

Arthur Carl Piepkorn

Colleagues,

Today another book review. Before I could stop, it got a bit long. Too much for a single ThTh post, I think. So part 2 comes next week. Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

THE SACRED SCRIPTURES AND THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS.

**SELECTED WRITINGS OF ARTHUR CARL PIEPKORN,
Ed. Philip J. Secker. Mansfield, Connecticut: CTC
Press. 2007. Paper. \$21.95**

[Order online from web address below]

Arthur Carl Piepkorn [ACP] (1907-73) was my teacher at Concordia Seminary (St. Louis, Missouri) in the early 1950s. Two decades later—but only for two brief years before his tragic death at age 66—I was his colleague in the department of systematic theology at the same place. The subject matter in both eras was the same: the theology of the Lutheran Confessions.

I say “tragic death” because though he had survived World War II as military chaplain, he died on the battlefield of the wars of Missouri. Some attending his funeral were even more crass: “The Missouri Synod killed him.” And that is not simply partisan hyperbole. Here’s how it’s plausible.

ACP was one of the superstars “given” to the LCMS in the 20th century. Others of similar stellar status from that era were Richard Caemmerer, Jaroslav Pelikan, Frederick Danker, Robert Bertram, Richard Luecke. ACP’s gifts shone through the many facets that had been polished on the gemstone that he was. Ph.D. at age 24—in Assyriology! Commandant at the U.S. Army Chaplain School. Pioneer in Lutheran liturgical renewal. Member of the group that organized the US Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue—and participant therein until his death—where even the Roman superstars admitted that ACP could out-quote them (from memory, in Latin) when RC documents from antiquity were needed for discussion.

Closer to home in Missouri, ACP was THE expert in the Lutheran Confessions (in their original languages, of course)—expert also in the subsequent generations of theologians, now designated Lutheran Orthodoxy (all of that in Latin or German too). At the seminary (and from other venues in the LCMS) when you needed to know whether something was “kosher” according to the Confessions, it was automatic, “Ask Arthur Carl.” [A mythology grew up, of course, about his omni-competence. Verified as true is this one. One of the four Piepkorn daughters comes home from parochial school and asks her mother (Miriam) to clarify something her teacher had said in class that day. Miriam: “I don’t know. Why don’t you ask your father when he comes home?” Daughter: “Mama, I don’t want to know that much!”]

ACP knew the Lutheran Confessions better than anybody in USA Lutheranism, chapter and verse—and lived their “doctrinal content” (his favored phrase) in palpable and conscious commitment. And therefrom comes the death-blow. The LCMS national convention in New Orleans in 1973 passed a resolution condemning Piepkorn as a false teacher. Others of us also fell under that verdict. This was the same LCMS whose constant

drumbeat was to be the most orthodox Lutheran denomination in America, most faithful to the Lutheran Confessions. And the convention spoke its “damnamus” (the Latin word in the Luth. Conf. for “we condemn”) to their God-given expert in, and practitioner of, Lutheran confessional orthodoxy.

The text of that fateful resolution uses the very words of the Formula of Concord (the last major Lutheran confessional document of the 16th century) to speak its damnamus: “cannot be tolerated in the church of God, much less be excused and defended.” For ACP these words were salt in the wounds, for they were using ACP’s own prose (literally) to condemn him. He had translated the Formula for the English-language edition of the Lutheran Confessions.

In the weeks that followed New Orleans, LCMS officials, carrying out the convention mandate, imposed “retirement” on ACP. He sought to challenge the action on constitutional grounds, but he died of a heart attack before he could argue his case—5 months and one day after the convention’s “damnamus” action. His funeral at Concordia Seminary was itself a piece of our post-New Orleans “time for confessing.” Besides the fifth-commandment verdict spoken at his funeral (“Missouri-killed-him”), I remember Walt Bouman’s comment (he too now of blessed memory) “We are also burying the Missouri Synod today.” Poignant and memorable were the words of his widow, Miriam: “They thought they could retire him. God took care of that.”

Did Shakespeare or Euripides ever compose a tragedy more grim? And Missouri today is afire with an “Ablaze!” campaign for world evangelism. Playing with fire—especially God’s fire— is always dangerous. All the more so after you’ve immolated one of God’s prophets.

Back to the book.

Editor Philip Secker was the last doctoral candidate to complete his degree under ACP before the Meister died. Phil has taken his last-of-the-line status as a calling, an Elijah's mantle, and has fashioned an impressive website, "The Arthur Carl Piepkorn Center for Evangelical Catholicity." <www.lutheransonline.com/piepkorn> [That's where you can buy the book.] It's the supermarket for Piepkorniana—manifest already in the center's very title, for "evangelical catholicity" was ACP's favored term for what the Lutheran Reformation was really all about. More about this below.

THE SACRED SCRIPTURES AND THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS. SELECTED WRITINGS OF ARTHUR CARL PIEPKORN is the first volume in Phil's efforts to make ACP's theology available to a wider public. But not the first one ever. An earlier volume of ACP's essays—THE CHURCH (1993)—appeared from the hands of other ACP fans, but efforts to continue that series failed—until Phil came along. So Phil calls this book volume 2 in the series and is currently working on two more: Vol. 3. MINISTRY, CHURCH AND SACRAMENTS and Vol. 4: WORSHIP AND THE CHRISTIAN LIFE.

In this volume we have seven of ACP's essays on scriptural issues (from 1954-73) and nineteen on the Lutheran Confessions (1951-1972). Missouri Synod's turmoil during these decades moves like a spectre through many of the essays—both those about the Bible and those about the Lutheran Confessions.

ACP seeks to come to terms with Missouri's shibboleths about the "Sacred Scriptures" [he seldom used the word Bible]. Veterans of the Wars of Missouri know these terms well: inerrancy, infallability, verbal inspiration, scriptural authority. The *modus operandi* is classic Piepkorn. It goes like this: "Terms x or y or z have no basis in the Sacred Scriptures themselves, nor in the Lutheran Confessions. [And then will come line-after-line of documentation from every imaginable

source—and sometimes even un-imaginable ones.] The same is true of such terms in the best of the ‘orthodox’ Lutheran authorities. They are unknown. So they have come into our evangelical catholicity from alien regions. Ergo”

Seasoned enough to know that such scholarly demolition would not convince every critic, ACP recites over and over again in these seven essays his positive counsel—and personal faith-conviction:

“We should first refuse to reply to loaded questions with ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ Next we should point out the inadequacy of [shibboleth term “x”]. Then we should patiently affirm everything that the Sacred Scriptures say about themselves and that the Lutheran symbols [=Lutheran confessions] say about them. Finally we should assert our conviction that the Sacred Scriptures have the Holy Spirit as their principal Author, that they are the Word of God in the language of historical human beings, and that they are true and dependable. In the meantime, we need to continue to explore reverently and prayerfully together the isagogical and hermeneutical problems and possibilities that these convictions about the Sacred Scriptures imply.” (p45)

One tour-de-force essay in the first grouping is ACP’s review of Robert Preus’s major work on *THE INSPIRATION OF SCRIPTURE. A STUDY OF THE THEOLOGY OF THE SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY LUTHERAN DOGMATICIANS*. Since the theologians of that era were his own bailiwick, ACP can commend Preus chapter-and-verse for highlighting “the soteriological purpose of the Sacred Scriptures” in these theologians, their non-Biblicist mode of articulating Biblical authority, along with “many other significant insights.” But he also cannot refrain from noting the—ahem!—“excessive number of typographical errors,

particularly in the footnote quotations of the Latin sources.” Nevertheless, generous to a fault, ACP trusts that “these are all things that a second edition can set to right.” [Veterans of the Wars of Missouri will note the irony of ACP’s positive review of this major work of one who later helped engineer Missouri’s “not to be tolerated” decree on ACP.]

ACP and the Lutheran Confessions. His Third Way

The second set of essays in this volume—19 of them—are about the Lutheran Confessions. As mentioned above, ACP was my Confessions teacher during my seminary years and from 1971 to his death in 1973 we were colleagues in the systematic theology department at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

During my student days I wasn’t clever enough to divine ACP’s distinctive “take” on the Lutheran “Symbols” (his favored term for these confessional documents) and thus I didn’t appropriate it. Not until we were teaching colleagues in those brief last two years of his life did I come to clarity on this. By then my “angle” on the Lutheran Confessions had been shaped by other Lutheran teachers: Pelikan, Elert and Bertram. Bob Bertram was dept. chair of systematic theology when I arrived to teach at Concordia Seminary in 1971, and it was Bob who once in casual conversation used the term “canonical” for ACP’s own approach to the confessions.

No one dared to say that ACP was “wrong” about the Lutheran Confessions. He was the one to whom you ran to ask “What do the Confessions say?” So what was ACP’s “canonical” confessionalism? I’ll try to explain that.

Back on September 6 (ThTh 482) I told you this:

There were actually 3 different positions within the Concordia Seminary systematics dept. (in the early 1970s),

three different readings of the Lutheran Confessions. One way of describing them is to say “three different sets of lenses” for reading the Lutheran Confessions. **One.** Four of our colleagues used . . . the lenses of Lutheran orthodoxy (17th/18th century theologians—Missouri’s self-claimed heritage) to read the confessions. In simple terms: Biblical authority is the linchpin for Lutheran theology. Everything centers around what the Bible says.

Two. Four other colleagues used Luther’s own theology as the lenses for the confessions. In simple terms: running all theology through the law-and-gospel sieve is that linchpin. Everything centers on what the Gospel is.

Three. ACP practiced a third way—with a “pax (gentle, of course) on both your houses” to the rest of us in the department. He knew Lutheran orthodoxy inside out, but also knew its slippery slope away from the classic confessions. So he couldn’t go there. And, for giving Luther’s own law/promise hermeneutics any priority of place, ACP was always a little leery of Blessed Martin’s occasional rambunctiousness—also in theology. When in a department meeting chairman Bob Bertram would refer to the law-gospel distinction as “the Lutheran hermeneutic for Scripture,” ACP would sometimes whisper over to me—emphasizing the indefinite article—“A Lutheran hermeneutic.”

Piepkorn’s third option was to read the confessions “canonically,” as the doctrinal canon of what Lutheranism is. Whatever the confessions say, that is what Lutherans “believe, teach and confess.” What they leave untouched cannot be “required” as Lutheran. Orthodox teaching on such untouched topics is to be mined from the patristic heritage insofar as it doesn’t contradict what the c onfessions do indeed say. Thus

the Mother of Jesus is “always virgin.” The Lutheran confessions say so. For the business of “verbal inspiration and scriptural inerrancy,” Missouri’s banner on the ramparts, he said: “Not Lutheran. It’s not in the confessions.”

ACP’s 19 essays here—many of which I’d never seen before—document his “canonical” hermeneutic on the LC. He even has a lengthy article (34 pp) on “Principals for a Hermeneutics of the Lutheran Symbols.” But in this essay he never addresses the issue of the differing hermeneutics for reading the confessions.

Here are some pointers toward ACP’s canonical reading:

DOCTRINE

His definition for “doctrine,” itself a super-neuralgic item in the LCMS then (and perhaps still now), was this:

“Doctrine is that which the Holy Spirit teaches through the Sacred Scriptures in the church so that human beings might know how they are to think of God, how God is minded toward them and what they need to believe and do for God’s saving purpose for humanity and for them to be realized in and through them.” (61)

What makes that sound “canonical” is first of all its implicit multiplicity (you can expect many things “to believe and do”), not simplicity (one-ness) AND, above all, its “you gotta” character—“How they are to think . . . what they need to believe and do.”

The Bertram-Bouman-Schroeder-Weyermann quartet [hereafter BBSW] in the systematics department preferred to say—and I remember Pelikan teaching us this in my first year as a seminary student—“according to the AC there is only one doctrine—the

Latin word is in the singular—‘doctrina evangelii’ (AC 7), the one doctrine that IS the Gospel.” So why then are there 28 patently different articles (multiple doctrines?) in the AC? They are spokes coming from the Gospel hub at the center of the wheel. If a spoke doesn’t “fit” into that center, it is rejected. It’s not “gospel.” If it does fit, it stays. That is the rubric the AC follows from start to finish.

ACP didn’t deny the Gospel’s uniqueness, nor its centrality. In quintessential ACP rhetoric he says:

“The gospel is not one doctrinal datum in the sacred scriptures among many, but in the hierarchy of verities that the church has always taught [is that not canonic?] it is the crucial, decisive, and unique item: all the other items derive their ultimate significance from their relationship to it.” (293)

Or again:

“As the central exegetical criterion in the Sacred Scriptures is [now comes German] ‘was Christum treibet’ [=what promotes Christ]. . . so the central exegetical criterion of the Symbols is the article ‘that we can obtain forgiveness of sins and righteousness before God not through our merit, works or satisfaction, but that we obtain forgiveness of sins and become righteous before God by grace for the sake of Christ through faith’” AC IV. (108)“To be Lutheran means to see the church’s teaching in terms of the Gospel.” (195)

The BBSW bunch 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.

[To be continued “Deo volente et nemine contradicente” (God willing and no one contradicting)—a favored ACP caution when he committed himself to some future task.]

Peace and Joy!

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