

The Theological Promise of the Convention Workbook

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ABSTRACT

Theologically the 1967 LCMS Convention Workbook, genuinely struggling to realign its problems around the gospel, offers a promise to the synod. Even when that gospel centrism is criticized by accusers who complain about an alleged “whittling down” all doctrinal issues to “the gospel itself,” in the bargain “the gospel itself” is coming into “a strange new notoriety,” offering the synod “a chance to bear the cross, and one another.” (Stephen C. Krueger)

1) Theologically the best thing about the Convention Workbook is this: it reveals a synod struggling to realign its problems around the gospel.

a) This struggle may not be plain for all to see, least of all for the cynic, whether of the right or of the left. Really, aren't both cynicisms 'way to the right—that is, reactionary; that is, regressing toward the old, judgmental order of things? The evangelical opposite, however, is not some variety of the theological “left.” The more meaningful antitheses are “old” and “new.” All bad theologies, whether “right” or “left,” whether legalistic or antinomian, are simply “old,” defunct, no matter how up-to-date they may be. Only the biblical gospel—with its “new age,” its “new creation,” its “one new man in place of the two,” its “new commandment I give unto you,” its “new covenant in My blood for the forgiveness

of sin"—is radically new. And so is the faith it creates. But for the reader with an evangelical radar the Convention Workbook does reflect that faith, unmistakably.

b) It is an embattled faith, to be sure, very much uphill. But throughout the Workbook there is the dogged trust that the only solution to our synodical problems—in fact, the only way even to diagnose those problems—must somehow root in our one new source of life and truth, the scripture's radical gospel.

c) "Somehow" the solution must root there. Exactly how, is not yet in all respects clear. But the faith, meanwhile, is not wanting. That alone is worth a Te Deum, and a convention.

2) A striking case in point and, so far as I can recall, a relatively new phenomenon is this: more and more even the negative overtures seem preoccupied with—indeed, seem forced to be preoccupied with— such radical gospel themes as "the Christological questions," "Law and Gospel," "*Sola Gratia*," "the Christological approach to Scripture." True, these themes are cited grudgingly and with suspicion. Yet cited they are, and prominently so. Even in this negative way, therefore, the gospel is already regaining the prominence it has always deserved.

a) The Workbook's second category, "Theological Matters," contains more overtures than any other category—in fact, almost twice as many as its nearest competitor. One could conclude from this, I suppose, that theological interest in Synod runs high. But in this instance that is a mixed blessing. By far most of the theological overtures are negative. It makes little difference that almost half of these negative overtures are virtually duplicate versions of two originals (2-19 through 2-14), "To Elect a Board of Inquiry," and 2-** through 2-60, "To Declare Certain Teachings False Doctrine," and therefore betray some organized efforts behind

the scenes. That does not mitigate the pervasive impression of negativism, especially since almost all the opposition converges upon a common syndrome of problems: biblical-historical problems, controversies *de Scriptura*.

b) That, of course, is nothing new. And there is the consolation perhaps that already in the next category, "Church Relations," negative overtures are more evenly matched by affirmative ones. In fact, by the time the Workbook gets to the ninth category, the tone has changed so completely that it is hard to imagine that these new overtures on "Social Action and Welfare" and the previous ones on "Theological Matters" could have emerged from the same church. Are there really no common denominators, say, between category two and category nine? Of course, there are. And it would take deliberate cynicism to pretend there aren't. The commonest denominator is a concern for the gospel, though that is not always apparent. But one way in which that concern does appear, ironically, and almost left-handedly, is in some of the most negative overtures of all. They seem to detect a new movement afoot in our midst, a strange new invoking of the gospel, and they find this an occasion for warning. That could be encouraging. At any rate, it does seem to be a switch.

c) What these critics fear is that, in our current biblical controversies, appeals to "the gospel itself," etc., are a red herring, a pious smokescreen, a diversionary tactic to evade the real issue.

i) For example, with respect to the document issued by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, "A Lutheran Stance Toward Contemporary Biblical Studies," one critic claims that "that document whittles 'necessary controversy' down to issues which have a bearing on 'the Gospel itself.'" (2-07) Notice: "whittles down."

ii) Another critic begins, affirmatively enough, by confessing that “the Gospel is the key which opens the door to the entire Bible and also grants us Jesus Christ in all His saving work as the Word of God made flesh.” But what is the critic’s purpose in making this confession? To follow with an accusation. “Some have used this above principle to call other doctrines of the Bible into question as to their historical factuality” The current resurgence of the “Law-Gospel theme” in our midst is here construed as something to be cautioned against, as an arbitrary limitation upon and not at all a resource for our biblical-historical problems. (2-13)

iii) Still another critic faults the *Concordia Theological Monthly* for its “Christological approach to Scripture.” That approach, as he understands it, “is an attempt to maintain teachings about Christ without maintaining that all the words of Scripture are the very words of God Himself It is an approach that subverts the Scripture foundation for the church and the saving faith” (2-17) That presumably is all the “Christological approach to Scripture” amounts to.

iv) Perhaps it is this alleged “whittling down” of the issues to “the gospel itself,” this privileged treatment of “Law and Gospel” within biblical history, this “Christological approach to Scripture” which another critic has in mind when he complains about “frequent, drawn-out, evasive answers” or “changing the emphasis from doctrine to a series of compromising studies and dialogs with numerous reservations and turning from dogma to vacillating new hermeneutical principles.” (2-18) If that is how the critics understand evangelical attempts to resolve our biblical-historical questions by recourse to “the gospel itself,” to “Law and Gospel,” to “the Christological

approach”—namely, as “changing the emphasis from doctrine,” “a turning from dogma,” “evasive”—then notice what is happening. Not only are words like “gospel” and “doctrine,” which used to be synonymous, being suddenly pitted against each other. In the bargain, “the gospel itself” is coming into a strange new notoriety.

d) But the gospel can live with—in fact, it has even been known to flourish under—such notoriety. There is no need to wax apocalyptic about this, or to martyr ourselves, least of all to feel superior. All that is needed is to recognize that some present criticism, which is profoundly sincere and at worst is helpless, is in its very helplessness providing a real assist. That is, it is calling attention to the mounting efforts among us to realign our synodical problems around the gospel. Nothing which helps to shift our center of gravity in that direction should be begrudged. In the process we might all reap the blessing—all of us, also the critics.

i) There is no doubt that the critics who harbor these suspicions are sincere. It could well be, in fact, that they are the honest victims of their own categories and that a so-called Christological solution to our biblical-historical problems is for them inconceivable—downright unimaginable, except as duplicity. Even so, shouldn't all of us find their reaction understandable? Would the chief difference between them and those they accuse be that the latter can imagine such a solution? No, certainly not as a solution all tidily worked out and ready at hand. For all of us such a solution is a struggle, sheer hard work, and the end is not yet in view. That can be admitted without exulting masochistically, as though knowing the problem were better than knowing the solution. Why not simply acknowledge the struggle as our common suffering—a feature which one wise Lutheran has found conspicuously missing

from American church life. 'Not that we have no suffering, but that we don't recognize it for what it is: a chance to bear the cross, and one another.'

ii) What does make the difference, though, is the faith, the confident determination that a realigning of our biblical-historical problems primarily around the gospel—rather than primarily around the doctrine of inspiration—simply has to be possible, the gospel being what it is. There is no guarantee, of course, that that faith won't be condemned as evasiveness. Who knows, in the next round it may be called self-deception and, after that, "enthusiasm"—forgetting that the only ground that faith has is the biblical gospel. On the other hand, that faith could prove contagious. The very critic who is exposed to it, though now only as critic, might himself be persuaded. Meanwhile, be glad for the attention he gives to this project. If nothing else, his attentiveness, the sheer public exposure, should accelerate production.

3) Not all the negative overtures, to be sure, are this useful. Most of them simply assume that, within biblical history, the gospel enjoys no special priority, and that the only way it could possibly enjoy such priority would be to remove it artificially from history altogether, and hence from the scriptures. It is not that there are no offenders to whom this criticism applies. There might well be. Perhaps even within synodical circles there have been those who—we trust, unwittingly—have operated as though the only way to preserve the gospel is to preserve it from history, from factuality, from sheer wondrous happening, lest it too be vulnerable to the historian's razor. The trouble is, both offender and critic in this case seem to share the same mistaken assumption. What both of them overlook is that what is new and distinctive about biblical history is what is new and distinctive about the gospel

within that history. Whether or not the metaphor of the dominoes is applicable here, the theological fallacy it betrays is an insidious flattening out of the gospel. Still, if this truly is a problem among us, then it is a problem for all of us. It is the common task before us. Then for this task, too, as for all our others, there is no reason why “the gospel itself” should not be the source of our light-as the Reformers said, our one *fons*.

4) It might just be that the evangelical clues to our theological problems de Scriptura will emerge only as we sweat out, simultaneously, the evangelical solution to our problems in other areas: in “Church Relations” in “Missions,” in “Social Action and Welfare,” in “Young Peoples Work ” in “Stewardship and Finance.” This suggestion could be misconstrued as activism, I suppose, as taking refuge from serious theological labor in the busyness of mere doing. But that is hardly the intention. The fact is—and the evidence is as near at hand as the Convention Workbook—that some of the most theological effort appears, not always under the category of “Theological Matters,” but under other categories as well. Look, for example, at the first report, “Report of Board for Missions.” (1-01)

a) The report is careful to remind the reader that, though the new convention theme is “Justified by Grace,” the previous theme was “Even So Send I You.” There is evident concern here lest the two themes become mutually exclusive.

b) “It is not a case of ‘ring out the old, ring in the new.’ At least we pray it is not. For it would be tragic-when as God’s people and by His Spirit we have rediscovered mission as our essential activity and have corporately affirmed as a Synod that mission is our one reason for being-to consign this reawakened sense of mission to gather dust in the archives of past synodical conventions . . . rather than to work and pray

that the verbal affirmation of God's mission will become incarnate and live, really live, in every nerve and fiber, every muscle and sinew, every bone and limb of the body of Christ, of which the Missouri Synod is a part."

c) Having given vent to his misgivings, what does the author of the report then proceed to do? He rolls up his sleeves, takes the new theme "Justified by Grace" in hand, refusing to let it lie idle as some pious shibboleth, and then step by step, paragraph by paragraph, meshes into it, as the motive and message and method everything that had previously been said and everything that must now be undertaken as "mission." "For God's grace and His mission are inseparable linked together. He gives us His grace that we might be in mission."

d) This is the sort of realigning of synodical problems around the gospel which, pray God, will have transfer value for a similar realignment in the matters which seem most to trouble us doctrinally. As in faith we watch how that gospel makes history through our privileged bearing it out to the world, we may divine with new vision how it first was history, among the apostles and prophets, for us men and for our salvation.

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