

Law and Promise Reading of the Scriptures, Part II

Colleagues,

Today's post is part two of a three-part monograph by Dr. Harry J. Duffey—engineering prof turned theologian in his senior years—titled: “Introduction to Law & Promise Reading of the Scriptures.” Information about the author and this essay came along with last week's Part One, now archived on the Crossings website <www.crossings.org> at this address <https://crossings.org/thursday/2011/thur060911.shtml>

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Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

“Introduction to Law & Promise Reading of the Scriptures” Part Two:

RECOVERY OF LAW AND GOSPEL

After Jerome’s (c. 342-420) Latin translation of the Bible, a thousand years would pass before new translations would be written in the West. John Wycliffe, in the last part of the fourteenth century, produced the first complete English translation. Scholars in England and Europe had begun to push the gates of the medieval church open for the people to have access to the Scriptures in their own language. By the beginning of the seventeenth century the King James Version was in print along with other Bible translations in various languages of European countries. As previously stated, Bible translation is not the same as Bible interpretation. Bible translation is basically moving words from one language to another language. Interpretation is taking those words to a what-does-that-mean understanding in my life, at my moment, and in my place.

On October 31, 1517 (All Saints Eve), Martin Luther posted his now famous “95 Theses” on the town bulletin board in Wittenberg, Germany. These statements, about practices in the Roman Church, were intended for topics of debate in the university community, as was the custom. But within weeks of Luther’s posting, his students and friends had translated the Latin postings into German, printed them, and sent them throughout Germany. The ensuing controversy caused the posting date to be referred to as the beginning of the Protestant Reformation.

Luther’s early writings and sermons produced cracks of separation between him and the Roman Church—little cracks at first that could have been bridged from either side of the dispute. Soon there appeared a major crack that opened a chasm that still exists today.

This major separation from the Roman Church was caused by Luther's stand on "justification." Justification was not a central teaching of the Roman Church in the early part of the sixteenth century. But for Luther, a product and priest of that Church, it WAS the central issue. He expressed it in the Biblical question: "What must I do to be saved?" Although Luther did not make a systematic presentation of his early theology, his student and colleague, Philipp Melanchthon [en#4], did in 1521 in his book Basic Theological Doctrines (English Translation). In the book, Melanchthon wrote a concise statement of Luther's interpretation of Biblical justification:

"We are JUSTIFIED when, put to DEATH by the LAW, we are made alive again by the word of grace promised in Christ; the GOSPEL FORGIVES our sins, and we cling to Christ in faith, not doubting in the least that the righteousness of Christ is our righteousness, that the satisfaction Christ wrought was for our expiation [atonement] and that the resurrection of Christ is ours." [Emphasis added]

For Luther, justification is "the doctrine by which the church stands or falls." A Biblical understanding of justification moved Luther to a Biblical understanding of Law and Gospel. Knowing how "men are to be saved" focused Luther on the Law/Gospel interpretation of the Bible—the Bertram statement above.

The words "law" and "Gospel" became "summation words" as the Reformation moved forward, the understanding being that the "law always condemns" and the "Gospel always forgives." These definitions, these understandings, were not a 16th-century invention but were the teachings of the Scriptures from the very beginning.

From 1518, the authority, doctrine, and practices of the Roman

Church were persistently tested by Luther to determine if they were centered in the Good News—the Jesus story. Luther's persistence in these activities resulted in his excommunication on January 3, 1521, from the Roman Church by Pope Leo X. The newly crowned emperor, Charles V, although only twenty years old, knew that peace within the Empire was tied to peace with the Roman Church. Under continual pressure from influential dignitaries of State and Church, Emperor Charles signed the formal condemnation on May 26, 1521 making Luther an "outlaw" of the Empire.

Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, Pope Leo X, and Professor Doctor of Bible Martin Luther were the vertices of the triangle that enclosed the beginning events of the Reformation. Tension and conflict would exist between the three men for the remainder of their lives. (Pope Leo X died in December 1521. The order of succession to the papacy was Adrian VI, Clement VII, and Paul III. All continued to persecute the Reformers. Luther died during the papacy of Paul III.)

Fortunately, Luther's home was in Wittenberg, a city in the principality of Saxony, a region in medieval Germany ruled by the Elector of Saxony. Under the complicated political system of the time, Saxony, although in the Holy Roman Empire, was under the jurisdiction of the Elector. The Elector, Frederick III, protected Luther from the consequences of being an "outlaw" as long as he remained in Frederick's territory.

In 1530, Emperor Charles V summoned representatives of both the official Roman Church and the Protestors to appear at an assembly to be held in Augsburg, Germany. Charles' hope was to re-direct the attention/tension from the religious factions to that of defending The Holy Roman Empire against the Muslim armies under Suleiman [en#5] gathering at the eastern edge of the Empire.

The Roman Church and the Protestors were told to present written position papers detailing their religious beliefs and practices. The chief protestor, Martin Luther, through his published writings, lectures, and sermons was the epicenter for the upsetting thought and practices occurring in churches during the reign of Charles V – the Church in which Charles and all the people in the Empire were members. As an outlaw under threat of arrest, Luther did not go out of Saxony to Augsburg. His position was filled by Philipp Melanchthon, who had worked closely with Luther during the previous years at Wittenberg University. Melanchthon's teaching skills and competence were essential for writing the explicit positions held by the Reformers.

The most noted document for the Augsburg assembly was penned by Melanchthon during the five-month meeting. The document is called the "Augsburg Confession." Out of the twenty-eight articles in the Confession only Article IV, on justification, is here examined for our study of the Law and Gospel reading of the Bible. Article IV reads:

"It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions [Law], but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us [Gospel]. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21-26 and 4:5." [bracketed terms added]

The Reformational understanding of justification in Article IV of the Augsburg Confession did not come from medieval theology. Medieval theology offered the sinner a "heaven-bound ladder" for

salvation. It was a ladder with the rungs constructed of the sinner's good works and God's grace as a reward for those works. Reaching for higher and higher meritorious rungs, with the help of Christ and the Roman Church, the sinner would continue to climb and reach for the top rung of righteousness, God's final "OK." The reader can verify the accuracy of this simple metaphor by referring to the proceedings of the Council of Trent, Session Six, wherein the understanding in 1547 of the Roman Church's position on justification is given. The Council of Trent was held in response to the teachings of the Reformers.

Article IV of the Augsburg Confession came from a clear Scriptural understanding of law, Gospel, and the wide separation between them. When sinners trust Christ's offer of forgiveness – that's what faith is – they are OK with God.

Charles V flatly rejected the entire Augsburg Confession. His hope for the Augsburg meeting was dashed – Germany was now in religious turmoil – the Reformation was firmly established – and the distinction between Law and Gospel was widely published. The Reformers had recovered the understanding that God's law is one thing and the Gospel of Christ is something else for both understanding salvation and, right along with it, for a Gospel-grounded way to read the Bible.

Meanwhile, for reasons unknown, Suleiman and his armies withdrew without attacking the Empire.

LAW

The mention of Biblical "law" usually brings to mind the Ten Commandments and the story of Moses coming down from Mount Sinai. More infrequent is recalling Jesus' interpretation of the law as written in Matthew beginning with Matthew 5:17.

In the Bible, "law" is much more than God's commands and

prohibitions. Although it is that, too – “thou shalt and thou shalt not.” Law constitutes a three-fold action of God that permeates all creation after the Fall. And that is the only creation we know, since we have no access to “what it was really like” before the first humans’ catastrophic attempt to “be like God.” In the now-fallen world, the world of our daily life, God’s law reveals three distinct “law-links” between God and humankind. These three enwrap our lives.

In the law’s first revelation God is CREATOR, giving us our existence, placing each of us in a specific context of space and time with manifold relationships – to people, places, and things. None of these did we choose; they are simply the “givens” of our personal existence. From that specific location where God has placed each one of us, our individual lives unfold as God “manages” our personal history within his governance of world history. We are bound to God as our creator/manager whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not. We are entangled in this web by the mere fact that we exist at all somewhere in God’s creation.

Secondly, God is LEGISLATOR, giving us orders, commandments, for how to live as his human being, as his “image” in this specific location amid all these relationships. The second disclosure reveals that God has expectations for how we are to “image” our Creator in the many relationships where he has placed us. What gets revealed about us is that we are under obligation to fulfill these expectations, to obey these commandments.

Luther’s “Small Catechism” puts it this way at the end of his explanation of the creation article in the Apostles Creed: “For all of this – [these gifts from God my creator] – I am obligated to thank and to praise, to serve and obey him.” Law as God’s legislation reveals an imposing group of obligations, of tasks and assignments, within the first disclosure mentioned above,

namely, that God has placed us in a complex network where we live our daily lives. This includes the “ought” with its drumbeat, thou shalt; thou shalt not.

The third disclosure is God the JUDGE, on the bench of world history (our personal history, too), evaluating us individually for how well we do as his “image.” This third web puts us in the divine courtroom and we are on trial. God the law-giver now becomes God the evaluator – and finally God the judge. God passes sentence on us for how well we have done in this complex network of many webs that makes up our personal histories. The judgment reveals that we are overwhelmed by the web of obligations. This third disclosure goes beyond the first two. It entangles us in a web of evaluation that exposes the value, the worth, of our lives. Simply stated, it asks, Are we good or not good? Right or not right?

In the law’s third disclosure those questions get answered. In God’s action as our judge a verdict, a sentence, is passed on our entire lives – on everything we think or understand about ourselves. The verdict is not good news. Sinners always fail the exam.

The law uncovers not only individual sins, but the entire human self. We are exposed as a person living in hostility against God (Rom. 8:7). The Biblical concept of “sin” is not individual acts of breaking the commandments. Sin is a value word – yes, a negative value word – about our whole person. When the word “sinner” is the truth about me, then all of me, not just some part, is hostile to God. Sin is the “shape” of my person. That’s the deep meaning of the word “sin” in the Bible. Sinful acts, breaking commandments, come as a consequence. The shape of the person determines the shape of that person’s actions.

God’s law does not leave any area of our life immune from its

accusation – neither some segment of biography when we were supposedly “innocent,” nor some segment of our self right now that is not hostile – the law pushes us to the conclusion that our sinfulness has been with us from the very beginning of our lives. That is what the term “original sin” means: humans “by nature” living in constant opposition to God right from the start.

Sin brings guilt. One way that humans are different from all of God’s other creatures is that human creatures are accountable to God. They are personally evaluated. God checks on them, examines them, when he moves through his creation-garden (Gen. 3) with the penetrating exam question that he asked of Adam: “Where are you?” That is not a question about geography, but about obligations and responsibilities: Where are you on the list of obligations I gave you?

Begin with commandment #1: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind—all the time!” Who of us has ever “passed” the test of this first commandment? When we face that first commandment, we encounter guilt. The term guilt carries the negative verdict of failure to carry out obligations and responsibilities. Failure is a fact. The word “guilt” adds another quality to the fact. “Guilt” says: you are in trouble because of this failure. Your “person” now carries a negative value, negative worth, because of this failure. The guilt element in sin arises from God being the examiner. God is the one speaking the verdict about my negative value, the negative quality of my sinner-self. It’s not just some human being whom I’ve failed, though it regularly is fellow humans functioning as God’s agents who let me know where I’ve failed them, where I’ve broken God’s own commandment.

Guilt is inescapable. That is revealed by the way the law makes no exceptions as it carries out its death threat – “the soul

that sinneth, it shall die" – on every human being. But that then reveals God to be a god who kills his own creatures. That is a terrifying revelation – both about God and about us. No wonder Adam and Eve ran to hide from such a God. But where to go? There is no place where God's web doesn't entangle us. Everywhere sinners turn to escape they run into a sign: No Exit.

That raises God's self-revelation in law to fearful dimensions and prompts sinners, who have just been exposed by this revelation, to cry out: Is there any OTHER revelation of God, any other word from God, that might rescue us? The answer is yes. There is indeed another revelation from the same God. It is THE Good News, God's Gospel, centered in the words and work of Jesus. It is Christ's rescue operation to save us all from that dead end.

GOSPEL

The GOSPEL is the PROMISE of forgiveness of sins and justification because of Christ. Medieval theology had correctly taught that no one can stand before God (neither today nor on the Last Day) unless one has God's own righteousness. And the general conclusion was: Get busy! But God wants to give me that very necessary righteousness as a present, gratis, so that I can indeed stand before Him, not only on the Last Day but every day of my life from here to eternity. The name of that gratuitous present of God's own righteousness is Jesus Christ. So the "surprise" of Christianity, the unexpected Good News, is that although people do have to have God's righteousness, the righteousness is gratis – free.

The name of this surprise is Jesus Christ. Hence, Christ alone, no strings attached. The way that the free gift becomes my gift is "by faith." In Biblical language, faith means trust. Christ offers his promise of forgiveness as a gift. When we trust his

promise, we become forgiven sinners. Faith alone does it. These three “alones” – grace alone, Christ alone, faith alone – became the motto of the Reformation.

Recorded in John 3:16, Jesus says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” And again, based on Romans 3:21-26, Philipp Melanchthon wrote, “[W]e receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us.”

Melanchthon’s confession and John’s gospel differ only by the way they used the words. But what they say is the same thing. The terms “forgiveness of sin” and “righteous before God” are synonyms. The word “faith” means “believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given us.” In Romans 3:22, Paul says, “Such faith equals righteousness.” Melanchthon’s confession is found in Article IV of the Augsburg Confession presented to Charles V in 1530 at the Augsburg Diet, as previously mentioned.

The Gospel is the heart of the Bible. We have to know this heart ahead of time before we study the Scriptures, or we shall have to discover it during the very process of our Scriptural study.

[Final Part Three of the full text to be posted next Thursday. The author’s e-address is <HJDuffey at aol dot com>]