherans different?

If we members of the Lutheran church are not different from other religions, there is no reason for us to have a different church body. We are traditionally and theologically unique. An ex-governor of the state of Wisconsin facetiously remarked that to become a member of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod people needed to do two things: 1) Be able to memorize. 2) Be able to sing loudly. That was a silly comment, and it resulted in laughter, but it had a grain of truth to it. More seriously, Lutherans are actually different from other religions and non-religions in three ways: 1) We emphasize the use of the Bible as God's literally inspired Word. 2) We emphasize the sacraments of Holy Communion and Baptism. 3) We emphasize the proper distinction between and use of Law and gospel.

### How are Lutheran schools different?

First, Lutheran schools are Lutheran. As an important part of the function of a Lutheran congregation, the Lutheran school emphasizes the Bible, the sacraments, and Law and gospel, as listed above. Discussions with Lutheran educational leaders from around the country have brought out some other practical ways that Lutheran schools are different from other schools: 1) Most of our teachers have been trained specifically in one of our synodical colleges to teach in Lutheran schools. 2) The relationship to the congregation is particularly unique in that a school must be sponsored by a congregation or congregations of the LC-MS or it is not one of our schools. 3) We have a strong belief in the value of Lutheran elementary and secondary education.


Of course, when Lutheran schools are compared to private or public schools, the only and real difference is Jesus Christ whom we proclaim freely, clearly, and enthusiastically.

### How are Lutheran schools (and teachers) different in the way they correct misbehavior?

The frank response to this question is "not much!" Too often we can't see the difference in discipline techniques used in Lutheran schools, as compared to others. Other schools from various denominations and of nonreligious orientation use many of the same techniques. For example, Canter, Dreikurs, and Skinner can be and are applied to all types of schools. Teachers in all

**Key idea** Understanding the distinction between Law and gospel is the first and most important step in establishing Christian discipline in a classroom.

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schools probably have three or four favorite consequences of misbehavior. Such things as detention, added assignments, isolation, referral to school authorities, and referral to parents are fairly typical in all kinds of schools. Of course, the technique used most frequently by teachers is to scold or reprimand the misbehaving child. Most frequently the words used are similar in all kinds of schools.

Since schools are very similar in the ways they discipline children, can Lutheran schools more effectively model that which we believe as we direct behavior, teach children how to act, and correct misbehavior? Can Lutheran schools use the models available for us from other systems and still be distinctively Lutheran as we discipline? It is not the system or the form of correction or rules we use which set us apart, but our intentions, our process, and the important dimension that we add (Law and gospel). The challenge is to make sure that our intentions and our process are Lutheran and that we do, in fact, use the Law and gospel as we control children's behavior.

#### What does the Bible say?

This article emphasizes two aspects of Lutheran discipline: the use of the Bible, and the use of Law and gospel. The Bible provides six basic precepts about classroom discipline.

**Precept 1**—Teachers have legitimate authority over pupils. This authority is a right, a requirement, and an opportunity. The Fourth Commandment, especially as explained by Dr. Luther in the Catechism, indicates that children have the responsibility to give honor to those in authority, to serve and obey them, and to hold them in love and esteem. Many admonitions in Scripture indicate parental responsibility for controlling youth. As substitute parents during the school day, this right to control is given also to teachers. Therefore, if it is necessary for teachers to use authority over pupils, teachers should not feel guilty about it, but should accept it as their right. Nothing is wrong when a teacher exercises reasonable control over pupils.

The legitimate authority that teachers have is also a requirement. In Deuteronomy 7 the Lord tells us to teach children his Commandments. God also commands us to teach his Word in Matthew 28. Proverbs 13 tells those in authority to correct misbehavior. Discipline in a classroom is not an option for teachers. It is a God-given requirement.

The legitimate authority teachers have over pupils is also an opportunity. It is an opportunity to help children gain self-control, and in so doing, to improve perceived selfworth and others' approval. It is an opportunity to show young people you care enough to care about their actions and about their relationships with other people. It is an opportunity to show our love for them. It is particularly a great opportunity to use the Law, followed by a large measure of gospel.

**Precept 2**—Teachers must set limits. In Deuteronomy 6:6-7 God tells us that we must speak his Law so that people will learn it. In Matthew 22:21 the Lord tells us that we should give to Caesar those things that Caesar has authority over. In other words, in addition to God's Law we must teach children the civil law and its boundaries as instituted by our government. School and classroom rules also are required. If pupils are not taught about them, children would not know which behaviors are considered disobedient to the authorities over them.

**Precept 3**—Children will misbehave. Everyone is a sinner by original sin (Ro 5:12) and actual sin (Ps 14:3).

**Precept 4**—Teachers must correct misbehavior. It is not enough to teach children what is right and what is wrong by our words. It is necessary that we control their behavior. Christ spoke against disobedience to the Law, but he also punished the money changers (Mt 21:12) and Paul caused verbal "Godly grief" (2 Co 7:8-12). Lutheran teachers use God's law to stop those who are misbehaving (curb), show the sinners that they are sinful (mirror), and show what should be done and not done (rule).

**Precept 5**—Teachers must be loving. Our Lord Jesus fulfilled the requirements of the Old Testament law, and he instituted a new law, the law of love (Jn 15:12). This love that we show because we have been loved so much is more than the humanitarian respect, concern, trust, and patience that is shown in any good school. It is love (agape) because of the Lord and



toward the Lord. It is a forgiving, initiating, non-reciprocal kind of love that the Lord provides for us. It is a love that is given to children because teachers are loved so much. It is a love that transcends humanitarian love. It is love that directs a teacher to help a child behave according to God's laws, not merely according to what the child or the society currently feel are correct for the pupil to do. To communicate this love, teachers must do loving things and be perceived by their pupils as being loving. If the pupils do not realize that the teacher is a loving person, something is wrong with the way the teacher is acting and communicating the love that she has in the Lord and that she has for the pupils because of the love the Lord gives to her.

**Percept 6**—Jesus loves me. The gospel in all its power and glory provides motivation for the teacher to love, empowers the teacher to love, and exemplifies the way teacher should love. No matter what happens at any time each Lutheran teacher knows, "Jesus loves me." If the teacher is having trouble or has made a mistake, the teacher knows "Jesus loves me." Although the teacher knows that wrong has been done, the teacher knows, "Jesus loves me." Every day, every class, every moment, "Jesus loves me." Therefore, a Lutheran teacher is happy, content, and self-confident as a forgiven saint. Therefore Lutheran teachers don't need to "put someone else down" in order to be raised up. Jesus has already raised them up with his love. Therefore, Lutheran teachers don't need expressed love by the pupils every moment, because they know that Jesus loves them every moment. Pupils don't need to like you all the time, and you don't need to strive for power. You have power in the Lord Jesus. The gospel message empowers a teacher to avoid responding to misbehavior in a vengeful, vindictive, or repressive manner.

Gospel discipline emphasizes Law and gospel. (Before reading this section, take the following quiz.)

### Quiz

To the left put a *G* next to those teacher acts which are gospel-oriented and an *L* next to those which are Law-oriented.

1. The teacher smiles and tells children how to use a learning center.
2. The teacher says, "Sit down."
3. The teacher directs the child to another activity.
4. The teacher gives a child a choice to behave or to be punished.
5. The teacher wipes the names of misbehavers off the chalkboard and forgets whose name was there.
6. The teacher holds a finger to her lips and says, "sh" with a twinkle in her eye.
7. The teacher lets the children help make the classroom rules.
8. The teacher ignores misbehavior, hoping that it will stop.
9. The teacher praises those who behave properly.
10. The teacher reports pupil conduct on the progress report (report card).
11. The classroom has only one rule: "Love one another."

To apply the Law and gospel to classroom discipline it is first important that the teacher know the difference between the Law and gospel in its applications. The Law condemns, is hurtful, gives despair, and causes stress—and stress is the greatest cause of misbehavior. The gospel comforts, soothes, and gives hope and love—and love is the greatest motivator for good behavior. Specifically, the gospel is the good news that we sinners are loved and saved by Christ, God's Son, who suffered our punishment on the cross that we might be forgiven through faith and rose again from the dead, proving that he is God.

The gospel is not merely accepting anything with no standards or expectations. It is not wishy-washy, accepting all kinds of misbehavior as acceptable. Actually, misbehavior is never and can never be acceptable. Misbehavior is a sin that can be forgiven. However, it remains a sin. The gospel is not saying that people are good by themselves. Christ is good and only in him and through him can we be good. The gospel is not just being nice or democratic or kind. In *Hostage in a Hostage World*, B. Christian Zimmerman, a pilot held hostage in the Near East, talks about the Shiite Muslims and their twisted view of Christianity and Americans. In viewing the attitudes and beliefs of his captors, he reflects on the dangers of a vague, universal God.

In my experiences in the working world, I deal with many good people who talk about a vague, universal God. In America we subscribe to a few of his laws and call ourselves a religious nation. As the God of every religion, he seems such a simple God to believe in. He can be called by any name. He can be worshipped conveniently in any form all over the world. He makes few demands. And, best of all, he does not convict us of our selfishness and sin.

I discern such a God to be the creation of Satan. He twists the truth that 'God requires perfect obedience' into 'Because God is love, he does not really require a full accounting for our sins.'.... He promises an earthly paradise of self-centered pleasures. He comforts us by telling us that we're not so bad. He assures us that we are okay the way we are. He cautions us not to be so self-righteous that we condemn the faith of other religions, but that we seek out what piece of truth each one has. And since this deceiver is Satan, he leads us to believe we have no need for Jesus, who lived and died to atone for our sins and rose again. (Zimmerman)

According to Zimmerman, people are thereby sucked into the trap of subscribing to a comfortable, universal religion which everyone can accept but which can save no one. This is the kind of danger that Lutherans sometimes fall into as they try to describe society's concept of gospel as a wishy-washy form of non-imposing love.

The Law prepares people for the gospel. Perfect people don't need the gospel or a Savior—only imperfect people do. They have a need for it only when they realize their imperfection. The gospel (comforting) is ineffective without the Law (hurting). We don't need a band-aid if there's no "owie." Therefore, to have gospel discipline we must use the Law. The title of this article "Gospel Discipline" is really an inappropriate phrase. It is an oxymoron, an expression containing two opposite or contradictory words. If discipline is only punishment or direction or works as a curb or mirror, it is only Law.

As you review the quiz above, please note that no matter how gently or kindly the teacher uses the Law, the Law is still the Law. The only possible example in the quiz that is gospel-related is the fifth item. It illustrates the gospel only because the teacher is non-directing, non-controlling, non-punishing—merely forgiving. Probably the ten examples that are law-oriented illustrate the frequency with which Lutheran teachers use the Law as compared to the gospel in the classroom. We become so busy controlling misbehavior that we take little time to assure each other of the gospel, God's great love and for giveness for us.

#### **What is the role of Law and gospel in discipline?**

If they are conflicting terms, and "Gospel Discipline" is indeed an oxymoron, then there must be some way of indicating how both Law and gospel are to be used in discipline. In a Lutheran school discipline must be much more than rules, control punishment, and behavior modification. It must include the gospel also as part of the intentions of the teacher and as part of the process. A teacher empowered and motivated by the gospel has a desire to help, to comfort, to soothe, to forgive, and to love. The gospel, as part of the process, is shown by a teacher who is actually forgiving, helping, comforting, soothing, and showing love.

Lutheran teachers must use both Law and gospel. Anyone who says a classroom is only gospel (no punishment, no rules) must assume with the humanists that children are good, not sinful; they don't need the gospel. Those who feel they are good and who are impenitent have no interest in the gospel. They reject it. Therefore the gospel has no effect unless the individual is first brought to repentance by the Law. Sorrow springing from disobedience of the Law opens our hearts to the joy of the gospel. Lutheran gospel discipline, then, must start with the Law, but with only sufficient Law for repentance. And it must always end with the gospel (love, assurance, comfort, forgiveness).

Another difference between Lutheran school discipline and discipline in other schools is the child's reason for obedience. Children who have been baptized and have come to faith by the Holy Spirit are motivated by God's love, not just by moralistic humanism. They obey and respect rules and authorities not merely because it is "nice," or polite, or because their misbehavior affects others negatively. They obey the Lord because God said they must do so, and because we who are empowered by the gospel to do so.



### Applying the Law before misbehavior

The Law can be applied before misbehavior by making a discipline plan. A discipline plan includes rules, punishments, and rewards. As rules are made, consider using Bible quotes where possible and indicating rules as God's rules where God has specific rules about the matter. Punishments are designed to produce repentance and should be applied only until repentance is in evidence. Rewards are designed to direct and control through positive reinforcement. Although rewards are positive and enjoyable, they are done to obtain correct behavior; therefore they are Law also.

Another way to apply the Law before misbehavior is to aid the moral development of the children. Moral education experts indicate that there are only two ways to aid moral development: Modeling, and helping children to make good choices. As a result, Lutheran teachers accept the high responsibility of modeling faith. Whenever possible, help young people make good choices. Provide real dilemmas, opportunities to compare and evaluate ideas. Provide opportunities for children to make decisions. Both young and older people must make many moral choices and decisions throughout their lives. Helping them to make good moral decisions in small matters when they are young will aid their moral decision making when they are older. It is important that children learn to base their decisions on God's Word and never contrary to it.

### Having and sharing high expectations.

They help children learn to control themselves. It is important, of course, to review God's laws regularly. This is especially true before misbehavior occurs. If done after misbehavior has occurred, it becomes a "put-down" rather than instruction. Review the Ten Commandments, but particularly the Law of love and its applications in Scripture. For example, the Lord has indicated that we should forgive as he has forgiven us, that greater love has no man than that he give up himself for another, that if asked for our coat we should give a cloak, and that we should love one another.

### Applying the Law after misbehavior

The literature of education is filled with ideas for applying the Law after misbehavior. A large number of people have proposed specific systems for handling misbehavior. The most popular one today is Lee Canter's "assertive discipline."

However, popular systems have been proposed by Haim Ginott, B. F. Skinner, William Glasser, Tom Gordon, James Dobson, Rudolph Dreikurs, and Gerald Nelson. Lutheran teachers can use these systems and apply them in a more specific manner to a Lutheran setting. For example, when using an assertive discipline plan, instead of saying, "I will not allow," you may consider saying, "That behavior is not God pleasing!" You may wish to say "God does not want you to ..." and so forth. Other systems can be applied by a Christian teacher to a Christian setting with Christian intentions and procedures.

### Applying the gospel before misbehavior

Although the literature of education is filled with suggestions for applying the Law, it is nearly empty of applications for applying the gospel. This is a concept unique to Christian schools. Others appeal to the child's goodness. We direct them to the good news of Christ. Other types of schools and the Law tell what the child must do to be good. We tell them what Christ has done out of his goodness to make us good. The gospel motivates and empowers proper God-pleasing behavior out of the child's response of love to God's great love. Children need the power of the gospel to obey the Law. The gospel, which empowers us to behave, needs to be given especially before misbehavior occurs. It can be communicated in the following ways:

- Daily rejoice together in Jesus' resurrection and love. Consider an invocation alternate as "We begin today in the name of Jesus, who makes us happy."
- Regularly tell children of your personal faith and personally witness to the great things

God has done for you.

- Help develop a community of believers in the classroom. Help your pupils become aware of each other's feelings and needs. Even as adults have become more aware of the other's needs and feelings through Teacher Effectiveness Training, so children can be trained to become aware of others' feelings and needs.
- Intentionally enable all the children to pray with and for each other beginning in the earliest grades and continuing through the oldest years. Help and encourage children to say prayers from the heart. Go beyond printed or written prayers to words spoken informally to the Lord.
- In loving, Christian ways, touch, hug, smile, and use other forms of the body language of love and forgiveness.
- Provide daily verbal assurance of your Christian love for each of the children and for Jesus' special perfect love for each of them.
- "Catch them being good." Focus on children's good behavior without the ulterior motive of using it as a tool to shape their behavior, and rejoice in it. Look for the work of the Holy Spirit in each person and rejoice together.

#### Applying the gospel after misbehavior

The gospel is applied after misbehavior, but only after the Law has been applied. The Law in the classroom provides many opportunities for using the gospel! Use the following gospel-oriented actions.

- Forgive children. Don't isolate or refuse to talk to or withdraw your affection or attention from the children. Use the word "forgive." Say things such as "You have been forgiven," or "The Lord forgives you of all your sins and misbehavior."
- Replace "That's okay" or "You better remember" with "Jesus and I forgive you." Sin is never acceptable in God's eyes. The Law says, "You better remember," but the gospel says, "Your error has been taken from you by Jesus."
- Hug a misbehaviorer. Some early childhood teachers hug small children until they stop misbehaving. That's applying the Law. However, good teachers continue to hug the child after misbehavior, indicating the teacher's continued love for the child in spite of the misbehavior. This models the love that the Lord has for us in spite of our misbehavior.
- Express love verbally. Say such things as, "Jesus and I love you— really!"
- Pray with and for the misbehaviorer. Hold the misbehaviorer's hands when doing so, to indicate your continued feeling of worth and respect for the child.
- William Glasser suggests that, at the end of a conversation about improving behavior, a teacher should shake hands "man to man" with the child as a sign of commitment to each other. This touching in a semiformal basis shows respect, commitment, and trust. Shake hands or touch the child and say, "Christian to Christian, this is our commitment to each other."
- Communicate clearly the fact that Jesus always loves the person, although he is pleased or displeased with actions. Don't say, "Jesus loves (likes) you when (if) you ...." Merely say, "Jesus loves you."
- When children are behaving, say, "That's great," or "Showing love is a Christlike thing," or "We Christians enjoy doing the right thing," or "Jesus is pleased," or "God likes your good work," or "That makes Jesus smile." The Bible is clear that God is pleased with good actions (Col 3:20, Php 4:18, 1 Th 4:1, Ro 8:8).
- After every punishment or after every time the Law knocks children down, pick them up with the gospel. Assure each child by name of God's greatest love for "Martha Jones" or "Jimmy Nevermeyer." Be sure they know, maybe through questioning, that Jesus continues to love them. Jesus' love is not contingent on their behavior.

Of all the systems propounded in the literature today, Gerald Nelson's "One-Minute Scolding" seems to be the only one that involves any type of gospel. His is a psychological/humanistic system, but it involves negative reaction to misbehavior for 30 seconds, followed by



a positive action toward the child for 30 seconds. In a gospel setting this model might become effective.

### Summary

We use a great deal of Law in the classroom. Why? The Law is necessary for the effect of the gospel. We use so much Law also because there is so much sin and misbehavior in a classroom. But sometimes we use so much Law because we think we are using the gospel when we are, in effect, using the Law. We must know the difference in the application of the Law and the gospel or we may neglect using the gospel.

We don't use enough gospel in the classroom. Our ego says to let children suffer for their sins for a while. They deserve it. But Christ says, "I love them anyway." and so must we. We are constrained by love. We forgive as we are forgiven. We love as we are loved!

Besides, it's a lot of fun to proclaim the joy of the gospel!

As you go about disciplining children in your school, be Christian as you discipline. Use God's Word as your direction. Use both the Law and the gospel effectively and regularly in your relationships with children. Teach God's Law, but proclaim his great love-even as you discipline in your classroom.

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### A Modern-day Tale "John Tetzel is Alive and Well"

Several years ago when I was observing classrooms I found myself in a third grade room. The teacher, in an attempt to control the rather disruptive behavior of some of the children, used a familiar and mildly unpleasant form of punishment. Whenever a child misbehaved by being noisy, not attending to the lesson, or disturbing a classmate, she would signal him or her with her hand and the child would have to stand alongside his desk for a few minutes. One boy in particular was the object of this punishment. I watched with mild interest as the boy was required to stand beside his desk five times during a reading lesson. Then I saw him rise to stand a sixth time, but I saw neither an infraction nor the teacher's motioning hand. He stood quietly for the required two minutes. Upon sitting down, he picked up his book and hit the boy sitting in front of him over the head. The teacher immediately turned to him and commanded him to stand beside his desk. With the crystal clear logic of childhood he declared: "I already did." Punishment for him had become a kind of payment for his sins, an indulgence he could even purchase before the sin was committed.

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