

# THE HERMENEUTICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF APOLOGY IV

## THE PROMISING TRADITION

A Reader in  
LAW-GOSPEL  
RECONSTRUCTIONIST THEOLOGY  
Second Edition

Concordia Seminary, now in Exile  
St. Louis, Missouri  
Advent, A. D. 1974

(From A PROJECT IN BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS  
(CTCR Publication, 1969 )

**ROBERT W. BERTRAM**

*(The projected study on this subject will run to five or six chapters, more than half of which are already completed. What follows is not a chapter-by-chapter outline but only a highlighting of some of the study's findings so far.)*

The Fourth Article of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession may yield help for Biblical interpretation today. But it can do so only when we heed how that article's own Biblical interpretations stick to the specific theological issue at hand, justification solely by faith, or to put the issue as a question: How to "commend works without losing the promise." In other words, it is not enough to look merely for the general literary procedures in Melancthon's exegesis (like his interpreting passages in their own context or according to their grammatical-historical meaning) , which for the most part were by then the common stock of northern European humanism and by now have virtually become truisms. But justification entirely by faith, together with what this means for interpreting Scripture, was at that time hardly a truism. Nor is it now. But that already has hermeneutical significance. For then it is impossible to ask how Scripture is to be interpreted without constantly asking how men are to be saved. Biblical hermeneutics is at no point separable from Biblical soteriology.

The hermeneutical situation of Apology IV contains not just the two components of a Bible and an interpreter but at least a third component as well: the

interpreter's critics -in this case the Roman Confutatores. Yet in concrete fact isn't that the hermeneutical situation still today? The interpreter's task is to cope not only with the text but with the text in the face of his own contemporary "accusers" (adversarii), who accuse on the basis of a contrary Biblical interpretation of their own. It is noteworthy that in the case of Apology IV the opposition was coming from the theological "right," and the Reformers were here being accused of innovating and of betraying the heritage of the past- worst of all, the Scriptures. At other times during the Reformation the opposition came from the theological "left. " But even then the opponents were no less Scripture-quoting than the Roman Confutatores were.

But why did a Biblical interpreter like Melanchthon have to take his opponents so seriously as all that? Why not simply ignore them? Why dignify their criticism as if it were itself an essential ingredient in his own exegesis? Answer: Because these critics, for one thing, had had a great deal to do with formulating the question before the house, defining the very issue. True, one of Melanchthon's monumental achievements in Apology IV is the way he succeeds finally in reformulating the question. Here too is a moral for hermeneutics today: Embattled

as the Biblical interpreter may be, he need not supinely accept the question in the legalistic form his critics put it to him but may instead have to restate it until it becomes a question directly about the Gospel. What this demands of the interpreter, however, is that he must then interpret not only Scripture but his opponents as well – or rather reinterpret them- so as to avoid having his Biblical exegesis dragged down to the subevangelical level of their question.

For Melanchthon, however, there was still another reason for taking his critics seriously: Their criticism had quoted in its own support very formidable evidence from Scripture. This Biblical counter-evidence he could scarcely ignore. On the contrary he subjects it to a most careful cross-examination. His intention is to get down to the bottom, to the “sources” {fontes} of his opponents’ objections. And these sources of theirs were at least in large part Biblical. In the course of this source analysis Melanchthon does isolate also a non-Biblical source, the critics’ *opinio legis*. But even that non-Biblical factor of theirs seems to get some encouragement from Scripture, at least from that motif in Scripture which Melanchthon classifies as *lex*. Though their *opinio* is merely that; an exaggerated opinion, still what it is an exaggeration of is thoroughly

Biblical, the Biblical  
lex. They have elevated to a saving truth what, though it is not  
saving. is  
still truth. And the lex motif in Scripture does on the face of  
it seem to  
contradict the evangelical motif, the “promises.” That the  
promises are ours  
entirely by our faith and independently of our “works of the  
Law,” Scripture does  
at times seem to deny. Question: Could it be then that there is  
“bad” Scripture  
which drives out “good” Scripture? This delicate question, which  
the Confessors  
boldly faced ( and faced it when even their own critics had not  
dared to do so)  
dare not be faced any less boldly by the Biblical interpreter  
today.

Although Melanchthon finally answers this question- this  
question of Scripture  
versus Scripture- with a no, his answer is by no means  
automatic. One of the most  
treacherously difficult operations he first has to perform is to  
distinguish the  
lex motif in Scripture from its promissio motif- a distinction  
his critics saw  
no need to make, preferring as they did to regard Scripture as a  
self-evident  
unity. And what makes Melanchthon’s distinguishings more  
difficult than ever is  
that as a matter of fact large and important sections of  
Biblical literature-  
for example, passages about repentance or about rewards- do  
indeed combine both

lex and promissio into a most intricate togetherness. The critics saw no need to put asunder what God had joined together.

But neither of course was that Melanchthon's intention. The trouble was that the togetherness which the critics saw in Scripture was not the togetherness which is really there. They misjoined lex and promissio unbiblically because of that "source" (admittedly Biblical) from which they had taken their start and to which they had erroneously given priority: the lex. But you cannot start from just anywhere in Scripture, no matter how true and divine that may be. Unless you start from Scripture's promissio, you wind up with a legalistic mishmash which is neither promissio nor lex.

This is why Melanchthon first had to distinguish these two motifs, the legal and the promissory, in order ultimately to relate them back together the way they belong: internally at odds with one another yet able to coexist effectively in one and the same passage, really in one and the same sinner-provided that sinner takes Christ's victory over the law sola fide, entirely on faith. Only in Christ is the Law given its full Biblical due and yet reduced to its Biblical position of subdominance. And the only way to "have" this Biblical Christ- and hence to keep both promise and Law intact in their Biblical togetherness-

is by faith, not  
first by actualizing Him in faith's works. That, that and no  
other doctrine of  
Scripture's wholeness (not even the doctrine of its whole  
inspiredness, which of  
course Melanchthon's critics likewise believed) is the secret of  
Scripture's  
deepest diversity and its ultimate unity. Could anything be more  
significant  
hermeneutically than that?

To have the promised Christ altogether by faith is the only way  
to "use" Him  
for what He historically was and is: the coming true of sheer  
merciful promise.  
Any other way than the sola fide is to render Him and His whole  
history  
"unnecessary." For what else was that whole long Biblical  
history, both fore and  
aft, but the history of God's promissio- not only His revealing  
of it but His  
making the promise and keeping it, historically- the historic  
judgments of His  
lex to the contrary notwithstanding? Throughout that Biblical  
history, as in  
human experience generally, promises are made to be trusted. Not  
only does faith  
need the promise, but as Melanchthon adds, the promise also  
needs faith. This is  
the only way to benefit from a promise at all and still honor it  
as the promise  
it is: by trusting the promissor's own goodness, especially when  
he is known to  
have no illusions about ours. To try Instead to insure his

promise by realizing  
it on our own is to make his promise needless.

Melanchthon's reply to his Roman accusers is that by obscuring the sola fide they have let Biblical history (which is nothing if it is not promissory) simply go to waste. In that case it might just as well not have happened. Then Christ has died in vain, and there is no "need" of Him. Here we might interject: Could it be that some exegetes today (including those who speak most glowingly about "faith") require only a minimalist Biblical history because, with a kind of subconscious and perverse honesty, they are living out Melanchthon's warning? Having lost the promissory secret of Biblical history (which for Melanchthon was the one reason faith "needs" that history) , perhaps they have now done the only consistent thing of discounting that history. How ironic that would be! .

Melanchthon's solution, on the other hand, is not merely to insist ,that all Biblical history did in fact take place. That much the Roman Confutatores would also have insisted, and still he claimed that for them the history's happening was really quite pointless. No, his solution was rather to recover within that history its basic "need" of having happened at all: Jesus Christ, God s promise kept, who is ours only by faith. Melanchthon's sort of



interpreter- and Luther  
was only one of his models, the Biblical writers themselves  
having set the pace-  
realigns the Biblical record again and again with what was  
really going on there:  
God subduing His lex with His promissio, so that good works  
could freely be  
commanded and “commended without losing the promise.”

If here and there in the Biblical record the accent on promissio  
had been  
“omitted”- conspicuously by the Confutatores and sometimes  
seemingly at least by  
the Biblical writers themselves- then that accent needed now to  
be “added” by the  
faithful interpreter. Still that “adding” was not a case of  
making Biblical  
history over into something it was not, into some allegorizing  
re-creation by the  
interpreter’s own pious imagination. It was simply a case of  
having no good  
evangelical reason for saying that a Biblical event happened  
until it was clear  
first of all what it was that happened. And those Biblical  
passages which were  
the most “clear” passages of all, and hence the clearest clues  
to what God was  
doing throughout, were those which announced that He was  
justifying the ungodly  
by faith alone- as He does still.