

A Crosser's Guide to Apology IV (Part Two of Six)

Co-missioners,

Last week Paul Jaster reviewed the events that gave rise to *The Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, touched briefly on its English translations, and discussed a key word in today's standard translation that calls for the reader's close attention. Today he begins his discussion of the Apology's critical Fourth Article. You'll want to keep your *Book of Concord* handy as you read, preferably the Kolb-Wengert edition. To follow where Paul is in his treatment of the Article, match the numbers bracketed in his text to the numbers found in the left- and right-hand margins of the document itself.

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

A Crosser's Guide to the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article Four: Justification by Faith Alone by Paul Jaster

(Second of Six Installments, [continuing from August 24](#))

Part One: Preliminaries

Question: Faith Alone – Greatest Error or Most Important Teaching?

How about this for a debate question? With your life depending

on your answer! Faith alone: Greatest Error or Most Important Teaching? Faith alone. *Sola fide*. Yes or No? What say you?



Portrait of Martin Luther –

Lucas Cranach the Younger (1515–1586)

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Back in the 1530s there was precisely this debate. The supporters of Martin Luther presented to Emperor Charles V a positive confession of their faith in the *Augsburg Confession* of 1530. In Article Four of this confession and elsewhere, they loudly said “Yes.” Yes, one is declared right with God (is justified) by faith alone—faith in the promise (*promissio*) of God attached to the person of Jesus Christ.

No sooner did Luther’s supporters make this confession of faith than their opponents, papal scholars, tore it apart with Bible passage after Bible passage to say a loud “No!” No, one is not made right with God by faith alone. It also takes “doing what is

in you” through acts of love. By “works of love” the opponents meant not only acts of charity towards one’s neighbor as in the giving alms, but also non-biblical religious practices that made money for the papal church. Such practices included monetary satisfactions made in connection with the sacrament of penance, the purchase of indulgences, the expenses due to pilgrimages, the cost of masses for the dead, the fees and donations involved in the purchase and adoration of relics.

The Confutators God-damned the Augsburg Confessors for teaching that people receive the forgiveness of sins freely on account of Christ, by faith in him, and not on account of their own merits [1]. They said, “**For it is entirely contrary to the Holy Scriptures** to deny that our works are meritorious.” An earlier draft of the Confutation is even more explicit: “On the other hand, when they say that we are justified by faith, this is the great and principal error of the preachers. For to faith alone they ascribe that which is proper to charity and to the grace of God” [BOC, 2000, p. 120].

So, when Philip Melanchthon and some others crafted the *Apology*, Melanchthon made Article Four on “Justification by Faith Alone” the centerpiece of that defense. Both the Confutators and the Confessors agreed on the singular importance of this topic. The Confutators called it “the great and principal error” of the Lutheran preachers. And Melanchthon called it “the most important topic of Christian teaching” (*praecipuus locus doctrinae christianae*), which when correctly understood (A) “**amps up**” (*amplificat*) and “enlarges” **the honor of Christ** and (B) brings the **abundant consolation** that devout consciences need.

Here already in the opening paragraph of Article Four of the *Apology* you see what one of Crossings’ founders, Ed Schroeder, called the “**double dipstick test.**” Think of the device you use

to check the oil level in your car or lawnmower. Imagine one of these with two prongs, a *double* dipstick. Now imagine a two-pronged question that you can insert into any statement which purports to present the gospel to ascertain whether it really does. (A) Does the statement make maximum use of Jesus crucified and raised? (B) Does it give abundant comfort to troubled people [2]?

The Biblical Battle Ground & Its Interpretation

Since Luther and the Confessors' defiant challenge to their opponents had been, "Prove me wrong by the Scriptures!" the Confutators did just that. They "proved" their position by quoting Bible passage after Bible passage ("proof-texting"). *The Confutation* started out by claiming that the Augsburg Confessors' position on this topic "is entirely contrary to the Holy Scriptures."

So, it wasn't that the Confessors argued on the basis of *sola Scriptura* and the Confutators argued on the basis of papal authority and church tradition. The Confutators, too, were able Bible scholars ready to battle on the sacred ground of the Bible only (*sola Scriptura*).

Consequently, Melanchthon was compelled to preface his defense with an introductory section on biblical interpretation. In keeping with a scholarly passion of the era, "*ad fontes*" ("back to the sources"), Melanchthon approaches the biblical argument by laying out the "sources" (*fontes*, founts) of each position.

The Confutators' position was that all the Bible passages they cited had equal authority to any other Bible passage. In bold contrast, the Confessors' position was that "All Scripture should [*debet, must*] be divided into these two main topics: the law (*lex*) and the promises (*promissio*)," that is, law and gospel [5].

For reasons that will be described below, in the story of Abraham (Genesis 12 & 15) and in Paul's arguments based on that story in Romans 4, the promises of God in Christ (the gospel) have both temporal and theological priority over the law as articulated in the Decalogue (Ten Commandments). If you play the card-game bridge, whist, or euchre, you could say the gospel "trumps" the law. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the card suit that ranks above all others.

God's Use of the Law vs. God's Use of the Gospel

However, Melanchthon does not distinguish law and gospel only by their "subject matter" (the laws of Moses vs. the promises of Christ) but also by the way God makes use of them. The law has two uses. One way God uses the law (what some call the "first use") is to maintain "civil discipline" (*civili disciplina*), that is, to maintain civility and order for the public good. The carrot and the stick. Quoting Galatians 3:24, Melanchthon writes, "*The law was our disciplinarian.*" "God wants those who live according to the flesh to be restrained by such civil discipline, and to preserve it he has given laws, learning, teaching, governments, and penalties." God honors good moral behavior with material rewards in this life (the carrot), just not with the forgiveness of sins which is given through faith in Christ [22, 25].



Saint Jerome in His Study –

Albrecht Dürer

[From Wikimedia Commons](#)

The other way God uses the law (the so called “second use”) is the manner in which it is used in gospel preaching: to show us our need for Christ: that is, Christ the mediator, crucified and raised; not just Christ the model or example. For the Decalogue requires not only outward civil works. It also requires inward behavior that goes far beyond human ability: such as, truly to fear God, to love God, to call upon God convinced that God hears, to expect help from God in death and all afflictions [8].

The Decalogue is “that law which deals with the impulses of the human heart.” [124] And, “God judges the heart” (*Deus iudicat corda*), not the outward appearance of moral correctness [35]. Thus, in gospel preaching, “the law always accuses!” (*lex semper accusat*) [128]. Always. Even laws you have never broken accuse you by the mere fact that you should even need those laws. Thus, Luther said, the ultimate use of the law is “to drive us to

Christ.”

The gospel, on the other hand, is that word from God that says people are right with God when they believe God’s promises made in and through Jesus of Nazareth. They are “justified by faith,” to use the language of Saint Paul. Martin Luther abbreviated this into a tidy bit of Latin, *sola fide* (by faith alone). The benefit of proclaiming the gospel in this way is two-fold: (A) it makes maximum use of Jesus as Savior and (B) it offers a much greater comfort to broken, hurting, fallible human beings because it all depends on God working through Jesus and the Holy Spirit and not on us. Schroeder’s **double dipstick test** again!

The Two Opposing Positions: Burying Christ vs. Maximizing Christ

The Confessors claimed that their opponents did not preach or teach the true gospel. Following the lead of Gabriel Biel (an influential German theologian popular in Luther’s day) and others, the opponents taught law: that people merit the forgiveness of sins by “doing what is within them” (*facere quod in se est*). It is the same theology that is still so popular and prevalent today: “God helps those who help themselves” and “Do your best and God will do the rest.” It’s what we tell our children in school and in sports: “Don’t worry, just do your best.” Monk Luther’s experiential problem with this theology was the question “How do you know when you have done enough?” “How do you know when you have indeed fully done ‘what is in you’ and you weren’t holding anything back?” Luther was an A+ student and still he always felt he needed to do more. “Do your best” DID make him worry!

And so, Melanchthon says sharply, **“They bury Christ!”** “They bury Christ so that people do not use him as mediator and on account of him believe that they freely receive the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation. Instead, they foolishly imagine that by

their own fulfillment of the law they merit the forgiveness of sins...and are accounted righteous before God—in spite of the fact that no one ever lives up to the law...” [18].

Melanchthon concedes that the Confessors’ opponents do not bypass Christ entirely. They do require a knowledge of the story of Christ and credit him with meriting for us a certain disposition they call “initial grace” that inclines us to love God more easily [17]. But the problem with their opponents’ position is that **they don’t make full use of Christ and they don’t give abundant comfort to troubled consciences**. “In complacent hypocrites, who suppose that they satisfy the law, our adversaries arouse a presumptuous and futile trust in works as well as a contempt for the grace of Christ. Conversely, they drive frightened consciences to despair who, beset by doubt, can never experience what faith is and how efficacious it is” [21]. Therefore, they fail the **double dipstick test**.

The Augsburg Confessors, on the other hand, taught that “being declared right with God” (justification) takes place through God’s free promise in Christ. And that a promise can be “grasped” in no other way than “by faith.” This is what the gospel proclaims and not the law. Their “proof text” for saying this is Saint Paul’s argument in Romans 4, where Paul bases what he has just said in Romans 3 in God’s promise to Abraham.

In Romans 3, Paul writes: *“But now, apart from the law, the righteousness (δικαιοσύνη, dikaiosunē) of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified (δικαιούμενοι, dikaioumenoi) by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement (ἱλαστήριον, hilastērion) by his blood*

effective through faith" [21-25].

To ground his point from the Hebrew Scriptures, Paul points to the story of Abraham. In Genesis 12 and 15, God promises Abraham three things: land, numerous offspring, and that through his family all the families of the world will be blessed. And then it is said, Abraham *"believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness"* [Genesis 15:6]. That is, Abraham's trust in God's covenantal promise puts him in a right relationship with God. Paul's brilliance in choosing this story as his "proof text" is that (A) Abraham is the father of both the Jewish covenant and the Christian faith, (B) this promise happens before God commands circumcision as a sign of the covenant, and (C) it happens before the giving of the Mosaic law. Thus, in both theological and temporal terms, the promise has priority over the giving of the law. The promise trumps the law. So, Saint Paul bases his argument on the very nature of a promise: justification is a promise; the way to grasp a promise is by trusting in it; therefore, we are justified by faith apart from works of the law (circumcision, Sabbath keeping, eating kosher, and observing Jewish festivals).

Melanchthon cites Paul in Romans 4 and argues the same way: "The gospel (which is, strictly speaking, the promise of the forgiveness of sins and justification on account of Christ) proclaims the righteousness of faith in Christ, which the law does not teach." "The promise freely offers to us, who are oppressed by sin and death, reconciliation on account of Christ, which is received not by works, but by faith alone" [44]. The issue between Melanchthon and his opponents is not so much about the graciousness of God as it is about how that grace is given and received.

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use

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