

Arthur Carl Piepkorn. A book-review. Part II.

THE SACRED SCRIPTURES AND THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS.
SELECTED WRITINGS OF ARTHUR CARL PIEPKORN,
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[Here's the final paragraph segue from last week's Part I: The BBSW bunch (=Bertram, Bouman, Schroeder, Weyermann in the department of systematic theology at Concordia Seminary) wanted to go one step further: Yes, the Gospel is indeed the central "doctrinal datum in the sacred scriptures." It is, in fact, so central that in the Lutheran Confessions the Gospel itself becomes the "norm" for the Bible. And the Gospel, when "properly distinguished" from God's law, its polar opposite, becomes the criterion for how to read that entire Bible that testifies to this one "doctrina evangelii." But to call that THE Lutheran hermeneutic for reading the Bible? ACP didn't think so.]

LAW-GOSPEL DISTINCTION—A HERMENEUTIC?

Law distinguished from Gospel as the lenses for reading the Bible? ACP didn't want to say that. "I prefer to speak of a law-gospel polarity (rather than a law-gospel antithesis). . . . the law-gospel distinction is a particularly useful hermeneutical criterion in dealing with the sacred scriptures; but it must not, in my view, be exalted to the place where it is the primary or the exclusive hermeneutical criterion. When it does become the primary or exclusive hermeneutical criterion, the tremendous 'bite' of the law-gospel distinction is lost." (286)

ACP is talking to our quartet when he says this. Yet I never did comprehend what that “bite” was, a bite that got lost in the BBSW mode for confessional theology and sadly, I never asked him point-blank. For his side, ACP was never convinced that law-promise hermeneutics proposed in Apology 4 of his beloved Lutheran Symbols—a hermeneutic drawn from “the central exegetical criterion of the Symbols” [ACP’s very words]—was THE Lutheran hermeneutic for reading the Bible. For ACP it was “a” Lutheran hermeneutic, not “the.”

There may be a hint in the last essay in the book, one of the last things he wrote before he died. Here ACP is responding—from the battlefield of the LCMS civil war—to a “request” from LCMS officials that each of us Concordia professors put down in writing our own personal statement of faith, with specific attention to some half-dozen specific topics. One of those topics was: “The Relation between the Law and the Gospel.”

Here’s what ACP says:

“I regard the conventional Lutheran law-gospel polarity as a denominational construction which is derived from data of the sacred scriptures, although the sacred scriptures do not explicitly distinguish the law from the gospel, as Lutherans understand these terms. I hold that in the sense that the terms have in Lutheran theology, the law and the gospel are ultimately functions of the Word of God. That is, for the Christian every word of God, however conveyed, has both a law function and a gospel function. . . . To stress the fact that the law and the gospel, as Lutherans understand the terms, are functions that inhere in the word of God, I prefer to speak of a law-gospel polarity (rather than a law-gospel antithesis).”
(p285)

I have a hunch that the synodical officials who might have read

these words would scarcely have a clue concerning what he was talking about with these distinctions. Even less, I suspect, would they have had a clue that ACP was also stating his "HERE I stand" vis-a-vis his BBSW colleagues, even though by that time we were all his allies, and he ours. And in a few months we, together with him, would be designated "intolerable" false teachers at the LCMS New Orleans convention.

ACP was part of the "faculty majority," the 45 (of a total of 50) profs already fingered as suspect in our teaching long before the synod convention. So he was clearly together with us on the side of the accused. Yet his words above, "as Lutherans understand these [law and gospel] terms" make me wonder if he didn't see that it was precisely THIS that he and our quartet were debating. What is the "right" way to "understand these terms" that constitute a cardinal Lutheran axiom? Disagreeing with ACP, our quartet did indeed see the terms as antithetical to each other. "The soul that sinneth, it shall die" and "Son, be of good cheer. Your sins are forgiven" are either/or assertions. Antithetical. One is bad news, one is good news.

ACP held that "every word of God, however conveyed, has both a law function and a gospel function." So every word is BOTH law and gospel. That, says ACP, is a "Lutheran understanding of these terms." Our quartet said Not so. One word kills (so says Paul) and one word makes alive. The same word doesn't do both. My hunch is that ACP is here drawing on the grand patriarch of Missouri, C.F.W. Walther, from his pioneering lectures on L&G in the early years of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Walther does not use L&G for Biblical hermeneutics in these lectures, but as a "hermeneutic" for pastoral practice. And here and there Walther does say that the same word of God, a specific Biblical text, can work sorrow or work joy in a pastoral situation depending on the parishioner's specific circumstances. Yes, that is "a" Lutheran understanding of these terms. But is it "the"

Lutheran understanding of these terms? Is that the best Lutheran understanding of these terms? Some of us didn't think so.

It's certainly not the "Lutheran understanding of these terms" that some of us learned from Elert when he led us into the Lutheran Confessions. Here are some quotes: "The law is God's judicial action; it concretely effects God's curse and wrath." "The gospel promises a change from life under the law. Faith trusts that promise, and in doing so faith IS a change of existence." "Law and gospel stand in substantive dialectical opposition to each other. When the law speaks, the gospel is silent. When the gospel speaks, the law must hold its peace." [Elert: "Law and Gospel," Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967, p. 1]

I have a hunch that ACP's preference for the term "function" instead of the term "use" is in the mix here too. He viewed L&G as "words" of God functioning when scripture is read, when a sermon is preached, when pastoral care transpires. Elert would stick with the term "use," with the accent on God himself "using" L&G to effect God's "curse" or God's promise.

I never pursued this issue with ACP. Better said, I didn't have it in focus. I don't know whether any of my colleagues in the quartet—all of them now also dear departed—ever did either, although I bet Bob Bertram did. He had 8 collegial years with ACP before I arrived. It seems to me that it is the LCMS "understanding of these terms"—inherited from Walther—to see them in "use" by human agents, pastors of course, as they minister the word of God to other people. The Elert proposal (and I think that's the ancient "understanding" in Luther and in the Lutheran Confessions) is more existential by focusing on God as the agent enacting one or the other.

Phil Secker has a passage posted on the ACP website—it's not in

this volume—that shows ACP getting close to the BBSW alternative I've proposed above. But he still holds that “both Law and Gospel are functions of the same Word of God.” Did he see a schizophrenic deity looming in the radical either-or that the BBSW crowd seemed to him to be promoting? That is a serious concern. But it is not removed by positing some unitary primal Word of God behind the conflict of law and gospel. [Karl Barth did indeed propose that, but I never heard ACP hyping Barth.] The resolution of that antithesis, that “substantive dialectical opposition” of law and gospel, came on Good Friday—in Christ's body on the tree. And not before. But that still doesn't make “the same Word of God” to be both bad news and good news for sinners. “Today you will be with me in paradise” is pure Gospel. There's no law-like flipside to that promise.

Here's the text Phil Secker offers, where—so it seems to me—ACP seeks to say both:

“Although the Gospel is bound to the Law as its polar opposite, although both Law and Gospel are functions of the same Word of God, and although the Law is illustrated and declared by the Gospel (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, V, 18), the Gospel as a principle stands wholly outside of and in paradoxical contradiction to the Law. It is God forgiving the unforgivable, accepting the unacceptable, justifying-in St. Paul's bold image-the ungodly. Here there is no application of justice-attributive, distributive, retributive, or merely, with Tillich, “tributive.” Here is not even creative justice. Here is love, forgiveness, the Father so loving the world that He gave His only Son, the Son taking upon Him to deliver man from the curse of the Law and abhorring neither the womb of the Virgin nor the death of the Cross, the Holy Spirit communicating Himself anew to those that had lost the life of God.” Arthur Carl Piepkorn, “What Law Cannot Do for Revelation,” unpublished essay, October 21, 1960, pp. 17-18.

BACK TO THE TERM "CANONICAL"

Additional signals of ACP's viewing the Lutheran Confessions as a doctrinal canon show up in some of his favorite terms. One of these is his oft-repeated reference to their "doctrinal content." Commitment to the Lutheran confessions is commitment to their "doctrinal content." One example: "The Symbolical Books . . . restate the doctrinal content of the Sacred Scriptures." (267)

Then there is his frequent use of the words "binding, bound" with reference to scripture and to the Confessions. Granted, this term was standard LCMS parlance in those days. Some of us in those days searched for other vocabulary, less law-like, to speak of commitment to scripture and doctrine. ACP opted to stick with the old rubric and still be engaged in "Christum treiben." In his 34-page article on "Suggested Principles for a Hermeneutic of the Lutheran Symbols" (106-139), he goes through a laundry-list of several pages designating over and over again what is "binding" and where "we are not bound."

Using both of these "canonical" terms, he tells us: "What Lutherans are bound to is the doctrinal content of the Lutheran Symbolical Books." (271)

A canonical view of the confessions designates what's obligatory, what's binding about them. I never saw any sign that this binding was bondage for him. Au contraire, from all the evidence I ever saw and heard, he rejoiced in it. But that is where ACP stood.

REHABBING THE WORD "CATHOLIC" AND "CATHOLIC" PRACTICE AMONG LUTHERANS ACP sought to rehabilitate the term "catholic" within the LCMS and in Lutheranism beyond. If you knew ACP at all, you knew that.

“The [Lutheran] Symbols are precisely intended to be a Catholic interpretation of the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and the New Testament.” (107) “The Church in the process of Reformation must remain the catholic church.” (183) “All the Symbols stand in a continuous chain of Catholic witness We are Catholic Christians first, Western Catholics second, Lutherans third.”(109)

That last sentence became the mantra of many of ACP’s disciples. So much so that some among these Piepkornians have in recent years swum the Tiber and gone back to Rome. Though that was not at all what ACP was recommending. [And the swimmers know that they are departing from their master as they start paddling.] ACP often asserted the bizarre-sounding thesis that today’s fellowship of the Augsburg Confession of 1530 (Augsburg catholics) was actually older than today’s Roman Catholic community. For when the Church of Rome at the Council of Trent (1546ff) anathematized the doctrine of “justification by faith alone,” Rome was renouncing the historic Western catholicism that the Augsburg confessors confessed. With that pronouncement the Church of Rome became a separate denomination—in the technical meaning of the term, a “sect.” Augsburg kept the Catholic faith, Trent did not. So when Augsburg catholics, disgruntled with the “mess” in their current Lutheran denominations, swim the Tiber hoping to become 100% catholics, they are sadly opting for a lesser catholicism than the one they are leaving behind.

ACP was an early and formative voice in liturgical renewal in US Lutheranism. He also agitated for the recovery of what the Lutheran Confessions call the third sacrament: “One area where the practice of contemporary American Lutheranism has departed far from the practice enjoined by the Symbols is in the area of private confession and individual absolution.” (164)

In my student days ACP's public persona—given his constant clerical collar, his crossing himself at specific places in the liturgy—was suspect for having “Romanizing tendencies.” That was the Missouri epithet in those days for the high-church crowd, including students on campus, the ones rehabbing the term “catholic” as good orthodox Lutheran vocabulary. ACP was their guru. He was “Father Piepkorn” to them.

ACP AND THE ARTWORK OF ELISABETH REUTER

One of the gifts ACP brought to campus was the work of artist Elisabeth Reuter, originally from Crimmitschau in what became East Germany. I think he learned of her work during his time as military chaplain in post-WWII Germany. Through ACP's mediation four of us seminarians made contact with Ms. Reuter and from her powerful woodcut series—from the Annunciation to the 12-year-old Jesus in the temple—we began a contemporary art Christmas card company, The Seminary Press. It ran for 25 years with wife Marie being the manager/operator for the last 20 of them. We have a set of that eight-panel Reuter series on our wall. But that brings up this question for you ThTh readers. Our set of eight is in black and white. To ACP, who also promoted her art in other venues, Elisabeth had given a brilliantly colored set of those woodcuts. I remember seeing them, framed in one composite panel, on the wall of the Piepkorn living room. Now this—none of the Piepkorn children knows what happened to that Elisabeth Reuter objet-d'art after ACP, and then later his wife Miriam, died. Have any of you readers ever seen it, or know what happened to it? If so, the Piepkorn heirs would like to know.

Summa.

ACP was dear to me and continues to be so in blessed memory. We weren't always on the same page, but we enjoyed walking together through the pages of Lutheran confessional theology to which we

both were joyfully committed. He was regularly doing giant steps to my baby steps. [Even though I never walked in his giant-sized moccasins, I did once wear his cassock! Of all places, in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada! And now get this—when I was guest-preacher in an Anglican church! And now get this—the rector there who vested me in it was a St. Louis seminary grad. The vestment was genuine. The ACP initials were embroidered inside the collar. How it had gotten into this Anglican vestment closet is an almost gothic tale: “It was a dark and stormy night” But that’s another story.]

ACP was a giant blessing for me, for which I give thanks, not only in this time of American Thanksgiving Day. I’m grateful to Phil Secker for dreaming up and then setting up the ACP Center and seeing to it that “his works do still follow him” now already 34 years after “they thought they could retire him, but God took care of that.” For me ACP incarnated God’s care-taking—both as he received it and as he put it into practice. Evangelical and catholic. Gospel-grounded and world-wide.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

P.S. Crossings general manager, Cathy Lessmann, just reminded me that Bob Bertram wrote an “ACP In Memoriam” many years ago. It’s a gem. To find it GO to <www.crossings.org>. Click on “Works by Bob Bertram” and then on “Piepkorn in Perspective.”

Postscript for the immediate future:

God willing, on January 10, 2008—six weeks hence—Thursday Theology number 500 will be posted. I want to celebrate that “D-date” [D = 500 in Roman numerals] by taking the day off, and letting you, you all, produce the text. So I’m asking the willing among you to compose a sentence, a few lines, a paragraph (not too big) which, when scissored and pasted, will

constitute the text for ThTh #500. For all contributions that come in, Mike Hoy and Steve Kuhl, (past and present presidents of Crossings Inc.) will constitute the scissors-and-paste committee. If Mike and Steve get surfeited with so much good stuff from y'all, perhaps I can take the following Thursday—or even several?—as days off as well. Not fishing for kudos—nor brickbats either! Something like a Krossings Karaoke, an “open mike” where the readership can sing to the readership and we provide the cyberspace mike, the stage—and, if necessary, Steve and Mike as umpires. Identify your prose as “4TT500.” Post to <mehs55@cs.com>by New Years Day.

Peace and Joy!

EHS