

HOW A LUTHERAN DOES THEOLOGY: SOME CLUES FROM THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS

By Robert W. Bertram

[In Lutheran-Episcopal Dialogue: Report and Recommendation, 73-87.
Edited by William G. Weinbauer and Robert L. Wietelman. Cincinnati:
Forward Movement Publications, 1981.]

1. Lutheran theology begins where all Christian theology does, indeed where all Christian ministry does, namely, with our risen Lord's commissioning his followers to go – not alone but with him – to baptize and teach all nations until he closes this age. Theology, over and over again, is for that one interim teaching mission.
2. But aren't the two, theology and mission, too far apart for that? Isn't theology back here, in seminaries and classrooms and libraries and studies? And isn't mission out there, out in the world? Doesn't mission mean being sent, sent out, out and away? And doesn't out-and-away entail distance, separation from the home base? It does. But then that is why doing theology, whatever else that means, means keeping the Word coming from headquarters to field – from Sender to sent. Mission threatens to interpose gaps which theology in turn must continually labor to straddle. Theology in that sense is trans-mission.
3. The gap, however, is not a geographical gap between out there and back here. Theological distance is not measured from, say, some seminary classroom as the point of origin. The origin is the Sender. The distant mission field, whether that be across the seas or downtown or just as likely on the seminary campus, is as distant theologically as it is distant from the Commissioner. The gap is between the world, whither he sends us, and himself. And that is the gap which theology strives to bridge.
4. That gap, the Christ-gap, has two dimensions (so to speak): horizontal and vertical. Horizontally there is a time gap. Our mission-Sender, an itinerant rabbi of the first century Middle East, did what he did – died and rose and sent his Spirit – then and there, once upon a time. But his times, alas, are no longer ours. Still, it was out here, out into this utterly different future, that he sent us. How to bridge that generations gap of almost 2000 intervening years of the most drastic historical change? By what possible transmission can his message get from his ancient world to our very different one without serious loss of meaning?
5. Then, as though that weren't enough, there is also a vertical gap: the gap between our Sender's message and the incredulity which his message perennially evokes. Always it does. That credibility gap, his *skandalon*, is not a problem of historical

distance. That gap was as prevalent in the days of our Sender and of his first apostles as it is (and had better be) today. Both gaps, the gap of time and the gap of unbelief, are the responsibility of theology to surmount. Thanks to the distant mission, distant from himself, on which he sent us.

6. Consider the horizontal gap first, that gap of which our historically and hermeneutically minded age is so poignantly aware. It was a gap of which even the Lutheran confessors in the sixteenth century were beginning to be aware: Indeed it was because of their gap – the gap in time between the prophets and apostles, on the one hand, and the later ages of the church, on the other – that confessions and creeds were deemed necessary at all. They were devices, just as “doing theology” is, for closing the historical distance between now and the New Testament. The theological “writings of ancient and modern teachers” show how “the doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved in post-apostolic times [*nach der Apostel Zeit*],” “setting forth how at various times [*jederzeit*] the Holy Scriptures were understood in the church of God by contemporaries [*von den damals Lebenden*]....” That is likewise what the Lutheran Confessions themselves are, “the symbol of our time [*dieser Zeit*].” They are the original Christian faith so expounded as to fit “the schism in matters of faith which has occurred in our times [*zu unsern Zeiten*].” (*Formula of Concord*, Epitome, Preface)
7. Lutherans believe that these confessional testimonies of the sixteenth century, like the ecumenical creeds centuries before, faithfully crossed the horizontal gap between the bygone times of their Sender and the much later time of their own mission. These confessors seem to us to have discovered the secret of “doing theology” for their “times,” well enough to make us wish to learn their secret for times like our own.
8. Then do these post-biblical confessions, these subsequent doings of theology, introduce something different from their own “times” which was not in the Scriptures originally? Yes, indeed. Or if not something different, then at least something additional, something from a later history which the prophets and apostles themselves had not yet encountered. For if all that the confessions did was merely to duplicate what the Scriptures had already said, then what need would there be to add confessions? What need to continue “doing theology”? What need to cross the horizontal gap? Indeed, what horizontal gap?
9. The fact is, times change. And not only do the times change, and not even only languages – say, from Aramaic to Greek to Latin to German. If that were all, then the changes could be handled simply by new Bible translations. No, changing times bring also new problems or, if they were not altogether new, than at least the same old problems in new form. Paul, for example, never had to cope with Arius or with the medieval system of merit, certainly not in those forms. Could he even have imagined such distortions? Much less could he foresee how those distortions would arise out of his own doctrine? Really, it was only because Paul

came first that these later aberrations could invoke his support as they did. They were “Christian” heresies. That explains why “the ancient church formulated symbols:” because “immediately after the time of the apostles – in fact, already during their lifetime – false teachers and heretics invaded the church.” (*Ibid.*) From then on the invasions never stopped coming, no two of them ever quite the same. Because the church, which is Christ’s mission, confronts always new and unanticipated mission challenges, it must by “doing theology” relate the message of its Sender anew to each challenge in all its historic particularity. The horizontal gap expands apace. And so, lest the mission of Christ be outstripped, must theology.

10. Comes now a danger. Given the confessional symbols, which admittedly restate the original faith in a new and later idiom, the church is then tempted to misconstrue those symbols as a substitute for the biblical original. Restatement becomes displacement. Confessional theologies, hammered out for the needs of their own mission situations, are thus detached from the mission’s origin. Of course, no proper confession or confessional theologian ever wants to say anything which was not first, at least implicitly, in the Scriptures themselves. Lutherans generally still agree the only subscribable confession is one which is always *nach Anleitung Gottes Worts* (*Ibid.*, title), and “every doctrine should submit to this guidance [*nach dieser Anleitung*].” (*Ibid.*, 6; my translation) And for many of us, at least, it makes sense to subscribe the Lutheran Confessions confessionally at all, not “insofar as” (*quatenus*) they reflect the biblical Word but “because” (*quia*) they do.
11. Still, that very *quia* in turn can now malfunction, ironically, to displace the Scriptures. Exactly because our confession witnesses only to “the doctrine of the prophets and apostles,” therefore the misimpression arises that their doctrine and our confession are indistinguishable. But if so, there would have been no need for the Reformers to bridge the horizontal gap. For then there would have been no such gap. In that case it is as though between the first century and the sixteenth nothing had happened. What is worse, the whole point of the Preface of the Formula of Concord is lost, namely, “the distinction [*der Unterschied, discrimen*] between the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments and all other writings.” (*Ibid.*, 7) What comes to be forgotten, at least in practice, is that “Holy Scripture remains the only *Richter, Regel und Richtschnur*” – the three R’s! – and that, in the theological courtroom, only Scripture is the “judge” and the confessions merely “witnesses” (*Zeugen*). (*Ibid.*, 7.8.2) To be sure, the *Unterschied* between Scripture and all other writings is not merely an *Unterschied* of time, as though the only distinction between them were that the former is early and the latter late. The horizontal gap does not exhaust their difference. But neither can their real difference be substantiated without that essential dimension, their historical distance.
12. Deprived of that wide historical *Unterschied* between Scripture and their own much later expositions of it, the confessors are then deprived of their boldness as

well. And bold they were. When they submitted their confession, they did not arbitrarily fling it down saying, Here it is, take it or leave it. That unsure of themselves they were not. Rather they opened their books to public audit, calling upon any and all to check them out – against the Scriptures. Any and all who? “All nations,” even “future generations” – “before God and among all nations, present and future” – and at the end of history, “Christ.” (*Apology*, Preface, 15, 19; IV, 398; XIV, 5; and *passim*) In face of that daring invitation to examine their biblicalness, we do the confessions small credit when we say in effect, Oh that’s all right, we’ll take your word for it. It is precisely the theologian who subscribes them *quia* who accepts their invitation, over and over. That is the mark of a fearless subscription. And it is the only way to appreciate how successfully the confessors did return all the way to their Sender and back once more to their own remote mission territory. The distance was far. But the trans-mission, they were sure, had connected. That is why they could afford to be so openly accountable. We begrudge them that, and we minimize their achievement, when we obscure the historical *Unterschied*.

13. How do confessions supplant Scripture in practice? Well, the obvious way would be to lay Scripture aside and to content oneself with the confessions exclusively. But that, if it is a danger at all, is a danger for only a few of us. Frankly, as post-seminary reading, the Lutheran Confessions are not all that popular. However, there is another, less obvious way. And that is to read Scripture itself anachronistically, as though it might just as well be a document from the sixteenth century Reformation, as though it had presented from the outset those later creedal and confessional theologies obviously and ready-made. Such exegesis does indeed read the confessions into Scripture rather than out of it, hence unconfessionally, and sooner or later falsifies also the confessions, let alone Scripture. All because the horizontal gap, the historical distance, between Scripture and all other writings is underplayed. As a consequence it becomes harder and harder to recognize those historical circumstances native only to Scripture itself, and to recover its original genius. This, in turn, impairs Scripture’s peculiar control, its *Anleitung*, of “all other writings.”

14. With such anachronistic exegesis the long biblical trans-mission across the chasm from its ancient missionary origins to the most alien and far-flung mission futures, loses its wonder. Then, though we may still speak respectfully of Scripture as the only “rule,” the exclusive *regula*, what escapes us is the marvel of how this Word of God has in fact “ruled” down through history, not above and beyond the flux of time but directly through that flux and by means of it; how that Word has “regulated” to its own purpose the most obstreperous opponents and such bizarre notions as *homoousios* and *Trinitas*; how that same Word could still raise up from a disintegrating Christendom “a summary formula and pattern [*Begriff und Form*]...the summarized doctrine...drawn together out of the Word of God” (*Formula of Concord*, SD, “Summary Formulations, etc.,” 1); how the *Begriff und Form* of the biblical Word – that constant, transhistorical shape of the faith, which is “the pure doctrine of the Word of God” (*Ibid.*) – never is “pure” if by that we

mean divested of history but is always inextricably intertwined with now this history, now that; how such historical versatility of the Word is, far from embarrassing, our very opportunity. It is, in short, the clue for engaging that trans-mission of the Word for also this, its most recent mission challenge: our times.

15. What all that presupposes, however, is that we first appreciate, without anachronism, the historic uniqueness of the biblical “prophets and apostles” and before them, the uniqueness of their Sender. Well suited to such appreciation of the mission’s origins is the method of modern historians or, as we have come to call it, the historical-critical method. Historians of Scripture do indeed exercise criticism. What they criticize, as well they might, are those anachronistic interpolations and accretions which later ages of the church have since read back into Scripture, as though they had always been patently there. Here the historians, armed with their critical edge, are under obligation to do the negative thing and to protest: No, that is *not* what Galatians means, not yet it doesn’t, not here in the time of its authorship.
16. Of course, biblical historians might also protest too much. They might turn reactionary and say, Galatians dare never mean anything more than what its author consciously intended by it. That sort of historical criticism is obscurantist, for it forgets that Galatians still had a long and varied career ahead. For that subsequent career the original epistle, as it stood, was already well equipped with the most versatile, future implications. But the historian is right, those implications are always controlled by what the document meant at the outset. In any case, at the time of Galatians’ origin most of its implications were still future and unforeseeable. And it is the way of the Word to take history in stride as and when it comes. Theology consists, in part, in waiting and watching for that stride. But how, without the methods of history? They are indispensable for “doing theology” across the horizontal gap, to bring the Sender’s message ungarbled to this present farthest reach of his mission.
17. Speaking of historical-critical exegesis, we are reminded of that most notorious charge leveled against its practitioners, most often undeservedly: namely, that they criticize not only the history which later, anachronistic theologians have read back into Scripture but also that very history which occurs right within Scripture and which Scripture cannot do without. For instance, the biblical history of our Lord’s resurrection.
18. And this reminder from historical criticism recalls, in turn, that second gap which “doing theology” confronts: the vertical gap -- the perennial and universal gap of an unbelief which is scandalized by the gospel. That credibility gap, even more oppressively than the horizontal gap of historical distance, afflicts Christ’s mission wherever and whenever it touches the world. So here too, if his mission is to span this gap as well, theology must serve as trans-mission.

19. But back up a moment. What was the connection, just alluded to, between the historical criticism of biblical events and the vertical gap of unbelief? The connection between them is not at all obvious. The obvious explanation would be that the two things are identical: historical criticism and unbelief. At first glance, radical criticism of Scripture's history appears to be a clear case of unbelief, plain and simple. Now unbelief it may be, though not plain and simple. There is a popular myth about unbelievers. Unbelievers supposedly deny Jesus' resurrection for the simple reason that it is extraordinary: ordinarily people who die stay dead, Jesus died, ergo he stayed dead. At least that is why unbelievers are *assumed* to deny the resurrection, namely, because it violates the uniformity of nature, or the historicist principle of analogy. As unbelief, that would indeed be plain and simple.
20. But does that explanation of unbelief really suffice, obvious though it seems? If that is all that drives people to discount biblical history, then why all the grand talk about their being scandalized by the gospel? After all, what is scandalous about the gospel is not only our Lord's resurrection but prior to that, says Paul, his crucifixion. Still, only a few eccentrics disbelieve that. Offhand, a crucifixion is not really that extraordinary – that is, not unless there is something about unbelievers themselves which made both crucifixion *and* resurrection *necessary!* But then that is what taxes people's credulity; not Jesus' rising as such, nor his dying, but rather our own need of them – our need of him. Disbelieving *that* does not stem from historical criticism. People disbelieve an incredible historical claim not merely because it is unusual but also because there seems to be no need which requires such unusual happenings. Jesus' resurrection is not only extraordinary, it seems unwarranted – unwarranted by anything in your situation and mine. But once you add that, then even Jesus' resurrection is not only extraordinary, it seems unwarranted – unwarranted by anything in your situation and mine. But once you add that, then even Jesus' crucifixion is unbelievable. That unbelief is the vertical gap. And it is that unbelief, not historical criticism, which “doing theology” must overcome.
21. Once again the Lutheran Confessions provide precedent. In the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, especially in Article IV, a recurrent counter-argument against the Roman *Confutatores* is that the latter render Christ “unnecessary.” Not that they deny Christ's *historia*. (What good Catholic would ever deny that!) On the contrary, they affirm it all, including every last assertion of the Nicene-Chalcedonian Christology, as the signatories of the Augustana of course did, too. The trouble, though, with the Roman accusers was that they denied the biblical *sola fide*. And it was that denial of theirs, presumably, which obviated any need of Christ. For all their high-flown christological subscription, their actual, working soteriology did not in fact make “use” of that Christ. It let him go to waste – or let him, as Paul said, die in vain – as though he had never needed to exist at all. After that it is immaterial; at last theologically immaterial, what you believe about his history.

22. Accordingly, the highest criterion of “doing theology” is so to do it as to show the need of Christ. It is not enough to affirm him, no matter how biblically. Theologies which are merely nominally Christian can do that. No, everything depends on whether those theologies, in all they say, can show cause for Christ’s coming as he came and doing as he did. Failing that, all their other assertions about his *historia* reduce to mere *fides historica*, which in itself is a form of unbelief.
23. This staggering demand upon theology – and every preacher can sympathize with how staggering it truly is – would in our day fall particularly upon that branch of theology called systematics. It may well be, therefore, that the modern historical mind is encouraged in its unbelief of biblical history, not just because biblical historians have failed to substantiate it but also because systematicians have failed intelligibly to show need of it. If so, that augments the already massive proof that “doing (systematic) theology” is especially in line for improvement, also within Lutheranism.
24. The Lutheran Confessions’ “systematic” *par excellence* for showing the need of Christ, for “using” him in all his historicity, takes the form there of a hermeneutical procedure: the distinguishing and relating of Scripture’s law and promise (or gospel). Not that Scripture itself always and explicitly distinguishes these two motifs. More often than not, perhaps, it does not. In fact, that may well be part of Scripture’s special genius, namely, that it transmits (*tradere*) the legal and promissory streams of God’s Word in such an already faithful coordination that it has no need of dividing them.
25. The “legal” dimension of the biblical Word is that which “commends good works” and, conversely, criticizes their opposite. The “promissory” dimension is that which proffers the divine mercy because of Christ. If the question before the confessors at Augsburg was how to commend good work without sacrificing the promise, then their answer, as they knew, lay in the way Scripture kept *lex* and *promissio* in their native, God-intended balance. Promise, dominant; law, sub-dominant. Law, penultimate; gospel, ultimate. Both of them divine absolutes, yet with the promise always having the final word.
26. But then why must the distinction-compulsive theologian lay heavy hands upon the biblical harmonies, putting asunder what God has there seen fit to join together? The explanation, of course, lies not in the theologian’s compulsions. And yet in a way it does, at that. For there is that compulsion, which is not unique to theologians but is the common affliction of religious people generally, or for that matter of all unbelievers. (And who, even among strong believers, is not also and simultaneously an unbeliever?) Call that compulsion, as the Augsburg Confession’s Apology does, the *opinio legis*.
27. In the exegete this *opinio legis* works as a subversive bias, spoiling the native rationale of biblical law and promise. As *opinio*, it is an illusion. But it is not

merely illusion. It is illusion about something which in its own right is true, the biblical *lex*. The element of illusion comes when people, as they always are wont to do, accord that *lex* soteriological significance, the last word. The ensuing disaster is that the promise is displaced, “omitted” or, in actual effect, abandoned. But one might expect that in that case the *law* at least would survive intact. It does not. Left alone, without the promise to trump it, the *lex* would be just too threatening to be a credible way of salvation. So to preserve the illusion of its saving power, the legalist scales also the law down reductionistically to barely a shadow of its old biblical self. Yet even in that truncated form it can still avenge itself upon its abuser in the twin forms of hypocrisy and despair.

28. Hence the most pressing reason for distinguishing Scripture’s law and promise is not that these are always set apart as such in the biblical text, but rather that human unbelief insinuates into the reading of that text an alien *Vorverständnis*, with a resulting combination of law and promise which is downright unbiblical and, pastorally speaking, fatal. By contrast, the biblical ordering (*ordo*) of *lex* and *promissio* can afford – as best of all Jesus himself does – to reveal the law in all its original force, as *accusator*, removing the “veil of Moses” by which that law has otherwise (even in Scripture) had to be masked. Yet this full facing of the law in all its criticalness is impossible only because, in its assigned subordination, it is domesticated by the promise. But where, pray, does that happen? Where, if both wrath and mercy are God’s own, do they become reconciled and so avoid an ultimate dualism? In one place: in Jesus the Christ, crucified and risen and, ever since, interceding for us on the basis of his historic deed. As a result the intimidating law, which still goes on accusing with perfect right, can now be lived with, even internalized and made use of – in the daily, penitential living out of our Baptisms and in losing ourselves for the world. And the final resolution of this New History is only a matter of time.
29. The upshot is that unbelief, the unbelief of the vertical gap, is taken with full seriousness. For, after all, it really is incredible – indeed, it is humanly impossible to believe – that the itinerant, first-century rabbi would “need” to go to such lengths to achieve the merciful mission of God toward us. But once that is believed, as again and again it is, the believer can assimilate also the law, can take its criticism, and can even profit from it, advancing its commendable good work in society. Still, *lex* is always only proximate to Scripture’s distinctive *promissio*. And only *promissio*, finally, is the solvent of the world’s hard unbelief.
30. *Promissio* is the secret of *missio*. For the mission’s Sender was himself the keeping of that promise. And the mission’s gaps, across which we move with our theological doings, are ultimately spanned by the same promise – of himself by the Spirit through his Word.