

Alfa Papa, Bravo Tango, but Charlie Victor: Which Is to Say, The Proper Distinguishing of Law and Gospel Saves the Church (C) from the Two Oldest Heresies (A and B). A Gambit. 1

1 Gambit: "A remark made to open or redirect a conversation."

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1. Everywhere we look we see the church—supposedly one, holy, catholic, and apostolic—divided and dividing. “Two roads diverged” and we took them both, time after time. Now there are tens of thousands of denominations, most of them of more than one mind.

2. Yet we say all the time that the church is the body of Christ. Has Christ been partitioned when we weren’t looking? We collaborate with a few, we converse with some, we anathematize others, we ignore the rest. Wouldn’t Paul criticize that as a failure to discern the body (1 Corinthians 11:29)? Is there more than one baptism, Lord, cup, faith? I don’t think so!

3. The purpose of this paper is to suggest a logic behind the

splitting—a logic which has everything to do with a failure to properly distinguish law and gospel in God’s Word. Thus, the central concern of the Lutheran theological tradition and of the Crossings Community has ramifications for understanding the fractured state of the church.

4. The Hatfields and McCoys of today’s church are not eastern and western Christianity, or Roman Catholics and Protestants, but so-called and self-styled liberal and conservative Christianity; ecumenicals and evangelicals. We just plain don’t like each other. That opposition is evident not only in worldwide associations (World Council of Churches vs. World Evangelical Fellowship— even if a few belong to both!) but within denominations (even the Roman Catholics), and within congregations.

5. What divides the body of Christ? What causes schism? Division of the church arises from the exercise of our will, whenever we mold the Gospel and the church into what we *prefer* instead of what God *proffers*. The word “heresy” is from the Greek for “choosing” or “opting.” To be a heretic is to pick—as though from a menu—what we prefer.

6. Two chief and natural heresies are available to people who wish to organize or improve the church and its teaching according to their preference. Paul distinguishes these two in operation among the Corinthians almost as soon as the church had been launched. I think they continue today.

7. In 1 Corinthians, he defends the Gospel-shaped church against two aberrations:

- a. He sees what they want: “*For [some] demand „signs” and [others] desire “wisdom.”*”
- b. Then he reminds the congregation what he had passed on to them: “*but we proclaim Christ crucified.*”

c. Then he expresses some sympathy with them. He can see why each group has a problem with what he taught them. To those who think in terms of power (evident in powerful signs—Paul uses these two words interchangeably), the Gospel seems to be “*a stumbling block.*” To those more into wisdom to start with, the Gospel must seem like “*foolishness.*”

d. Concluding, Paul points out that they have not improved the Gospel by adapting it. **The true gospel is better than what they are making out of it by adapting it to their preferences:** The gospel is, “*to those who are called, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*” (1 Corinthians 1:22)

8. Those two parties are alive and well.

a. Some people still want to make of the Gospel something more definite, decisive, and powerful. They want people to know exactly what they should believe and obey. They would prefer that outsiders see how strict their moral teachings are, and how correct their worship. Their confidence in the Gospel comes from the strength of what is revealed, and the *strength* with which it is followed.

b. Opposed to them are those who want the Gospel to make more sense to them and others. They think they know wisdom when they see it, and they want the teaching of the church to square with what they already know, in their wisdom. I think this is what Paul means by “*plausible words of wisdom,*” in 1 Cor. 2:4. For example, they might want everyone to be able to see how well they get along with each other, how generous they are, how relevant is this faith.

9. *Power and might vs. wisdom and understanding.* This antinomy is essential to understanding the human. Both strength and wisdom are gifts humanity has received from God, but they have a habit of being pitted against each other. Brains or brawn. The

pen versus the sword.

10. And when the desire for God to *appear to act according to our expectations* becomes the decisive principle in the church's life, the ensuing conflict will separate people whose expectations are dissimilar. For "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways," says the Lord.

11. Indeed, the Bible does reveal God to be one who detests our sin. We were made in God's image, and God still wants us to reflect him perfectly. The standards are high and unyielding, whether you open up the full implications of the Ten Commandments or unfold what it means to love with God's type of love. And the consequences of failing to live up to God's law are dire.

12. However, the Bible also reveals that God's love is not withheld from even the most vile sinners. The forgiveness of sinners is not a divine attribute which may be derived from the other picture of God—the one who detests not only what we do, but the hearts which impel us to sin. Consequently, the Bible's revelation of God appears to be inconsistent. No wonder people are tempted to take part of the picture and run with it.

13. God's Law and God's Gospel meet in Jesus Christ's crucifixion for our sin, not by averaging out two extreme messages, not by taking the corners off, but by God's liberating us (Gospel) from the judgment we have earned (Law).

14. For the sake of the Gospel, and for the unity of the church, it might be good for us to analyze our situation the way Paul broke his down.

15. Let us label the party of the "sign-demanders" **Alfa Church**, and the party of the "wisdom-desirers" **Bravo Church**. These are not actually churches. They are ideal types of church to which

some wish the church would conform, and which many denominations and congregations actually resemble. T

16. Alfa Church attempts to fortify the Gospel of Christ crucified; at least, it emphasizes what is tough in the message. Bravo Church operates with a mutation of the gospel which seems *wiser*, in their eyes. Both deviate from the message about Christ crucified as if it were not quite adequate.

17. But Paul says the message of the cross is actually “just right.” The very thing people were looking for when they wandered away from the Gospel in either direction (wisdom, strength) was actually there all along, since “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”

18. Let’s call church formed according to the gospel of Christ crucified **Charlie Church**. This is not a third *option*; at least, not according to Paul. Charlie is not something we design. Instead, it is the gift of the God who is both almighty *and* merciful. Charlie Church is “an echo, not a choice.”

19. Alfa, Bravo, and Charlie Church are, by the grace of God, one in Christ. Three churches do not exist, else would Christ be divided, which has not happened. We separate them hypothetically, for discussion.

20. When God’s people allow what we want to become more important than the Gospel, we organize ourselves into parties (or denominations). That way, we give the impression of living without each other. We might *feel* more together flocking with birds of a feather; but to the world the church looks ever more split. People even mistake our denominations for “different religions”!

21. Alfa Church and Bravo Church represent human initiatives in

opposite directions, each seeking to improve or reform the church.

22. Both parties appear to draw the church into the Bible. They ask us to take *certain* texts more seriously. But they point to different verses. The omnipotence of God (an Alfa theme) and the compassion of God (Bravo theme) are both in the Bible. God's demands (Alfa) and his gifts (Bravo) are well documented. But it is not easy to see how those messages get along. The Word of God is not so homogeneous that either party will be happy with everything they read in the Bible. Consequently, by de-emphasizing each other's themes, they seem to each other to disrespect the Bible.

23. Many features of Alfa Church and Bravo Church may be traced back to their fundamental preference for "strength" or "wisdom." In what follows, we will point out a few of those characteristics. The presence of one "Alfa" or "Bravo" characteristic seems like a good predictor of the presence of another. Eventually, I think, the evidence will support our theory of their being two fundamentally aberrant ways of being church. The generalizations we make in support of this theory are broad, but I hope they may shed useful light on the problem of church divided.

24. Alfa and Bravo define themselves by their difference from each other. Charlie, on the other hand, defines itself with reference to the Gospel, and distinguishes itself from the world. (See, for example, AC VII: "The church")

25. Let me reiterate, for the sake of people who are right away identifying themselves with Charlie—as I do. No one is able "of their own reason or strength" to prefer Charlie. That is the work of the Holy Spirit.

26. Alfa purports to be stronger than Bravo, attaching its self-

image to that of the *Almighty* God, who has reminded us he is in charge by means of mighty signs and remarkable revelations. Bravo purports to be wiser than Alfa, identifying with the wisdom of the *Merciful* Father in heaven. (N.B.: In both Alfa and Bravo churches, the meaning of various terms begins to assimilate to their characteristic emphases. For example, in Bravo church mercy is part of wisdom.)

27. Alfa is more authoritarian: concerned about beginnings, sources, revelation, the fact that the Bible is the *Word of God*. Note the root “author” in “authority.” Bravo, on the other hand, is more outcome-oriented, looking for certain kinds of results from the Word, using the Word to *achieve* its desiderata.

28. Mnemonically: Allusion to “alpha male” is intentional, but no reference is intended to the Alpha program of theological education. (And please note that the international radio alphabet spells it with an *f*.) “Bravo” hints at a tendency to praise the human self. If you find *chi rho* in “Charlie,” that is good.

29. Alfa focuses on the commandments God gives. Bravo focuses on the results, the *telos* God is accomplishing, e.g., life, peace. Charlie focuses on the gift God gives.

30. Alfa is to “law and order” as Bravo is to “peace and justice.”

31. Alfa prides itself on being firm about the law of God. Bravo claims to get the Gospel better. But both improperly distinguish law from gospel! In practice, both tend towards legalism. Their disagreement is between what I call elementary and advanced legalism. Hard, prickly, negative law—“Thou shalt not”—and warm, fuzzy, “positive” law—“Love one another.”

32. Those familiar with the six-step Crossings-style exegetical

model might notice that Alfa legalism crosses from step one to step six Bravo crosses from step two to step five, and considers itself wiser for doing so. Neither Alfa nor Bravo succeeds in getting down to step three; therefore neither really appropriates the power in step four—the cross of Christ. On that third level, operational power is no longer within us (as legalism requires) but is God’s own mercy.

33. Even allowing that all do profess Trinitarian faith, Alfa favors the *Father*, Bravo the *Holy Spirit*. Charlie is Christ-centered. But this is not merely a function of talking a lot about Jesus Christ. It depends on the way in which Christ is used— his death for our sins, reconciling us to the Father and giving us life.

34. For this reason, we may call Alfa Church *theocentric*, having only a vestigial Christ and Holy Spirit. Alfa Church talks and talks about “God.” In contrast, Bravo Church is *anthropocentric*, easily confusing the Holy Spirit with its own wishes. God “resident in us” is the topic of Bravo. Charlie Church is unashamedly *christocentric*, which by the way is what makes it Trinitarian.

35. Alfa Church would say it is a religion; Bravo Church a spirituality; Charlie Church a faith.

36. Alfa’s image of God is of one who is *transcendent*, majestic and mighty. Bravo prefers God *immanent*: that still, small voice that is peaceable and enlightens us from within. Charlie says both are right. However, it does not average them into a happy medium, but its eye is on the Crucified One.

37. Alfa thrills to the *Te Deum* and loves the chorus of “How Great Thou Art.” Bravo would rather sing *Ubi Caritas* to candlelight, but does like the first stanza of “How Great Thou

Art": "When through the woods, and forest glades I wander." Charlie sings the whole thesaurus of hymnody, but does not omit (like one collection of popular hymns) stanza three from "How Great Thou Art": "But when I think that God, his Son not sparing, sent him to die, I scarce can take it in."

38. Alfa's Bible defines what we must think and do, and backs its demands with lots of death threats, etc. Bravo finds interesting and inspiring truths in the Good Book, here and there, although some parts offend, such as when God is really mean to people. Charlie considers the Bible the cradle of Christ, and offers the whole book due reverence on that account. (Those "God is mean" parts help us take seriously why Christ had to die for us.)

39. Alfa says worship is what we owe God, a duty laid down in Scripture. Bravo wants worship to produce results in our hearts, such as peace and happiness. Charlie says yes (a duty), yes (results!)-yet it is all about the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

40. Alfa preachers emphasize authority, and use *deductive* reasoning to elaborate what God demands of us. Bravo preachers try to inspire us to do more and try harder to make the world the way it should be, employing a lot of *inductive* reasoning to get there. Charlie preaches faith in Christ (which is what God wants from us, and also what will save the world from what is wrong); you might call its thinking *correlational*.

41. Alfa teaches *deontological* ethics-what we have to do because God says so. Bravo teaches *teleological* ethics-what God is trying to achieve in the world. Charlie teaches the Lord's Prayer ethos: Jesus has told us to believe that God will accomplish his will in the world, which will no doubt mean we will be taken care of. The Lord's Prayer merges deontology with teleology without harping on ethics, and meanwhile both comforts

us and draws us into the action.

42. Alfa and Bravo Church, being shaped by predilections, make the Gospel conform to a preconceived notion of what it *ought* to sound like. And they emphasize how the church *ought* to look. No wonder Alfa and Bravo employ theologies of glory! Charlie's theology is theology of the cross, which "calls a thing not what it seems to be but what it is." (Heidelberg Disputation)

43. Charlie is not shaped according to a third sort of human preference. There are not, in Paul's thinking, some paradoxical types who prefer a Christ crucified. This is not what some of us want, but it is what all of us get! Each of us is probably more drawn to Alfa or Bravo at different times, but all of us are asked to surrender that option and accept the One God actually offers.

44. Peter said to Jesus, when he told them he would be crucified, "This must not happen!" Peter spoke for all of us. Of the twelve apostles, six were probably Alfa types (I think of Judas) and six Bravo (perhaps Thomas?). None were intrinsically, innately Charlie. Yet Charlie is what happened, by the grace of God.

45. To repeat: The proper starting point of Gospel and church is **not our predilection but God's promise**. Initially this confounds our expectations. Ultimately it satisfies them better than we could plan for, if we are willing to receive it. The church is founded on what God proffers: Jesus Christ on a cross, crucified for our sins. When the church conforms its thinking, teaching, worship, preaching, etc., to the Gospel which is about Christ crucified, it will not look like Alfa or Bravo church, yet it will beat them at their own games.

46. Charlie Church is dialectical and correlational. It affirms the Law of God in its most trenchant form: "You shall die." Yet

it has a Gospel which is adequate to the condemnation. It says "You shall live."

47. Charlie Church gets both the "God of Alfa" and the "God of Bravo," held in tension within its theology. It does not dismiss one in order to get a purer version of the other. It does not allow a projection of its demands/desires to become an idol.

48. Charlie Church does not dismiss half the biblical evidence; it does not drop either of God's words (law and gospel) in favor of the other. It finds the key to Scripture in the *unexpected* Gospel of Jesus Christ.

49. Charlie survives by properly distinguishing between two words from God: law and gospel. Charlie trusts God's Word to accomplish what *it sets out to do*, rather than using God's Word to accomplish what it wants to do.

50. Nevertheless, Charlie has nothing whatsoever to boast about. There is no room for boasting, according to Paul, unless you count boasting of what you have received, as Paul does. Being Charlie is always and only the work of the Holy Spirit in us, through the Gospel. Luther's Small Catechism, explanation of the third article of the Creed: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe . . . But the Holy Spirit has . . ."

51. The Lutheran Church occupies important ecumenical ground not (as is sometimes said) because we split the difference between the different types of churches, kind of Catholic but not too different from Baptists; not because we are moderate, or modest, or lack seriousness; not because some of our members are Alfas and some are Bravos and we manage to get along; but because we take very seriously the humanly impossible task of dealing honestly with both of the words from God in the Bible: law and Gospel. And because in our teaching we have found not what we preferred, but what God proffers in Christ, the one who was

crucified.

52. Charlie Church is not middle ground, like the middle ground Wildman and Garner find in their Alban Institute books "Lost in the Middle?" and "Found in the Middle!" It is not a separate place, for people who eschew the other two locations. It is the place where the whole church needs to be, and perhaps is, more often than we might recognize.

53. Lucky Lutherans! Whereas Alfa and Bravo both leave the task of straightening out the world and ourselves on *human shoulders* ("You should act better!" "You should feel and think differently!"), Charlie celebrates that God has taken that burden on himself in Christ, through the forgiveness of sins.

54. Lutherans, when we actually teach justification by faith using law-gospel theology, have much to offer people who err in the direction of Alfa or Bravo, because we are just like them. We, too, with our own reason or strength, prefer another sort of word. But we have seen how the Word of God clicks in Jesus Christ.

55. Lutherans (who ourselves are sometimes divided into Alfa and Bravo camps) need to take the beam out of our own eye, then help Alfa and Bravo to see what is in their respective blind spots, by showing how to properly distinguish law and gospel. For Alfa cannot manage a hearty Gospel when it is so consumed with law; and Bravo cannot quite believe that God hates sin.

56. Only in this way can the church

- a. Properly make use of Christ; and
- b. Offer to others the full consolation available through Christ.

57. An entire industry of Church Improvement has arisen, based

upon observations that something is wrong with the church and that we can make it better either by adhering more strictly to God's demands or by being more amenable to people's wishes. Both schools of thought rely heavily upon appearances. [Heard at a recent conference: "Using other people as examples, especially positive ones, has done more in our church than anything else!"—this from a former ELCA executive, now a consultant to churches that want to vibrate more.]

Practical Application

58. I find these labels quite handy for characterizing and criticizing in broad strokes many of the efforts of well-intentioned Christians to improve the way we preach, the way every aspect of our ministry is performed, the way the church looks or wants to look to the public, etc. It is a handy way of saying that something is off kilter because of a failure to be centered in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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