

Law-Promise Hermeneutics, Lutheranism's Core Charism – for Every Context. Case Study: Mission Theology

Edward H. Schroeder

[Presentation at the conference “The Future of Lutheran
Theology: Charisms & Contexts” held at the University of Aarhus
(Denmark) January 16-20, 2003]

My thesis is already expressed in the title above. What is the Core Charism of Lutheran Theology? Answer: hermeneutics. The Lutheran Reformation's fundamental charism was not new doctrine for faith and life—even so fundamental a doctrine as justification by faith alone [JBFA]. JBFA was itself already the result of something more fundamental that preceded it. That was the hermeneutic, a new way to read the Bible which then opened the scriptures to show the JBFA center of the Word of God. So the primal Lutheran “Aha!”—if I may call it that—was how you read the Bible, and subsequently, how you read the World. I propose to document that claim and then illustrate its value in a missiological context, a Case Study of the Mission Theology of my home church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America [ELCA].

1. SOLA FIDE, NOT SOLA GRATIA

It appears from the topics given for the major lectures here at Aarhus that “sola gratia” [grace alone] is being proposed as a

major Lutheran “charism.” I have not seen any of the texts of these major presentations, but I wonder why that charism was chosen. At least at the time of the Augsburg Confession (1530), the Roman Catholic critics of the AC claimed that the AC was OK on “sola gratia.” No controversy there. It was the AC’s “sola fide” [by faith alone] that they condemned. “All Catholics confess that our works have no merit [apart from] God’s grace. . . . But the [Augsburgers’] ascription of justification to faith alone is diametrically opposite the truth of the Gospel.” [Confutatio Pontifica of Aug. 3, 1530] The central conflict issue at Augsburg 1530 was sola fide, not sola gratia. When Melanchthon returns to JBFA (art. IV) in his Apology to the AC, he takes note of that in his very first sentence: “In the 4th, 5th, and 6th articles, as well as later in the 20th, they condemn us for teaching that people receive the forgiveness of sins not on account of their own merits but freely on account of Christ, by faith in Him.” In short, sola fide.

2. THE HERMENEUTICS UNDERLYING SOLA FIDE

1. MELANCHTHON – Behind the Reformation “Aha!” about sola fide was a hermeneutical “Aha!” Melanchthon makes that very point in Apology IV. Before he even addresses the many charges brought by the Confutators against JBFA, he says: “We need first to say a few things by way of preface in order that the sources of both versions of the doctrine, the opponents’ and ours, can be recognized.” Both the confessors and the confutators cite scripture to support their theologies, but “the sources” Melanchthon is talking about are not the Bible and the Christian tradition. No, the differing “sources” are the differing HERMENEUTICS whereby these common sources are read. The confessors’ source is that “all Scripture should be divided into

these two main topics: the law and the promises” and the text goes on to define the two key terms. The Confutators source? “Of these two topics, the opponents single out the law . . . and through the law they seek the forgiveness of sins and justification.” In addition to scripture’s law, the confutators, so Melanchthon, “add” the non- scriptural “opinion” that people “doing what is within them,” can fulfill God’s law and achieve “Christian righteousness.” The “source” for JBFA is law-promise hermeneutics for reading the Bible.

2. LUTHER – Luther himself in the late years of his life was once asked what Biblical text triggered his own Reformation “Aha!” Here’s what he said [Table Talk, 5518] “For a long time, as I was teaching the Bible at the seminary, I knew I had discovered something important, but I was never clear about just what it was. Then one day I was reading Romans 1:17 again: “Righteous people will live by faith.” That text helped me, for in the verse just before it were these words: “The Gospel is God’s own righteousness. It is revealed through faith.” So I connected the two: God’s own righteousness [= the righteousness in God himself] and righteous people who have faith. When I made that connection, I saw what the Gospel was. The Gospel is the story of God’s own righteousness. And what is that? Answer: The righteousness of God is God working to make us righteous. He makes us righteous when he leads us to put our faith in Christ.

“Before that discovery I had never noticed any difference between the righteousness of the law and the righteousness of the gospel. I always thought that Moses (the law) and Christ (the gospel) were basically the same thing. The only difference, I thought, was that Moses was farther back in history—and not God’s full revelation, while Christ was closer to us in time—and God’s 100% revelation. But I always thought that God’s word from both of them was the same.

“But when I found the distinction [das discrimen fand] that the righteousness of God’s law is one thing, and the righteousness of God’s gospel is something else, that was my breakthrough. [German: Da riss ich herdurch.]”

“Before that discovery I had never noticed any difference between the The law- promise hermeneutic for reading the Bible is the core charism of the Luth. reformation. “Da riss ich herdurch.”

3. THE ‘LARGER’ HERMENEUTIC UNDERLYING ROMAN SCHOLASTICISM

Not mentioned here by Melanchthon is the “larger” hermeneutic lying behind the “law plus opinio legis” hermeneutic that he finds at work in the theology of the confutators. It is the “larger” hermeneutic of medieval scholasticism: the nature-grace axiom: “Grace does not diminish nature, but brings it to perfection” [Gratia no tollit naturam, sed perfecit.] Luther doesn’t name this either in the Table Talk statement cited above, but he could have, for in his reference to his earlier notion that “Moses and Christ” were the same, he is drawing on that hermeneutic. Expressed simply. it is that all of God’s revelation is “grace,” some less complete (Moses), some more complete (Christ)—and that the function of God’s grace is to “fulfill” (literally fill-full) what is lacking in as-yet unperfected nature, specifically imperfect sinful human nature. That grace is understood as a metaphysical medicine flowing through the sacraments of the church, bringing to completion what is still lacking in the incomplete righteousness of sinners, what is still lacking for the salvation of the world.

Does that notion of grace have Biblical foundations? The Augsburg confessors said no. They also claimed that the notion

of “nature” in the scholastic hermeneutical axiom had no Biblical equivalent at all. A fuller evaluation of this “classic” hermeneutic in the Latin church follows in #5 below. My point here is to propose that the law-promise hermeneutic for reading the Bible was a fundamental “Aha!” for the Lutheran reformers, and that it was their counter-proposal for the otherwise dominant nature-grace hermeneutic of the western theological tradition.

4. FROM GOD’S TWO WORDS TO GOD’S TWO HANDS

By using the law-promise hermeneutic for reading the Bible, which exposed two different righteousnesses in the scriptures, the reformers’ saw many more “two-nesses” about God in the Bible: God’s 2-covenants, 2-creations, 2-messages, even God’s 2-wills and “2- grammars.” This duplex hermeneutic for reading the Bible opened the reformers’ eyes to such two-ness in God’s activity in the world—God’s left-hand work and God’s right-hand work. God’s right-hand work always centers in the promise (both before and after its fulfillment in Christ); God’s left-hand work centers in “Moses,” God’s law. The works of these two hands come to expression in an offertory collect commonly used in U.S.. Lutheranism: “We dedicate our lives, Lord, to the CARE and REDEMPTION of all that you have made.” Left-hand care of God’s creation, right-hand redemption of that same creation. Same one-and-only God, but two distinct kinds of works—law and promise, care and redemption.

5. IN REFORMATION LUTHERANISM LAW-

PROMISE HERMENEUTICS REPLACES NATURE-GRACE SO THAT MORE OF GOD'S WORK BE "SAVED," AND THEN "USED."

1. I think it was Aristotle who said that the task of any philosophy was [in Greek] "sozein ta phainomena," to "save" the phenomena, the data, that the philosophy pursued. Whether consciously or not, the Augsburg Reformers were saying the same thing about good theology. Best theology was that which "saved" all the word of God and didn't "lose" fundamental elements of it. Over and over again Melanchthon in the Apology criticizes scholastic theology for "wasting" or "not using" or "misusing" basic components of the Word of God. His claim is that the opponents aren't "saving" what good theology ought to save. They are "losing" it. This can be illustrated at three places.

2. First of all THEO-logical-basic "God-data." Lost in the opponents' theology is God's law. One might think that by propounding a "legal" reading of the Scriptures, as Melanchthon claims they do, they really let the law come to its fullness. Not so. By turning the law into a soteriology, they lose the whole dimension of "lex semper accusat." God as critic, judge, accuser of sinners gets lost. And with the loss of the law, the Gospel too finally gets lost. When sola gratia is made a principle in the grace-nature paradigm, grace as Biblically proposed-God's mercy toward sinners-also gets lost. No longer needed is an intervention from God to trump the law's curse. There is no place for God bending-over-backwards to be merciful to sinners. Since God is by definition grace-full, God's radical criticism of sinners is lost, and surely "lost" is something as grim as "the wrath of God." The nature-grace hermeneutics undergirding scholasticism cannot "save" these Biblical data. The AC and esp. its Apology is a tour-de-force proposal for

using the law-promise hermeneutic for precisely that purpose: so that all of the Word and Work of God be saved.

3. The next two key segments “lost” in scholastic theology, and thus needing to be saved, are CHRISTO-logical – that the merits and benefits of Christ be rightly “used” and not wasted—and finally PASTORAL – that sinners actually receive the Good News God intends them to have. For our Lutheran audience I need not expand on these. They are Melancthon’s drumbeat throughout the Apology. The fundamental contra-Christ heresy of the scholastics, he claims, is that although they profess Nicaean-Chalcedonian orthodox Christology, they do not “need” that high Christology, and therefore they do not “use” it in articulating their doctrine. And when Christ is “wasted” instead of “used” to bring Good News to sinners— with or without “terrors of conscience”—the results are bad pastoral theology, very bad.

6. CASE STUDY: MISSIOLOGY

1. The hermeneutics at work in the official mission theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (and elsewhere in contemporary missiology across the ecumenical spectrum) departs from the law-promise hermeneutic of Augsburg Lutheranism and returns to the nature/grace hermeneutic of classical scholasticism, but now in a 21st century format.

My text for documenting this thesis is the “Vision Statement” of the Division for Global Mission [DGM] of the ELCA entitled GLOBAL MISSION IN THE 21ST CENTURY [GM21] together with discussions at a missiology conference in Chicago [September 2001] with DGM mission executives on this mission statement. I was more than a casual partner in these conversations, for my job was to present a “position paper” on law-promise hermeneutics for Lutheran missiology. Thus I drew flak from the DGM staff.

Here are four comments I received from DGM voices:

A. You parse God's work of law and God's work of gospel under the rubrics of "care for creation (=law) and redemption of creation (=gospel)." To talk about "care" under the rubric of God's law and "redemption" under gospel is not right. "Care" belongs under gospel.

B. Redemption as you present it is an "individualized act, not world-wide." The real nemeses in the world are the evil powers of destruction manifest in the oppressive structures that tyrannize humanity. Your individualized redemption doesn't get to these evil powers in the world. The Gospel of redemption as you present it doesn't transform the world.

C. Your presentation centers on "getting me saved," and not—as mission should—on transforming all creation. God's mission in the world is to transform creation for the sake of life.

D. You stay too narrowly in the second article of the creed. God the creator of life is the central metaphor for mission. Life is God's highest value. God's goal is to transform the world so that we may have "life in its fullness."

The frequent accent (4x in the comments above) on "transforming the world" is at root a nature-grace project. "Individual salvation," "getting people saved" was central to Reformation theology as God's chosen way to "save the world," but it is peripheral to the DGM perspective. And that's why "care of creation" belongs to Gospel in DGM theology, because Gospel is God's good action, care is God's good action, and all of it can be subsumed under God's grace, a grace that transforms creation—or, to use scholastic language, "perfects nature."

2. Greater clarity on the alternatives in the discussion—nature-

grace vs. law-promise- -didn't come until one of the DGM execs walked us through GM21, the vision statement, and another DGM colleague put THE ISSUE into words: "The reign of God is God's mission to the world. It is the transformation of creation for the sake of life. [For Lutherans today the question is:] how do we exploit this understanding without getting bogged down in sorting out the Two Kingdoms notion."

3. For me that was an Aha! My earlier position paper had been arguing for the exact opposite thesis: "Concerning God's Reign in the world—how do we exploit this understanding without getting bogged down BY NOT sorting out the Two Kingdoms notion." God's double operation—law and promise, God's left hand and God's right hand, care and redemption, each term "distinguished" from its partner term in each pair—was a fundamental core charism of the Lutheran Reformation. DGM missiology claimed that attention to that charism would get us "bogged down." At the very least, this was an "anderer Geist."

4. Hermeneutics and soteriology go together. GM21's calls us to an alternate hermeneutics. That also has soteriological consequences. Soteriology in GM21 is as follows: GM21 "opts for LIFE as the central metaphor" for salvation. It's a "paradigm shift," we hear. Indeed. One shift is that its soteriology comes out "law-shy." God, our critic, pretty well disappears when GM21 articulates its Trinitarian salvation: God "transforming creation for the sake of life." Question: Does salvation—under any Biblical metaphor—ever occur if God, the world's critic, is ignored? Not only St Paul, but also St John and the synoptics say No.

5. Parallel shift (on the promise side) is that the Reformation drumbeat for "necessitating Christ" suffers. "Theology of the cross" in GM21 designates the shape (humble, vulnerable, suffering) of God's work, but not the content. Nowhere does GM21

offer Christ's cross as a "new thing" that "God was [doing] in Christ," namely, "reconciling the world to himself," and doing so in clear contrast to God's "normal" way of dealing with us, viz., "counting our trespasses against us."

6. GM21's crispest statement about the cross comes on p.8. "Jesus' ministry is a radical struggle for life. This puts him in continual conflict with those who would limit and destroy life. Jesus ultimately expresses God's vulnerable love for all humanity in his willingness to die in this struggle. Finally, he is put to an unjust, humiliating and yet redemptive death on a cross." [The "redemptive" aspect of the cross surfaces at Easter.] "The resurrection of Jesus is God's re-affirmation of life and a sign of hope in a world marked by sin and death. It declares that God's salvation, the restoration of life for all people and all creation, is rooted in God's compassionate and vulnerable love embodied in Jesus' ministry and death."

7. "Expresses" and "reaffirmation" are significant terms in the paragraph above. Question: If Jesus had never shown up, would God's project "to transform creation for the sake of life," have gotten derailed? In GM21's soteriology, it seems to me, the answer is: not necessarily. Christ "expresses" God's vulnerable love, and Easter "reaffirms" it, but there is no "necessitating Christ" for that love to be there at all, and for sinners to have access to it. Same question, different angle: apart from the cross, does God, or doesn't God, "count trespasses?" If God does, then the cross is a cosmic shift in God's dealing with sinners, not simply an expression of what God has always been doing.

8. Summa. GM21 openly calls the ELCA to move beyond the hermeneutics, the paradigm, of 16th century Lutheranism. Why? It had defects then, we learn, and even some of its good aspects are not relevant today. To move us forward, GM21 surprisingly

proposes an even more ancient paradigm, the hermeneutics of medieval scholasticism, reading the Word and the world under the rubrics of Nature and Grace. In GM21 “nature” is “creation” still tragically deficient of “life in its fullness,” and “grace” is God—and God’s people wherever they may be—“transforming creation for the sake of life.” That’s the scholastic axiom: God’s grace perfects nature, does not diminish it. The Lutheran Reformers found that medieval paradigm defective, so defective that they replaced it with another one, which they claimed was the hermeneutic the Bible itself commended—law and promise. Yet GM21 opts for the scholastic one and commends it to Lutherans today. Why?

7. ELCA MISSIOLOGY AND THE 3-FOLD CRITERION FOR “SAVING THE DATA.”

1. The parallels to the Augsburg critique of scholasticism are striking. THEO-logical. God’s word as “law” gets lost. There no place in the GM21 blueprint for “lex semper accusat,” God’s own *usus theologicus legis*. In GM21 God’s critique of what’s wrong in creation is not directed to sinners’ unfaith (*coram deo* matters of the heart) but to evil principalities and powers in the world that diminish and destroy life. God’s action to counteract such destruction and to preserve an endangered creation (God’s own “care” agenda) is not seen as “law” (God’s own *usus politicus*) but is already designated Gospel. For it is a good action of God and produces beneficial results. But with such a paradigm, the law’s own *usus politicus* and *usus theologicus* are lost.

2. Paralleling that, of course, is CHRISTO-logical loss, since losing the law regularly also loses the Gospel. Christ is presented as good news, of course. The DGM Gospel comes under the rubric of the Reign of God as spelled out in Luke 4 (the

canon-within-the-canon for “grace” in this nature/grace blueprint). The center of God’s reign is God’s good news and good action for the oppressed. But that sort of Gospel needs no crucified or risen Messiah to make it all come true. Cross and resurrection are not ignored in DGM theology, but they too get “transformed.” Like this: Christ’s cross signifies that suffering is part of the package in God’s transforming the world vis-a-vis the mighty tyrants that oppress it. And Easter signals that such world-transformation will indeed finally be victorious. Both Good Friday and Easter are signals, but nothing substantive changes in the cosmos when Christ dies or when he is raised. In Melanchthon’s language (Apol 4:157) this “robs Christ of his honor as mediator and propitiator.” Paul called that “Christ dying in vain.” An Easter where death itself (along with the other cosmic nemeses that vex sinners) was not put to death is an Easter that leaves us “yet in our sins.”

3. And that highlights the PASTORAL loss. In the language of the Luth. confessions: If Christ does not “remain mediator,” sinners “do not find peace of conscience”; they are left with nothing “to pit against the wrath and judgment of God.” (Apol 4:214)

All of the losses indicated above do serious damage to Christian ministry wherever it occurs—whether in the context of Christian congregations or on the mission frontiers. What are the particular “gains,” the “savings,” when law-promise hermeneutics are practiced by the church in mission?

8. THE PROMISE OF A LAW-PROMISE HERMENEUTIC FOR CHRISTIAN MISSION ON

THE NEW AREOPAGUS OF TODAY'S 21ST CENTURY CONTEXT. TWO EXAMPLES.

1. REPENTANCE The context for Christian mission today is “the new Areopagus.” Paul’s Athens in Acts 17—“the city was full of gods”—is everywhere in today’s world. This is especially true in the so-called “Christian” lands of the west. And, as with Paul on Mars’ Hill, Christian witness invites people to change gods—it’s as crass as that—to hang their hearts on a god previously unknown to them, the crucified and risen Messiah. “Repent” is the technical term—a 180% turnaround. “Times of ignorance God overlooks, but now he commands all everywhere to repent.” Nature-grace theology has a hard time calling for radical repentance. If human “natura” needs only “perfecting,” (“transforming” in the rhetoric of GM21), then radical switching of deities, and dying/rising of repentance, sounds like overkill. To law-promise theology it does not. Can Christian mission proceed without a call to repentance? It never did in the NT era.

1. Remember that the call to repentance in law-promise theology does not have to be a hellfire and brimstone sermon, though Jesus did that with the hard-of-heart of his generation. L. Goppelt calls that Jesus’ “condemning call to repentance.” But there was also his “saving call to repentance” to the vast majority of his own mission audience. Such a call diagnoses people’s lived experience using God’s law as “mirror” so that we see the facts of our own lives. No more traumatic than having an x-ray, although subsequently reading that x-ray (with God as radiologist) may indeed bring sobriety—even terror. But with that X-ray Aha! comes another call, the call to move away from the truth of that x-ray to the “grace and truth” of the Gospel. That Gospel is God’s own “alternative in Christ” offered for the people just diagnosed,

a healing to hang their hearts on. “Repent and trust the Good News,” was the two-step invitation recorded as Jesus’ first public words in Mark’s chapter 1 and throughout his ministry in all four Gospels. That is law and promise proclamation, not “nature and grace.”

2. DEUS ABSCONDITUS, A LINK TO OTHER WORLD RELIGIONS An insight arising from law-promise reading of the scriptures, viz., Luther’s concept of deus absconditus, humankind’s common experience of God-hidden – in contrast to deus revelatus, God-revealed-in-Christ – is a fundamental resource for Lutheran mission theology and practice. Although generally unused (yes, unknown) in today’s mission discussions, it is a unique resource for Christian mission in today’s “world of faiths.” If for no other reason than that the absence of God’s grace—the essence of deus absconditus experience—is such common daily life experience throughout the world.

0. The hiddenness of God does not mean that there are no signals of God at all in people’s lived experience. On the contrary, God’s creation abounds with such signals, as Paul says in Romans 1:19ff: they have been evident “ever since the creation of the world.” But not so the Gospel, God’s “mercy to make sinners righteous.” Out there in our general experience of God in creation such Good News is abscondita, hidden – often contradicted – in the God-encounters all people have in God’s creation. That Gospel is what deus revelatus is all about (Rom. 1:16f): “For in it [the Gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith.”

1. Deus revelatus is God in the Gospel. Deus absconditus is God in the law. It is the same “one and only true God” but as different as left-hand and right-hand. Because deus absconditus encounters with God are common among all human creatures – those who trust Christ as well as those who do not

– there is common ground here, common “God-experience” for Christians to engage in God-talk with all people of other faiths.

3. USING THE GOSPEL TO COPE WITH DEUS ABSCONDITUS Deus absconditus encounters are not all doom and gloom. God creates and sustains and “cares” for us creatures through the multiple “masks” he wears in these daily life encounters. But they do have their downsides as well, also their dreadful downsides. And that too is common God-experience throughout the human race. What might we learn from beginning interreligious conversation with the daily lived experience of “God hidden”? How do encounters with the hidden God appear in the experience and perception of people of other faiths? That leads to a different focal question for mission conversation: It is not “what do you believe?” but “How do YOU cope?” “What do you have in your God-experience to cope with the downsides of life?”

0. And “having” is a Lutheran key term for faith. “To have Christ”—Christum habere – is a regular synonym for “faith” in Luther’s vocabulary. “Glaubstu, Hastu; Glaubstu nicht, hastu nicht.” [When you believe, you have (something). When you don’t believe, you don’t have (it).] Faith is a having, a possessing of a resource not had before. And with new resources, you can cope as you were not able to cope before. Yes, even cope with dark side of encounters with deus absconditus.

1. It ought to be obvious. Christians claim to “have Christ” to cope with the deus absconditus encounters of daily life. In order for someone who doesn’t “have Christ” to have him, someone else must offer Christ. Christian mission is precisely such an offering. In Apol. 4 Melanchthon makes the point that the fundamental verb accompanying God’s promise is “offer” (in contrast to the law’s fundamental verb “require”). Both Luther

and Melanchthon complained that the medieval church so often “made Christ unnecessary,” and with that it was joining the ranks of the Turks and Jews. The upshot of “sharing” deus absconditus experience in mission conversation and dialogue is to listen for and to hear those signals of people’s need for Christ – the same need(s) the Christian also has living in the same deus absconditus world we all do. It is a coram deo [face-to-face- with-God] need which “necessitates Christ.” Offering Christ is what the missionary is called to do.

9. SOME CONCLUSIONS

1. No one’s day-in/day-out religious experience – whatever their religion – is grace alone. To center inter-religious conversation on grace-experiences leaves vast areas of God-experience untouched, and almost guarantees that Christian grace- talk, centered in the crucified and risen Messiah, will be blurred. The law-promise hermeneutic “saves” such experiential data.

2. Inter-religious conversation that sidelines negative God-experiences is not speaking the whole truth. To talk about Christian grace-experience without specifying the antithetical God-experience it must cope with does not give the dialogue partner a fair shake. Nor does it clarify the Good and New in the Good News of the one Christians call Lord. Here too a law-promise hermeneutic saves the data.

3. The grace of God in Christ is not simply an unexpected and undeserved experience of goodness, as one missiologist defines it. It is rather a surprising fresh word of mercy from a Creator whom we chronically distrust, and to whom we are unendingly in debt. Might not this fact – Christians’ own chronic distrust of their creator, with all its consequences, and their willingness to confess it – serve as a leaven in the dialogue? Even a

leveler? Christians come with paradoxical God-experiences and paradoxical faith-confessions. “Lord I believe; help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24). And Christians admit to being “simultaneously saint and sinner.” Thus, Christians are no “better” in their moral life or the strength of their faith than their dialogue partners. They might even be worse. Their claim is not about themselves, but about a Word they have heard, that “surprising fresh word of mercy,” which encourages them to live in hope before the face of God despite all evidence to the contrary. The law-promise hermeneutic “saves” these data.

[Law-PromiseHermeneutics \(PDF\)](#)