

Justification by Faith Alone – Doctrine or Hermeneutic?

Colleagues,

Last week's ThTh 24 essay prompted this inquiry from Scott Jurgens, Seminex alum ('80), currently pastor at Christ Lutheran Church in Odessa, Washington USA. By the time I finished responding to Scott's items, it occurred to me that I had also produced ThTh 25. So here it is for this week's offering. If nothing else intervenes, I intend to get back to that segmented book review I've been doing on *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998].

Peace & Joy! Ed Schroeder

Dear Scott, What a joy to hear from you.

I. You say:

"I have a couple of questions:

1. You mention that Law/Gospel [properly distinguished] and JBFA [justification by faith alone] are hermeneutics, not a doctrines. How do you come to that conclusion?
2. What is the difference in your thinking between a doctrine and a hermeneutic?"

It seems to me—

Key to both of your questions is the term "doctrine." My take on this comes from Melanchthon's use of the term doctrine in Augsburg Confession [AC] Article V, when he speaks of "doctrina [singular] evangelii." There is only one doctrine, one item that must be preached, taught, proclaimed, and that is the evangel, the good news of

Christ. If one uses the term in the plural, doctrines, then these need to be organized as they are in the AC, as spokes coming out from that center doctrine (singular). What the Gospel wants people to believe in is Christ, not even the “teaching” that gets Christ to them. The L/G distinction and JBFA are (almost) synonyms for “how” to get the Good News to folks. Such “how to do it” stuff these days we call hermeneutics. So L/G and JBFA fit best into that category. They are the pipelines that channel the flow of the Good News that the Confessors say must be piped to people. Jesus used the similar item in his day with wineskins and wine. Depending on what wineskin, what pipes you use, different stuff comes out at the end. For a “new wine” end product, you need a new hermeneutic, a new way of reading the Bible and reading human life in the world. You can try to use “old” skins, but they will either ruin the wine, or the wine will explode the old skins. JBFA , L/G distinction are the Reformers proposals for wineskins for the Good News. Others in the church (for 2000 yrs) have proposed other wineskins: Peter at Antioch in Acts, the Galatian Judaizers, Arius, Pelagius, scholastic semi-pelagianism, enthusiasts, and those manifold alternate gospels spooking around in both the church and secular society today.

In Melanchthon’s riposte to the critics of the AC, in Apology IV, the Reformation classic statement on JBFA, he starts at the very outset with a prolegomena, as he calls it, which today we’d call a hermeneutic. It’s his pitch for L/G distinctions in reading the Bible, which his adversaries don’t do, he says, and in the Confutation, their response to the AC, we see that they don’t and why they don’t. If you’ve still have a copy of THE PROMISING TRADITION [Semnax’s reader in systematic theology], you

might read again Bertram's essay therein, *THE HERMENEUTICS OF APOL. IV.* which we inflicted on you back in seminary days. Melancthon's charge contra his critics, says B. there, is that they do not use L/G piping, but instead their hermeneutics uses "opinio legis" piping. With this legalist opinion, the stuff coming out at the end of the pipe is not Good News at all. It fails to pass the "double-dipstick" test (another label for the Reformers' hermeneutic):

1. making full use of the merits and benefits of Christ, and thus
2. giving sinners the comfort/encouragement they so desperately need.

So the difference between doctrine and hermeneutics? Hermeneutics is the pipeline, the wineskin. Doctrine (singular) is the oil, the wine.

II. You say:

"I know during class you tried to get us to stop thinking [that] Lutheranism puts faith in a list of doctrines, and try to understand JBFA (i.e. Christ on the cross?) as the hub of the wheel. Does that somehow relate to the hermeneutic/doctrine view that you have?"

It seems to me—

I think you're right that it does. It's probably the same thing. The hub is the (singular) *doctrina evangelii*, the proclamation that is the Gospel itself. All the doctrines (plural) that deserve to be called Christian are spokes coming from that hub. Bertram likes to say: "The 28 ARTICLES of the Aug. Conf. ARTICULATE the one and only Gospel in 28 different directions." So even such articles such as the Trinity, sin, christology, justification,

faith, ministry [=pipeline talk, “cater-waiter” stuff we called it way back then!], new obedience, church, sacraments, secular society, the saints, married clergy, monastic vows, church authority, etc. need to be articulated in such a way that they come out as Good News. E.g., the “doctrine” of the Trinity is not the “true facts” about God, but the Good News about God. Even AC III on sin is so presented that it signals what’s at the hub, the Good News that takes away the “biggie” that sin really is.

III. You say:

“Also, in your last article, you mentioned God has two covenants. This sparked something that I remember from CROSSWAYS! training and teaching. Harry Wendt [the creator of the CROSSWAYS program], from what I remember, claimed that once the new covenant was made in Jesus Christ that the old covenant (Sinai) was null and void. He also pointed out that both Sinai and Jesus Christ were covenants of human obligation (this might have come from Hiller’s book) while the Covenant with Abraham is a covenant of Divine Commitment (no human requirements were attached). So, my question for you is this: do you see the covenants of Sinai and Jesus Christ simultaneously existing and applying to the Christian? Or is the Christian only living under the covenant made through Jesus Christ?”

It seems to me—

I don’t know Wendt’s stuff very well and haven’t made the effort to learn about it. [Subconsciously that may be because folks regularly get our CROSSINGS stuff mixed up with his CROSSWAYS.] He once visited Seminex to show us his work and I recall having a “friendly discussion” with

him on-covenant! Even so, your few lines above suggest a perspective that I wouldn't think Wendt would propose. For example, to say: "both Sinai and Jesus Christ were covenants of human obligation" surely won't wash as stated. And I don't think Hillers supports this at all. Doesn't the NT regularly connect Jesus and Abraham, but contrast Jesus and Sinai/Moses? I think so. E.g., John 6. Granted, Sinai has obligations aplenty, and not just obligations toward God but even more deadly, our obligation to die for not carrying out our part of Sinai's bargain. But Jesus too as a "covenant of human obligation?" Something's screwy there, isn't it?

Seems to me this is what needs to be said instead: Sinai OBLIGATES sinners, Jesus LIBERATES them. He liberates them from Sinai's life of obligation and from the laundry list of unfulfilled obligations Sinai leaves us with. That concludes with Christ liberating us from that deadly obligation at the end when God "visits" the ones who mucked up on covenant obligations and now are obliged to die. "God was in Christ reconciling, not," as in Sinai, "counting trespasses." But does Jesus then impose new obligations (or maybe even the old ones again) after he has liberated sinners? Not according to the Bible when read with the Lutheran hermeneutic, which the Reformers claimed was the Bible's own hermeneutic. "Jesus plus obligations, Torah obligations" was what the Galatian Judaizers claimed as their Gospel. Paul dumped his anathema on them for this "other" Gospel that they were hustling, saying that it was really not good news at all. Even stronger, he claimed that if our Christ-connection were to lead us back into obligation, then "Christ died in vain."

The rhetoric sometimes heard in evangelical circles,

“Christ as Savior and [then afterwards!] as Lord,” seems to me to follow this pattern. As I hear it the term “Lord” is seen as bringing in obligations again, and that seems to me to follow the pattern of the Galatian Judaizers. Either Christ has set us free (free indeed!) or he has returned us to obligations—even if they are seen to be different obligations. It is not only with the Galatians that Paul hangs tough: you are either under law and obligations or under Spirit and freedom. There’s no third option.

And with the word “third” we’re at the “third use of the law,” your last item in the paragraph above. You say: “my question for you is this: do you see the covenants of Sinai and Jesus Christ simultaneously existing and applying to the Christian? Or is the Christian only living under the covenant made through Jesus Christ?” Even though Formula of Concord VI on this topic was itself a “flashpoint” in the battle of Missouri, I hold to what FC VI “really” says. Namely, for the Old Adam (Old Eve too) still evident in every Christian, the law of God has a candidate where the law’s first two jobs—two uses—need to be done:

- 1. compelling a minimal amount of rightful civility in order to preserve creation now that it’s populated with human sinners, and*
- 2. accusing us Old Adams/Eves of our unfaith and thereby driving us to Christ.*

The second self in every Christian, that Christ-trusting “new creation,” is law-free, taking his/her ethical coaching from Christ’s “follow me” and from the Spirit’s leading. When such new creations recur [literally “run back”] to Moses, they give a vote of no confidence in Christ as Lord and the Spirit as Leader. “If you are led

*by the Spirit, you are not under law," someone once said.
He was right!*

Cheers! Ed