

Some More Thoughts on the Augsburg Aha! – The Augsburg Confession Itself–Class Session #2.

Colleagues,

Here is the second installment of “Lutheran Confessional Heritage,” the Ron-and-Ed Show–Ron Neustadt and yours truly–running from January through March, 2008 in Springfield, Illinois, a class for students of the Central/Southern Illinois Synod of the ELCA.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

Theology of the Lutheran Confessions–Class Session #2.

Lesson Plan

1. Opening Devotions
2. Review of Session One: “What was the fight all about on Original Sin?”
3. The Son of God – Article III of Aug. Conf, the Confutation and the Apology Walk-talk our way through the textsLUNCH BREAK
4. Justification – Article IV of the AC, Confutation and Apology What was that fight all about?
5. R.Bertram’s essay: “The Hermeneutical Significance of Apology IV”

6. Is justification still worth fighting about today?

Here's how we filled in the blanks.

2. Review of Session One: "What was the fight all about on Original Sin?" One-sentence answer:

The fight was about how serious original sin is, with one side (AC folks) saying it's terminal, and the other side (RC folks) saying it's serious, but fixable using the resources at hand.

Paragraph-length answer supporting this thesis sentence:

- A. One side says: Sin is so serious that it's like getting your car "totalled." The whole thing is wrecked. It'll have to be replaced with an entirely new vehicle. Other side says: No, no, it's seriously damaged, sure. But it can be repaired. And here's the repair shop where God's grace heals the damage.
- B. Both sides—like two M.D.s—agree that the diagnostic term for the sin-problem is the big word (doctors are all alike!) "concupiscence." [Latin: "cupere" = to desire. Prefix "con" intensifies the verb.] But the M.D.s disagree on what concup. is. Again that means they disagree on HOW SERIOUS the affliction is. Augsburg Confessors say: Concupiscence (Latin) is the N.T. term for human self-centeredness, "doing my own thing" and thumbing my nose at God in the process—call it "no fear of God, no trust in God." This is the "shape, slant, tilt" of sinner-existence (Melanchthon's Latin word is "inclination"). The fabric of a sinner's life—thoughts, words, and deeds—has this shape. Sins (plural) are concup. "in action."

- C. Confutators define concupiscence (using Aristotle's definition) as the psycho-bio-drives of human nature. Nothing wrong with them at all, they say, until they get out of control. That's what the seven deadly sins are—normal "OK" needs/urges running amok, out of control. That signals what original sin is: control-mechanism malfunction. "Upper level" management (labelled "original righteousness") is gone. That's the sin of "origin." Consequently the next level down, the control mechanisms (human reason and will) are damaged—not all the time, but often. So human behavior, arising from the "ground-level," – the "cupere" of psycho-biological stuff in people—gets out of hand. That's what "actual" (not original) sin is—concupiscence badly managed and thus destructive. It's serious, but not fatal.
- D. How does Christ figure in as remedy for the sin-problem? Just how necessary is Christ, and for what? That is where the "fight" about sin moves to the hub of the wheel: how do sinners get "un-sinned," aka "justified"? Where does Christ fit in? For what is Christ necessary? In the Apology Melanchthon challenges his Confutator respondents to show just how necessary Christ is in their theology for sinners to get their sin-problem fixed. He's an insider himself in the scholastic heritage—that was his education too—so he knows. The answer is: "not much."
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3. The Son of God/Christ – Article III of Aug. Conf, Confutation and Apology

- A. Check the key terms in both the German and Latin versions of the AC. Note: Christ's person –"true

God, true man”— and work. Note the “good-news” verbs for the Work of Christ: “sacrifice, conciliate [earlier translators said “propitiate”], reconcile (note the direction of the reconciling action, “to reconcile the Father to us!”), sanctify,” and more. Note the “so that” in the AC text, which doesn’t merely confess “orthodox Christology,” but links it to the “work” of Christ. All of this hype about the “person” of Christ “so that” Christ might “fix” our God-problem [That’s what AC I & AC II have just said: “God is real, God is three-in-one, and we are in trouble with that God, big trouble.”]

B. The Confutation response is: AC III is OK. Note: Confutation responds only to the “person of Christ” part of AC II, not to the “work of Christ.” It is at that point, the “work” of Christ, that the fight breaks out in the next article. Apology III in response to the Confut. merely says: They approve what we said in AC III.

4. Justification – Article IV of the AC, Confutation and Apology **What’s the fight all about on Justification?**

One-sentence answer:

“Justification” is getting a sinner “un-sinned,” with one side saying “God’s grace joined to human good works, good intentions (however minimal), can do it” and the other side saying “No way—it takes a massive forgiveness-intervention on God’s part, a.k.a the crucified and risen Jesus, a.k.a. God keeping his promise, to un-sin (=justify) a sinner.

Paragraph-length answer supporting this thesis sentence:

A. Since the diagnosis is so different, it’s no

surprise that the “healing” for sinners is also very different. If the human “car” is just damaged—even badly damaged by Adam’s careless “accident”—then the resources needed to fix it are less than what’s needed if it’s totalled. The Confessors say: It IS totalled, but Christ is God’s new BIG deal to rescue sinners even when they are totalled.

- B. The Confutation’s “healing” proposal is to make use of the good stuff still in the damaged vehicle [=get the sinners to “do what’s in them,” namely, small-scale efforts of good will, still possible for sinners]. These good efforts merit God’s “grace-reward” and that grace starts replacing what’s gotten all twisted and tangled in Adam’s accident. Once grace is triggered by such merit, it starts refilling that “management vacuum” at the top that Adam/Eve brought upon themselves—and upon all the rest of us too. Like all repair jobs, this process takes a while (not instantaneous), regularly a life-long while. But at the end full “righteousness” (everything OK again) is achieved. Without God’s grace it couldn’t happen. It is a cooperative project: human effort, aided and abetted by God’s grace.
- C. Another way of saying it: Within sinners there exist limited resources for healing. Sinners are not totally helpless. “Doing what [good] is in them,” they trigger the process. God responds, rewarding that goodness with grace. Grace corrects the “management disorder” at the center of sin. Sure, Christ is in the mix as God’s #1 fixer-upper and grace-giver, but he’s a REPAIR-MAN, not one who creates a brand new human being. And to be fixer-upper, he wouldn’t really have to do that crazy

stuff at the end—cross and resurrection. It is extraordinary grace that he did so to show us how far God is willing to go with the grace-business. But Christ's cross and resurrection are not "necessary" for sinners to get restored. Even without Good Friday and Easter sinners are fixable. God is gracious toward sinners (by definition) even without Christ.

- D. The Confutators do talk about "faith" (as they define it): believing the truths of the Christian creeds—centered, of course, in Christ. Such believing is itself MERITorious and brings additional grace-rewards. That accelerates the process toward becoming a completely (100%) justified (former) sinner. Rare is any "I am 100% justified before God NOW" sort of certainty. How can there be? Justification is a process: "I am on the way to becoming 100% justified. Here's where the third theological virtue called "hope" comes in alongside the other two, "faith" (as defined above) and "love" (innate "goodness" being grace-perfected). My hope centers on God bringing the process to 100% completion.
- E. The Confessors shudder at this whole thing. Since their view of sin is so drastic, there are no resources left in sinners for beginning the "fix-me-up" process. Even adding God's grace to the mix doesn't help, since the whole system is merit-based—like Brownie points and Boy Scout "merit" badges. That necessarily puts the whole thing into a process they call "law"—performance and reward. And they claim that this is what "law" is in the scriptures too—a pattern of performance and reward. Good reward from God for good performance and "ouch"

reward for bad performance. It's the crazy "law-opinion" in sinners that if they tried harder to be good, they could fix the sin-problem. Au contraire, says the Apology: In a fallen world God's law "always accuses us" of being sinners. When sinners try to use this very law of God to get "un-sinned," when they choose a merit-system to relate to God, they are crazy. It's suicide. Sinners become cinders.

- F. The remedy that does work is called "forgiveness." Forgiveness is the opposite of what law calls for with sinners. Forgiveness has Christ at the center, the Grand Sin-Forgiver by virtue of HIS "merits" on Good Friday and Easter. Christ offers this to sinners as a promise. The promise is an absolute freebee. Promises work when they are trusted. They "only" work when trusted. Therefore "faith-alone," "trusting this promise alone" is what un-sins sinners. An un-sinned sinner is a justified sinner. So justification by faith ALONE is really a no-brainer. That is the "only" way, the "alone" way, that promises ever work. Everybody knows that.
- G. Faith is just such trusting Christ's promise. A Christ-trusting sinner = a non-sinner. Christ says so. That's his promise. It is this faith "alone" that un-sins sinners – 100% right now when faith happens, when Christ-trusting begins. What about the long haul, the "process"? "Christ remains mediator," almost a mantra, recurs throughout Apology IV. Christ the mediator remains the continuing antidote to trump the continuing nemesis of "law always accusing" us. Accusing us of what? Of not being faith-full enough, hope-full enough, love-full enough. In the face of the law's ongoing "gotcha!"

Christ “remains” with his own law-trumping “gotcha,” his mercy-promise sent our way over and over again in words and “tangibilized” over and over again sacramentally. Such Christ-trusting sinners are already home free NOW—and trust that as Christ-trusters they are free all the way “home.”

An alternate single sentence for what the fight’s all about on justification could be this:

The fight is about this: “How to commend good works without losing Christ’s promise.”

Supporting material—

- A. Confutators argue: If there is no merit for doing good works, who will do any good works at all? Or—same difference—If you say sinners are “justified by FAITH ALONE,” who will even bother to do any deeds of charity? So we’ve GOTTA keep merit and reward in the equation or there’ll never be any good works. We’re concerned about ethics.
- B. Confessors respond. We’re concerned about ethics too. But the Promise gets lost in your equation. So that can’t be right. We say: Keep good works (acts of charity) OUT of the equation when talking about our God-relation [technical Latin term is: *coram deo*]. Put Christ and his promise IN there to heal the sinner’s God-problem. Then promote good-works, yes, on the horizontal turf of me-and-my-neighbor, my life in the world [Latin: *coram hominibus*], not the verticle turf of God-and-me. Good works are the fruit of justification, not the cause.
- C. Christ sets promise-trusters free to get busy loving the neighbor. Really “free” since they don’t need to

hustle brownie points for themselves while loving the neighbor, stuff to take back and show to God. But will they do it—the Confutators challenged—without rewards? Of course, say the confessors. Only sinners are reward-hungry. Forgiven sinners not so. They are living on God’s mercy. [“Mercy” gets used in Apology IV to replace “grace,” if for no other reason than that “grace” is so abstract a term, while “mercy” is more nitty-gritty and clearly inter-personal.] Merci-fied sinners are in a different ball game. Forgiveness is the flat-out opposite of merit-reward. Trusting Christ, they take their signals from him. What he tells them is simple: “Once you trust me, then follow me.” That’s the REAL way to get works done, works that God himself calls “good,” yes “very good.” [When folks claim to be Christ-trusters and yet “do nothing for the neighbor,” they are self-deceivers. That is the issue in the Epistles of John. It is not their ethics that is kaput; it’s their Christ-connection. Remedy for them: back to square one to start all over and get their Christ-connection restored.]

5. R.Bertram’s essay: “The Hermeneutical Significance of Apology IV”

A. In making their case against “faith alone” the Confutators pile up Bible passages for support to show that what the AC says about justification is contrary to scripture. So how will the Apology respond if the Confutators have all the Bible passages on their side? Right! It will have to start out by spelling out a “right” way and a “wrong” way to use the Bible. And that is what author/scribe Melanchthon does in the opening paragraphs of

Apology IV. He calls it a “preface” on “right and wrong” ways to read the Bible. [Fancy word for this nowadays is “hermeneutics.” In nickel words: What lenses are you using when you read the Bible?] Melanchthon proposes a “law and promise” hermeneutics. He hears the Confutators using “law only” lenses. Worst aspect of that is that they seem not to know the promise at all, have never bumped into it. And so—no surprise—since they don’t know it, they don’t use it at all as their eyepiece for reading the Bible. When the promise is lost, there is only one lens left for Biblical hermeneutics.

B. In the last half of the text of Apology IV Melanchthon examines the many Biblical texts which the Confutators piled up against “promise-and-faith-alone.” He looks first at the “law-alone” reading coming from the confutators on each text and then runs these texts through a law/promise set of lenses. It’s a brilliant tour-de-force culminating in the “gotcha” text the Confutators claim to have from James about faith AND works combined. Melanchthon takes that text (James 2:24 – “no other passage is supposed to contradict our position more”), runs it through his law/promise hermeneutic, and has the chutzpah to conclude: “This text is more against our opponents than against us.” Is he fudging? Sleight of hand? See for yourself. Apology IV, paragraph 244ff.

C. Here’s where Bob Bertram’s essay fits in: “The Hermeneutical Significance of Apology IV.” For the full text GO to <<https://crossings.org/archive/bob/hermeneutics-1974.htm>> In class with the students we walked/talked our way through Bob’s essay like this, paragraph by

paragraph:

1. "How to commend good works without losing the promise" is Melanchthon's agenda in Apology 4. He shows that "Biblical hermeneutics is at no point separable from Biblical soteriology." How you read the Bible is always linked to how you think people get saved.
2. Three elements are in the mix: the text, the interpreter and the interpreter's critic.
3. This third partner is important in formulating the question which the interpreter may have to re-formulate (re-interpret) to keep it from being sub-gospel.
4. Melanchthon took his critics seriously for another reason: They had some Biblical base for their criticism, Biblical LAW, although it was Biblical-Law-plus something, viz., non-Biblical OPINIO LEGIS, the opinion that "If I do the right thing, then I AM a righteous person." Question: is the Bible schizophrenic (good Bible vs. bad Bible)?
5. Melanchthon finally says no, but only after he has done the job of distinguishing law from promise within the scriptures.
6. He distinguishes so that they may later be joined properly, not improperly (wrongly, contra-biblically) into a legalistic mishmash that is neither promise nor law.
7. The key to how to distinguish and re-join into coexistence the law and the promise is to have the sinner take Christ's victory over the law SOLA FIDE, entirely on faith. Faith, this Christ-trusting faith, keeps the two properly connected, not faith's works. That's the

soteriological secret, and the hermeneutical one.

8. SOLA FIDE is the only right way to “use” Christ and his history. Trusting a promise is the only way to benefit from a promise, the only way to properly honor the promissor.
9. Obscuring the SOLA FIDE lets the Bible go to waste; that also lets Christ go to waste.
10. Melanchthon does not simply say: the history happened and you better believe it! No, he seeks to show how we NEED the Jesus-history, how we need God’s-promise-kept (= necessitating Christ) so that good works could freely be commanded and “commended without losing the promise.”
11. If here or there in the Bible the promise is not obvious, Melanchthon “adds” it, as he says. But this adding, he claims, is the opposite of the Confutators’ “adding” OPINIO LEGIS to Biblical law, for Melanchthon’s adding is itself commended Biblically (in such passages as John 15:5 and Hebrews 11:6), namely that God was and is still justifying the ungodly by faith alone.

6. Is justification still worth fighting about today? ThTh readers can guess what the answer was. In the language of Lake Wobegon: “Yah sure, you betcha.” It has always been at the center. Already in the New Testament we read about “other” gospels. Such “other” gospels have continued throughout 2000 years of church history. Every brand of gospel makes an offer for how people who aren’t (yet) OK can get to be OK. In nickel words that is the “justification agenda.” About which there is constant

conflict—also inside church denominations, inside congregations. Today is no different.

The religious marketplace of America today offers a wide variety of gospels—coming not just from different “world religions” (Islam, Buddhism, etc), but also coming with the label “Christian.” Each claims to be THE Good News At the center of each is always a “special brand” for the justification agenda—how to get to be OK.

Those brands of Gospel that claim to be Christian always follow the Bertram axiom: How you read the Bible is always linked to how you think people get saved. Or in reverse: How you think people get saved (and saved from what?) is always linked to how you read the Bible.

The salvation agenda is the justification agenda. The jailer at Philippi (Acts 16) asks the question that never disappears from human history after Eden: “What must I do to be saved?” “Other” gospels have “other” answers, different from the one Silas and Paul gave the jailer, “Trust the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” The “fight” about justification is the “fight” about that 10-word sentence. Is that THE gospel, or should we look for another?