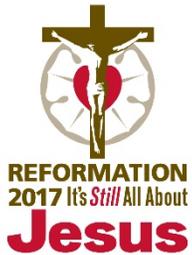


# God's Alien Work: The Condemnation of the Law

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It strikes the ear strange: God does what He doesn't want to do. "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord GOD, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?" (Ezek 18:23) When God does what He doesn't want to do (kill and eternally condemn the sinner; cp. 1 Tim 2:4), it's called His *alien work* or His *strange work*. When He does what He wants to do (save the sinner), it's called His *proper work*.

But His *alien work* isn't for that reason unimportant. In fact, it's critical to His *proper work*. Paul says that "God 'locked up' all people unto disobedience in order to have mercy on all" (Rom 11:32; cp. Rom 5:20, 3:19-24). The *alien work* must precede the *proper work*. Salvation must be *from* something. And it's from God's just condemnation not just of *sin*, but of *sinner*s.

To do both His *alien* and His *proper work*, God uses the same tool He always does: His own words. He accomplishes His *proper work* through the word of the Gospel. Through the word of the Law He accomplishes His *alien work*. Of that latter Luther says, "This is God's thunderbolt. By the Law ... He declares no one to be in the right, but drives all together to terror and despair" (SA 3.3.2). The Law brings "nothing but death and hell, and must despair, as Saul and Judas did" (SA 3.3.7). That's the Law's proper job and God's *alien work*.

At the time of the Reformation, however, there was great confusion on the Law's job. Although "the Law intervened in order to increase sin" (Rom 5:20), Roman Catholic theology regarded the Law as effecting God's *proper work*—His justifying and saving work.

It all hung on the concept of *love*, the sum of the Law, which demands that we love God and neighbor. It's very hard to love the neighbor; it's impossible to love an accusing God. And herein lies the rub. If the Law is the source of justification (Ap 5.55 [3.176]), and if the Law always accuses and makes you hate God (Ap 5.45 [3.166]), it's impossible to be right with Him. "We are not righteous before God as long as we flee God's judgment and are angry with God" (Ap 5.55 [3.176]). Why? Because how can you "fear, love, and trust in God above all things" (SC 1.2) when you hate Him? You can't even fulfill the First Commandment, much less any other. In fact, it only enhances "disobedience"—"ignorance of God, hatred of God, without fear of God and faith toward God, inability to love God" (Ap. 2.14).

And it can mean only death—a death God does not want, and which He redresses in His *proper work*, the work of Christ for us.

**Further Reading** SC 1; LC 1; Ap 4.75ff., esp. 122-400; SA 3.2, 3.3; Ep 5; SD 5

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## Abbreviations

AC = Unaltered Augsburg Confession  
Ap = Apology of the Augsburg Confession  
SC = Small Catechism  
LC = Large Catechism  
SA = Smalcald Articles (exclusive of the Tractate)  
Tr = Tractate on the Power and Primacy of the Pope  
Ep = The Formula of Concord, Epitome  
SD = The Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration

Cat = Catalogue of Testimonies

**NOTE:** Articles and sections/paragraphs in the *Book of Concord* are denoted in Arabic numerals, separated by a period. Please note that the first number in citations of SC and LC points to the Chief Part; any numbers following the period point to the specific section/paragraph. Thus SC 1.8 does not point to the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment, but to the explanation of the 4<sup>th</sup>.