

Scripture and Confessions; A Session with Schneeweis

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His name alone was enough to lure me into conversation with him, "Simon Schneeweiss, pastor at Crailsheim." I had passed him often, on page 317 of my Book of Concord. There he stood with the other confessors of Smalcald, only a few lines up from Melancton, though he had signed with none of Melancton's reservations. What the old confessor now said to me, about our theology today, probably reflected his own limitations. After all, he was four centuries removed from us. Yet what he had seen of our theology was a worthy enough sample. His Book of Concord stands alphabetically cover to cover on my bookshelf with The Brief Statement.

Our discussion of The Brief Statement, moreover, conformed to the rules: Schneeweiss is an ordained clergyman. By the same token, I had to decline his suggestion that we include Count Bodo of Regenstein, a layman. "Naturally," Schneeweiss winked, quoting The Brief Statement itself, "all Christians have the right and the duty to judge and decide matters of doctrine." "Naturally," I gulped. – So our conversation proceeded, whether in the mind or out of the mind I cannot say.

I. The Priority of Inerrancy

"I notice you assign first place," said Schneeweiss, "to the inerrancy of Scripture."

I nodded Yes.

“And you say that inerrant Scripture – inerrant of course because it is authored by God – is ‘the foundation of faith.’” (BS, 212)

I nodded again.

“But do you mean,” he asked, “that it is the Bible’s inerrant Authorship simply which prompts faith?” Before I could reply that that is what I do mean, Schneeweiss answered his own question, “Ach, but of course you would not mean that. And I apologize, my boy, for even asking such an un-Lutheran question. As though you did not know the biblical Author speaks inerrantly also in His Law and His wrath, though these hardly prompt faith. I might know your faith would settle for no foundation short of God’s mercy in Christ, the Gospel of justification by grace.”

“But,” I began to protest, “...

“How could I forget,” Schneeweiss went right on, “what your own Brief Statement says so well, later on: ‘Holy Scripture sums up all its teachings regarding the love of God to sinners...in the article of justification.’ (BS, 227) Sure, biblical inerrancy might compel assent, but assent to what? At best, to God’s Law. Something more, surely, is needed to create faith – unless by faith we mean, heretically, what the scholastics mean by it. Remember, ‘They interpret faith as merely a knowledge of history or of dogmas, not as the power that grasps the promise of grace and righteousness, quickening the heart amid the terrors of sin and death.’ (Ap., 383-6) Such faith, as the Apology describes it, requires for its foundation not merely the inerrant Scripture (for that may equally create the ‘terrors of sin and death’) but rather ‘the promise of grace and righteousness.’ That must be what your Brief Statement means by ‘the foundation of faith’ – not the Scripture as such but the Gospel, which is the foundation also of the Scripture. Nicht wahr?”

“On the contrary, “ I said, trying to object again.

“No, no, my boy,” Schneeweiss interrupted, “there is no need to apologize.”

“But I was not going to apolo...”

“I understand perfectly,” he said, “you were going to explain why your Brief Statement assigns first place to biblical inerrancy. You were going to say that this doctrine comes first in you statement only because it happened to be the doctrine under controversy.”

“Well,” I conceded, “that doctrine is under controversy all right, but...”

“Well then,” Schneeweiss chuckled, patting me on the head, “what is so wrong with placing it first?” All I could do was sigh.

“You see,” Schneeweiss said apologetically, “It was I who had jumped to conclusions about you. I suspected, unfairly, that you had another reason for beginning your Brief Statement with the article on Scripture. What I suspected (and I apologize) was that you were using biblical inerrancy to establish the Gospel, rather than visa versa. What I even suspected (you must forgive me) is that you had made the Scripture as such into the object of faith, thus ignoring the radical difference between the Scripture that comforts and the Scripture that terrorizes. What is worse,” Schneeweiss confessed further, “I had even feared you were using biblical inerrancy to guarantee our inerrancy – our faith, our certainty – so that our faith could then rely on its own certainty, rather than on Christ Himself. So you see, I was much too hasty.”

II. Inerrancy As A Premise

Once more I tried to reverse Schneeweiss' argument, but the old patriarch had already gathered too much momentum.

"Far too often," he complained, "have I seen Lutherans adopt the premises, unwittingly, of the very errorists they were opposing – not only Rome but more frequently, because more subtly, the Reformed and the sects. No wonder then, when we harbor Reformed premises within our theology, that we flirt with neo-Reformed solutions as the solutions to our own problems."

Now that Schneeweiss was pitting Lutheran and Reformed against each other, he struck for the first time a responsive cord within me.

He must have detected my response, for he quickly added, "But it is not a matter of one Christian communion against another, my boy. Rather it is a matter of confessing to the whole holy Christianhood, and with her, the one apostolic Gospel of Jesus Christ – as we did at Augsburg and Chalcedon and Nicea and Jerusalem."

"All right," I granted, "so bad premises undermine the Gospel. But how could the Gospel be undermined by such a fundamental premise as biblical inerrancy?"

"Only because biblical inerrancy," he replied, "is not a basic enough premise to distinguish the Law from the Gospel, not a basic enough premise, that is, to insure the Gospel's magnificent distinctiveness. A bad premise, my boy, is one which subverts the benefits of Jesus Christ. It subverts His benefits, always, by crowding both Gospel and Law onto some minimal common footing which, though it may be broad enough to span them both, is too shallow to plumb their distinctive depths. A case in point is the hybrid Roman notion of grace or the hybrid Reformed

notion of faith as obedience, half Law and half Gospel and yet not really one or the other.”

“But my question,” I reminded Schneeweiss, “was about biblical inerrancy.”

“Gewisz,” he said, “and biblical inerrancy itself can become that minimal common footing. We can become so preoccupied with what Law and Gospel have in common – for example, their revealedness, their scripturalness, their inspiredness, their inerrancy – that we obscure their fundamental opposition, and thus obscure the benefits of Christ.”

“If so,” Schneeweiss continued, “we would talk as if Scripture, because it is all God’s Word, is therefore one and the same kind of Word throughout. As if there were no basic biblical opposition between the Word which crushes and the Word which rises up. As if it were all to be believed with the same kind of faith. As if faith were first a submission to divinely authored truth and only derivatively a penitent trust in God’s mercy. As if impugning the Scripture at one point, just any point, is what leads a man to impugn it at its base, rather than visa versa. As if the worst threat to faith were scientism or agnosticism. As if a still worse threat to faith were not the Scriptures themselves when seen from some base other than the Cross. As if the most gracious thing God has done is to reveal Himself at all. As if He does not also reveal Himself, just as inerrantly, in His condemnation. As if from the bare fact that He reveals Himself – whether in Scripture or in some personal encounter – we need merely deduce that He forgives sins. As if there were any profounder foundation for our faith, or even for our proper grasp of the Law, than the Gospel of God’s mercy in Christ. As if the Scriptures themselves had any profounder basis than this.”

III. The Telltale Vehemence

At last Schneeweiss was out of breath. This was my opening. "If I may say so," said I as politely as I could manage, "your objections are altogether too vehement, almost extreme."

"What a man objects to most vehemently," Schneeweiss shrugged, "might tell you something of his theology."

"Precisely," I countered, "and your vehement objections betray to me a lack of theological balance."

"But," he pleaded, "even you, my boy, must object more strenuously at some points than at others. Consider your own Brief Statement. It is in your article on biblical inerrancy that you vent your strongest language against your opponents' error."

"Because that is what it is," I retorted, "a 'horrible and blasphemous' error."

"Nowhere else," continued Schneeweiss, "do you reproach your opponents quite so vigorously. Legalism, you say merely, is 'unchristian and foolish.' (BS, 230) Self-justification and Unitarianism are 'apostasy from the Christian religion.' (BS, 228) Denying God's grace is 'vicious.' (BS, 226) Neglecting the means of grace is novel and 'unchurchly.' (BS, 232) But to impugn the Bible's inerrancy seems to be worse than all these by far. You say of this error, not only that it is 'horrible and blasphemous,' but more: 'It flatly contradicts Christ and His holy apostles, sets up men as judges over the Word of God, and thus overthrows the foundation of the Christian Church and its faith.'" (BS, 213)

IV. The Worst Heresy

"Are you suggesting," I demanded of Schneeweiss, "that any heresy could be worse than the questioning of Scripture?"

"No," he replied, "all heresy, if it is that, is but a form of the worst heresy." "Then what, may I ask, is the worst heresy?"

"My boy, you shouldn't have to ask that."

"Please answer the question," I snapped.

"I can only cite you the definition I mentioned before," he answered, "and I must confess the definition is not original with me. It is Doctor Luther's: 'Heresy is anything which diminishes the benefits of Jesus Christ.'"

I was silent.

"Surely now," Schneeweiss leaned forward, "you do not find this definition strange? Not if you share our Confessions. Surely you have not forgotten why we labored so hard, for example, against merit-monging?"

"Why, because it defies Scripture," I explained.

"To be sure," he replied, "but we at least found it necessary to say why it defies scripture: Merit-monging 'obscures the glory and the blessings of Christ, and robs pious consciences of the consolation offered them in Christ.' (Ap. IV, 4) And surely you recall why we emphasized original sin?"

"Because not to do so," I replied, "was unbiblical."

"And," he added, "because not to do so was not to 'know the magnitude of the grace of Christ.' (Ap. II, 33) And surely you remember our charge against the saint worshipers?"

This I did remember, and so I quoted verbatim: "'They do not

even have proof from Scripture...”

“But remember,” said Schneeweiss, “how the passage continues ‘...To put it mildly, even this obscures the work of Christ.’” (Ap. XXI, 15)

“But you must remember,” I in turn reminded Schneeweiss, “that ‘whatever was written in former days was written for our learning’ – that was good enough for Saint Paul.”

“Oh no, my boy,” Schneeweiss corrected me, “you have omitted Paul’s climax: ‘...that by steadfastness and encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope’. What the Formula of Concord comments on this passage is worth remembering: ‘...any interpretation of the Scripture which weakens...this comfort and hope is contrary to the Holy Spirit’s will...’ (F.C. XI, 92)

Schneeweiss would have traced the benefits of Christ still further, through infant baptism, the church, the Lord’s Supper. But suddenly my memory came to my rescue. “Come to think of it,” I said triumphantly, “this same theme of yours appears in our Brief Statement too, more than once.”

“Then may it be the theme, “ he said, “of the whole document, also of its article on Scripture.”

V. The Biblioclasts Versus Christ

“Our article on Scripture,” I assured Schneeweiss, “does refer to Christ. In fact,

that is why we oppose the impugners of Scripture: the biblioclasts: ‘They flatly contradict Christ and His holy apostles.’”

“Do you mean,” the old pastor said sadly, “That they contradict

Christ's promises?"

"That I don't know," I had to admit.

"They must at least contradict the Law," he said.

"I don't know that either."

"Then what is it about Christ they contradict?"

"They contradict Christ's statement to the Pharisees, 'Scripture cannot be broken.'" (Jd. 10:35; B.S. 211)

"But what I am asking," Schneeweiss persisted, "is this: Do your opponents contradict Scripture in the same culpable way the Pharisees did?"

"I suppose so," I shrugged.

"You suppose so!" he exclaimed. "My boy, how can you be so casual about this question? If your biblioclasts do break with Scripture the way the Pharisees did, it is because they mix the Law and the promises, they adulterate Christ. That, then, is their trouble. It is at that point that they deserve the same concern from you that the Pharisees got from our Lord."

"Look here," I said to Schneeweiss, "I don't know what all you are reading into our Lord's statement. Isn't it enough that He said, simply, 'Scripture cannot be broken.'"

"Ja, ja, it would be enough," said Schneeweiss, "if that had been all He was saying. He – He and not I – was saying much more. Actually the bare formula, 'Scripture cannot be broken,' was what the Pharisees themselves had always said. What our Lord did was to quote their formula against them. He showed that, though they declared Scripture to be inviolate, it was they who violated Scripture. And how? By displacing Him. Psalm 82, which

they agreed could not be broken, they themselves broke by failing to see Jesus in it. The psalmist's promise ('you are gods, sons of the Most High') they misread synergistically. The Law ('you shall die like men') they misread antinomically. They de-fused the Law and disgraced the promise. Both mistakes were very natural ones, and very attractive. Still, by the very Scripture which they insisted was inerrant they had deprived themselves of the Messiah, the psalmist's Son of the Most High, the Jeremian Good Shepherd."

"So?" I asked.

"So with the biblioclasts of any age," Schneeweiss replied. "To demand of them merely whether Scripture can or cannot be broken is not yet to raise the Christ-like question, not even the Christ-like question de Scriptura. So far it is but the demand a Pharisee might make, say, upon a Sadducee, or an Anabaptist upon a humanist. So far the question ignores the real ground of biblical inerrancy, and the real virus of biblioclasm. So far the question treats merely the symptoms, and might even treat the wrong patient."

VI. Does Sinai Imply Easter?

"My dear Pastor Schneeweiss," I said, perhaps a bit too condescendingly, "you have badly placed the cart before the horse."

"Then I am the guilty one," he blushed, "and it is you, my boy, who must correct me."

"The big trouble with our biblioclasts, " I explained, "is not that they deny the benefits of Christ. That is, not yet they don't. But that is where they are heading. Today they reject one miracle, for example, the six day Creation or the theophany on

Sinai. Tomorrow they may reject the resurrection. Like a row of dominoes, push the first one and they all fall. For example, Bultmann, the arch biblioclast today. Not content to deny demonic possession, he goes on to deny the resurrection as well."

"The resurrection of our Lord?" Schneeweiss asked incredulously.

"The resurrection of our Lord," I repeated, "And he dismisses it as a myth about a resuscitated corpse."

"*Schade, schade,*" the old confessor groaned.

"So you see," I said, twisting the blade, "you did put the cart before the horse.

Biblical inerrancy does precede even the benefits of Christ."

After a long thought, Schneeweiss broke the silence: "My boy, answer me this." Then he asked a question which obviously disturbed him as much as it did me, "Does our Lords speaking at Sinai, for instance, guarantee that He rose from the dead? If someone accepts the miracle of Sinai, does it follow that he must accept the miracle of Easter? Or if he rejects the miracle of Easter, does he do so because he rejects miracles as such, miracles like Sinai and all the rest?"

"But both miracles are true, I protested, "and this is what biblioclasts proceed to deny."

"Ja, ja," said Schneeweiss, "but our question is, How does their denial proceed, from what fatal beginning to what logical ending?"

"You are right," I agreed, "that is our question, but now suppose you answer the question."

"Well," Schneeweiss began, "you and I accept the account of

Sinai as true, not only as history but also in its fearful judgment upon ourselves.”

I nodded.

“And yet,” he proceeded, “you and I also know that we could never conclude, from the grim truth of Sinai, that therefore there must have been an Easter.”

In this I had to concur, and I even carried his comparison a step farther. “Come to think of it,” I added, “the more earnestly a man believed in Sinai, the more earnestly he might deny there even could be an Easter.”

“Exactly,” said Schneeweiss, “so not only does Sinai not imply Easter. By itself it contradicts Easter.”

“I am beginning to see your point,” I conceded: “The way to protect Easter against the biblioclasts is not by protecting biblical miracles in general, certainly not Sinai, as if by some logical necessity the history of wrath and death guaranteed the history of grace and life.”

“Conversely,” Schneeweiss went on, pleased with our new progress, “while the Law does not imply the Gospel, the Gospel does imply the Law, a more drastic Law by far than Sinai could ever reveal to an un-Eastered man. Remember the Formula of Concord, ‘Where is then a more earnest and terrible revelation of God’s wrath over sin than the passion and death of Christ, His own Son’? (F.C. V, 12) ‘Thus He reveals His wrath from heaven over all sinners and shows how great His wrath is. This directs the sinner to the Law, and there he really learns to know his sin, an insight that Moses could never have wrung out of him.’ (F.C. V, 10) Only for the evangelical man who has been through Good Friday and Easter is Sinai fully credible, credible not only as law-giving (that much the legalist, even the

antinomian, will insist) but also as a show of wrath. Only when we see what all Christ rescues us from can we plumb the depth of our plight, and reread Sinai through the grid of the Cross.”

“Then perhaps the reason the biblioclasts soften Sinai,” I concluded, “is that they have never really gone all the way to Easter and back.”

“And perhaps with your man Bultmann,” Schneeweiss suggested, “you will find his real biblioclasm in his views on sin and grace. At any rate, the logic of biblioclasm tumbles in one direction only. The one domino which can topple all the rest, or can sustain all the rest, is not the Scriptures’ Law but only the Scriptures’ Law-fulfilling Gospel.”

“The Dominus Evangelii Himself,” I chorused.

VII. Why Did It Need to Happen?

Still, grateful as I was for our agreement, I began to suspect Schneeweiss had conned me out of my original objection. I forced him back to it with his own previous phrase, ‘not necessarily’. “Are you suggesting,” I demanded, “that not all biblical miracles are necessarily true?”

To my surprise, the old man welcomed my question. “I like your choice of the adverb ‘necessarily’,” he said.

“You should like it,” I snickered, “after all it is your word, and I hope you will now defend your use of it.” Before Schneeweiss could begin, I explained further: “I do agree with you, Pastor Schneeweiss, that the Gospel does not follow necessarily from the Law and that, in fact, the Law by itself opposes the Gospel. I agree, too, that the Law is never fully exposed until it is exposed by the Gospel. But my question, really, is not about Law and Gospel. Those are, shall we say,

doctrinal abstractions, abstractions about the divine attitude. No, what I am asking about are the concrete miracles themselves, as historic and geographic facts, the actual Mount Sinai with its thunder above and its wilderness below, our Lord's bodily resurrection from Joseph's sepulchre, and all the rest of the biblical happenings. What I am asking about these happenings is, Aren't they necessarily true?"

"Now that you have explained your question," Schneeweiss smiled, "I am more relieved than ever that you have kept the word 'necessarily.' You might have emptied the question completely by asking, Are all the miracles equally true? Then, alas, we would be right back where we started. After all, all miracles, if they so much as happened, are in that superficial respect true, equally. As mere occurrences, one is as true as the next. But what, if anything, could that possibly tell us about biblical history, the Work and Word of God? That would only reduce all the wondrous works of God in Scripture to some secular least common denominator, retaining no more connection with God perhaps than that it is He who causes the works to happen, to be written down, to be learned, entirely subordinating the decisive biblical question, Why did He? For what purpose? Out of what divine necessity? Such reductionism could well be the device of the Evil One. For, beyond the bare fact that the miracles happened, we could then conveniently obscure the whole divine purpose which necessitated their happening."

"In fact," Schneeweiss continued, "it is not even right to speak, say, of Sinai as though its historical occurrence were one thing and the reason for its occurrence were something else. What God willed in what happened is itself a part of what happened, indeed the crucial part and certainly not a doctrinal abstraction which mere men can choose to suspend, whether for the sake of their skepticism or their zeal. We may sound zealous when, in our polemics, we demand from our opponents, Did the

miracle – regardless of its purpose – happen or did it not happen? But who are we, my boy, to disregard the purposes of God? Apart from His controlling purposes of Law and Gospel, there simply is no biblical history, for then there would be no need, biblically, for the history to have happened at all. Then we would indeed have to fall back on other, shallow ground for claiming the history is true.”

VIII. Two Needs for History

“This is not yet the worst of it,” Schneeweiss continued. “Worse yet, having forgotten the crucial distinction between Law and Gospel, we could then run all biblical history together as though it had all the same purpose, hence all the same necessity – as though Jesus needed to die for the same purpose for which Adam or Pharaoh or Stephen needed to die. If so, we could then conveniently pretend that biblical history as Gospel needed no other reason for happening than did biblical history as Law. Or, what is but the fatal converse, we could pretend that biblical history as Law enjoys the same unique necessity which it does as Gospel – as though the nomological need for history were essentially soteriological.”

I found it disturbing to construe biblical history with different levels of necessity. So I asked Schneeweiss, “How about Sinai and Easter? Must they not both have happened necessarily?”

“Of course,” he replied, “it is indeed necessary that both these events should have happened, but hardly necessary for the same divine purpose. What God did in the one instance is not what He did in the other.”

“But different kinds of necessity?” I asked.

“Let us say,” Schneeweiss proposed, “that God’s purpose at Sinai was to declare His Law, to dramatize human guilt. Then, because of Sinai, we may know the incriminating truth about ourselves as sinners.”

That much I understood.

“Still,” he continued, “neither Sinai nor any other history of God’s judgment is needed to make us the sinners we already are. Sinners we are whether God had troubled to show us that or not, whether Sinai had ever happened or not. As Exodus puts it, the Lord was bent on ‘proving’ the Israelites, who had boasted so confidently, ‘All that the Lord had commanded we shall do’. (EX. 15:25; 20:20’ 19:8; 24: 3, 7) Well, their subsequent history in the Sinaitic desert proved them wrong and the Lord right. Of course, Sinai was needed for other purposes as well. Still, its purpose as Law was to diagnose, but to diagnose an already existing state of affairs, not to bring that state of affairs about. To be sure, the diagnosis may have worsened the malady, but it did not create the malady. Nomological necessity is the necessity of proof. Sinai was needed to show men what they are.”

“So also,” I countered, “is Easter needed to show men what they are – in this case, to show them they are saved.”

“Ja, ja,” replied Schneeweiss, “and not only to show them they are saved, but to achieve their salvation. Unlike Sinai, Easter did not merely reveal some happy truth about us which would have been true whether Easter had happened or not (though I suspect some Reformed theology talks differently.) Oh no, without Easter the truth would not have come true. Our Lord’s resurrection, like His whole life and death, not only diagnoses us as dead to sin and alive to righteousness. It accomplishes this for us, in our place and in truth. The reason the history of Jesus Christ is needed is that it has to function vicariously as our history.

Saint Paul put it very plainly, 'If Christ had not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins'. (I Cor. 15:17) But notice that the purpose which necessitated the history of Christ is a real exchange of biographies, His and ours – Luther's glücklicher Wechsel: 'the death He died He died to sin, once for all, but the life He lives He lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus'''''' (Rom. 6: 10, 11)

No doubt about it, Schneeweiss was right, so I joined him with a Pauline quote of my own, "For this purpose Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and the living. (Rom. 14:9)"

"Yes," beamed Schneeweiss, "and that was the purpose for which – as the risen Lord said at Emmaus – it was 'necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory'." (Lk. 24:26)

"And that," I added, "Was why Caiaphas spoke better than he knew when he said, 'It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish'." (Jn. 11:50)

"Yes," Schneeweiss concluded, "That is Easter's kind of necessity, without which we saints not only would not know what we are, but without which we would not at all be what we are. Without Sinai, on the other hand, we sinners would still be sinners, though we might know it."

Next I provided Schneeweiss with a quote to illustrate Sinai's kind of necessity: "I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all...baptized into Moses... Nevertheless with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness...Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction...Therefore let anyone

who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.' (I Cor. 10: 1-12) So, as you said, Pastor Schneeweiss, the purpose of nomological history is 'warning,' 'reproof,' 'taking heed'. Nomological history is necessary for 'proving' men the sinners they are. Nomological history is not necessarily soteriological."

"You notice then," Schneeweiss summarized, "that biblical history is always true for a purpose or it is not true at all, not biblically and theologically true. But more, you notice too that it makes all the difference, the difference between death and life really, how we divine this history's purposes. For the Law, history happens in order to reveal. For the Gospel, history happens in order to redeem, to replace. The Law happens to make its truth known, the Gospel happens to makes its truth true. The history of the Law only reflects an old truth. Only the history of the Gospel effects a new truth. The one history is as necessary as revelation, the other is as necessary as redemption. With the one we are, though knowingly, still the same, with the other we are knowingly changed."

"Ex-changed," I exulted, "exchanged with Christ and He with us."

Here Schneeweiss recalled our earlier questions. "Does every biblical event depend for its Gospel truth on every other biblical event – the way the event of our redemption does depend on the events of Christ's death and resurrection? Does the event of our redemption depend at all like that upon the events of Sinai or the six-day creation? Let Sinai and the six-day creation be granted, and grant too that they ultimately may be used for our redemption. Still, isn't it the case that our redemption in Christ is independent of these events in a way that it can never be independent of our Lord's life and death and resurrection? Is it then because a man denies the historicity of Sinai that he will deny the historicity of Easter? Do the dominoes really fall that way? Are Law and Gospel

so interchangeable? If a man rejects Easter, does he do so because he first rejects biblical miracles in general, or because he first rejects Christ and His benefits?"

"Hmm," I mused.

IX. Once More the Biblioclasts

Meanwhile I had almost forgotten the biblioclasts. "The trouble with them then," I resumed, "is that they ascribe to all biblical history but one kind of necessity, the sort you have reserved for the Law, the need merely to reveal. For them Easter, though it revealed more vividly and persuasively than Sinai did, needed no other reason to happen than Sinai did: Namely, that through these mighty acts God might at last be recognized for what He has always been and what He always would have been whether the mighty acts had occurred or not. Through His mighty acts, to be sure, His people do come to recognize Him and in that sense, in that nomological sense, they are changed – from disobedience to obedience."

"Ach, but that," smirked Schneeweiss, "is not even good Law."

"Worse than that," said I, stealing his thunder, "it is not good Gospel, for it minimizes the need of the substitutory history of Christ. On these terms Christ becomes much less Redeemer than Revealer. His chief redeeming feature is that, by what He reveals, He merely evokes for us a new response to God. Then the Cross is not needed to reverse a previous divine verdict and to suffer that verdict out of existence. Through Christ's dying and rising sinners need not be destroyed and replaced but only converted. A biblical history, including the history of the Gospel, is reduced to the bare necessity for revelation."

(Here followed a short digression. Schneeweiss noted that the

Brief Statement says Christ “reconciled us to God whereas the Confessions say, repeatedly, that “God is reconciled to us.” I insisted the difference is, at most, academic.)

X. But Now the Fundamentalists

“That sounds like the biblioclasts all right,” I repeated: “All biblical history, including the history of the Gospel, they reduce to the Law’s kind of necessity, the bare necessity for revelation.”

“If so,” Schneeweiss reminded me, “their biblioclasm is but the symptom of a deeper trouble: They adulterate the crucial difference between the Law and the Gospel. That is what, in my day, we called ‘nomoclasm’ – nomoclasm and christoclasm. But tell me, my boy, is the Church today plagued also by the opposite trouble? Are there those among you who pretend all biblical history, even the history of the Law, enjoys throughout the same unique necessity as the history of the Gospel?” While I was groping for an answer, Schneeweiss added, “Of course, the two errors would really only be two sides of the same coin. As Doctor Luther once quipped about the papists and the sects, they are like two foxes who snap at each others’ snouts only because they are tied to each others’ tails.”

Meanwhile I managed to think of only one significant antagonist to the biblioclasts. Accordingly I suggested, albeit reluctantly and not without real pangs of conscience, that our second fox (Luther’s word, fox, suddenly seemed too vehement) might be the fundamentalists.

“Fundamentalists!” Schneeweiss exclaimed, “but that sounds like a title of approval. You remember, in the Apology’s Reply to the Opponents’ Arguments, the lead sentence speaks of ‘the fundamentals in this issue, namely the distinction between the

Law and the promises of the Gospel'. (Ap. 183) Fundamentalists, if their name means anything, must surely insist the Law-Gospel distinction is fundamental."

"No," I had to admit, though grudgingly, "that is probably their one fault which might be most objectionable, at least to you."

"To me?" he gasped, "why not to you?"

"But," I pleaded, "these fundamentalists do insist that all biblical history must necessarily have happened."

"Ach, ja," grumbled Schneeweiss, "but that much, in their own way, your biblioclasts seem to say too. The question is still, What does it mean to say the history must have happened? What did God mean by it happening? For what very different purposes did He mean it?"

"All biblical history," I paraphrased the fundamentalists, "is necessary for the truth of the Gospel."

Here Schneeweiss, with immense patriarchal patience, only shook his head.

XI. For Example, Creation

While Schneeweiss was straining to recover his humor, I proffered an illustration. "For example, the fundamentalists join us in denying the world was created in 'immense periods of time' rather than in the six solar days of Genesis."

"Ja, ja," said Schneeweiss, "but how does the story of the six days affect the truth of the Gospel – or better, how does it effect the truth of the Gospel?"

"Let me cite you a case in point," I replied. "I know a fellow-Lutheran pastor who entertains un-Lutheran views on the age of

the earth. I have confronted him with the question, point blank, Do you accept the 'immense periods of time' or do you not?"

"And what," asked Schneeweiss, "does this Lutheran pastor answer?"

"That's just it," I replied, "he is reluctant to answer me at all, like a man who has been challenged at the very heart of his faith."

"Could it be," Schneeweiss mused, "that what you have done to your brother is that you have over-asked him? Maybe he senses that, beneath the one question you have asked outright, you have actually concealed a second, more invidious question. Thus he simply cannot answer Yes, not to both questions."

"And what," I asked, "might that second, more invidious question be?"

"Perhaps what you are actually asking your brother is this, Do you accept the hypothesis of an old earth and, if so, don't you thereby deny all biblical miracles, including our miraculous redemption in Jesus Christ? If that is your question, then your brother probably has cause to be concerned about you, your resting the Gospel on the six days the way it rests only on the deeds of Christ. And let me add, my boy, it is not a matter of saying merely that the one history is more necessary for the Gospel and the other is less necessary. Rather, the one history effects the truth of the Gospel altogether and the other does not. No, if this is the fallacy by which your fundamentalists maximize the necessity of all biblical history, then they likewise minimize the unique necessity of Jesus Christ."

"Nevertheless," I demurred, "our Brief Statement..."

"I was about to say the same thing," Schneeweiss interrupted:

“Your Brief Statement, actually, is not the fundamentalist theology you seemed to suggest, not even in its article on creation. Your statementarians do insist the six days are necessary, yet not necessary to achieve the truth of the Gospel but – what is something quite different – necessary to reveal the sovereign Creator and necessary to reveal our lot as His creatures. (Which of course can be very different from our lot as children of a loving Father.) Evidently your statementarians’ opponents assume something else. Those opponents seem to have assumed, illogically, that the ‘immense periods of time’ would be enough to displace the Creator. That, of course, is foolish. It assumes that God would be less the Creator of an old earth than of a young earth. But your statementarians, whether they grant the opponents’ assumption or not, are careful how they defend the six days. They do not defend the six days by claiming these are required for the truth of the Gospel. According to your Brief Statement, the one purpose which the six days subserve, biblically, is to show that ‘God has created the heaven and the earth...by His almighty creative word’ and that world, therefore, ‘has not developed more or less out of itself.’ (BS, 215) In other words, there is nothing in the world which is not utterly beholden to its Creator. This awesome revelation about the world is also a diagnosis of ourselves. Witness your Statement’s (how do you say?) punch line: ‘We confess with Luther’s Catechism, I believe that God has made me and all creatures’. (Ibid.) To reveal our creatureliness, to that purpose the six days must be true, otherwise they lose all, at least all biblical, necessity. But nowhere in your Statement, you notice, do the six days usurp that unique necessity which distinguishes the saving history of our Lord.”

“Are you so bent on Lutheranizing our Brief Statement,” I grinned, “that you must distinguish Law and Gospel even in our article on creation?”

Schneeweiss was puzzled.

“It is my impression,” I explained, “that the creation is already Gospel, good news, and in no sense Law. From the very fact that ‘God has made me and all creatures, that He has given me house and home, wife and children,’ it has to follow that He is our dear Father and we are His dear children. For instance, I may remind a parishioner of the many blessings His Creator showers upon him. Surely the man should conclude from this that he has a merciful Father.”

“And does he draw this conclusion?” asked Schneeweiss. “Isn’t he just as apt to conclude, My pastor is right, God has indeed been generous to me and I have been oblivious to his blessings – shame on me, I ought to be more grateful?”

This did sound familiar.

“In that case,” Schneeweiss went on, “your parishioner’s prosperity is the very fact which reveals his own unpaid debt of gratitude to God. If that is not the wrath of the Law, what is?”

“As for my distinguishing Law and Gospel in your article on creation,” Schneeweiss said, “I simply take seriously your statementarians’ ‘We confess with Luther’s Catechism...’ (Ibid.) According to that Catechism, the article on creation might very well be Law. From the fact that ‘God has made me and all creatures, that He has given me house and home, wife and children’, what conclusion does the Catechism draw? Answer: ‘For all which it is my duty (my Schuld, my debt) to thank and to praise, to serve and obey Him.’ (SC 2) As the Large Catechism explains, ‘...How few people believe this article...We swagger about...as if we ourselves were to be feared and served...If we did believe this article, it would humble and terrify us all’. (LC 20, 21) The question for Scripture is never merely, Has God’s creation happened? But rather, Why does it need to happen? To

this the Law replies, In His creating us God reveals how we stand coram Deo: we are unconditionally obligated; yet we are incorrigibly thankless; but, since what God creates is unblameably good, we may not blame our perversity on our creatureliness but only on the way we ourselves have ruined it; we are without excuse. We are born into this world, not neutrals, but sinners who have previously been evaluated as such by the divine Judge. Our subsequent biographies, like the history of Israel, are the unrolling of the Judge's scroll, to 'prove' historically that His prior verdict was true and that every mouth must be stopped. It is the Creator's blessings which we neglect and exploit; body and soul, reason and senses, good friends and faithful neighbors, fossils and the uranium time-clock. But these neglected blessings only reveal the more vividly how inerrant indeed is God's terrible verdict. It is also for this Lawful purpose (whatever other evangelical purpose there may be) that the happenings of creation are necessary, not to make the Law's verdict true but to reveal, to prove, its truth which the foreknowing Judge has unhappily known all along."

"Still," I replied, "what we confess about the Creator is that He is, not only 'the almighty maker of heaven and earth', but 'God the Father'. Surely God's fatherliness is Gospel and surely that Gospel truth needs the historic event of creation to make it true."

"God's fatherliness is indeed nothing but Gospel," Schneeweiss agreed, "but the historic event which is needed, indeed the only one which is sufficient, to make the almighty Maker our Father rather than our Judge is His own history among us in Jesus Christ. Suppose our Lord had not been born and crucified and raised among us, historically. Then, creation or no creation, not only would we not know enough to call the Creator Father, we also would have no right to call Him Father."

What Schneeweiss was saying, and what I was beginning to appreciate anew, recalled again the Large Catechism. This time it was I who quoted it, "When we were created by God the Father...the devil came and led us into disobedience...We lay under God's wrath...There was no help for us until...Jesus Christ...made us free and restored us to the Father's favor...' (L.C. 28030)

Here Schneeweiss applauded my progress and, for my reassurance, supported me from my own Brief Statement: "'Since the Fall no man can believe in the fatherhood of God except he believe in the eternal Son of God, who became man and reconciled us to God by His vicarious satisfaction.' B.S. 214)"

I thanked Schneeweiss for this quote but added, self-effacingly, that even here the statementarians spoke less emphatically than their own Johannine proof texts did. "For apart from Christ," I said, "not only can a man not believe the fatherhood of God, but according to John 14:6, such a man cannot 'have the Father'. Or according to I John 2:23, 'No one comes to the Father' except by the Way of Christ – surely not by the way of the fact of creation."

XII. History of Christ, History of Grace

Now I had no wish to diminish the unique necessity of God's history in Christ, either by reducing it to a mere need for revelation the way the biblioclasts do, or by arrogating its uniqueness to the history of the Law the way the fundamentalists do. Yet, as I told Schneeweiss, "all this still leaves me with a question, Don't we impoverish biblical history if we restrict the basis of the Gospel, historically, to just the life of Christ – in effect, to the first four Gospels?"

"I am sorry," said Schneeweiss, "if I have left that impression. You are right, my boy, God's history in Christ has occurred wherever and whenever Christ has shared His benefits with sinners through His Gospel and Sacraments. For in the Gospel and the Sacraments the same Lord Christ is really and historically present. If the Gospel of forgiveness of sinners was to be true of Peter or of the Christians at Ephesus or of David or of Eve, then it was as necessary that Christ present Himself to them in His Word, historically and geographically, as it was necessary that He Himself be historically crucified for them. If the Gospel had not been preached to them, then the Gospel would not have been true, not about them. We dare no more diminish the necessity for the means of grace in history, through which means Christ becomes our Benefit, than we may diminish the necessity of His Atonement, for the one is but the historic extension of the other."

Here I quoted the Brief Statement with pride: "Since it is only through the external means ordained by Him that God has promised to communicate the grace and salvation purchased by Christ, the Christian Church must not remain at home with the means of grace entrusted to it, but go into the whole world with the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments'. (B.S. 232)"

But now in quick succession, Schneeweiss and I added three qualifications. "First of all," he said, "the need for the history of grace – whether as Atonement or as preaching – is still very different from the need for the history of Law. The Law would be true of sinners even though its truth had not historically occurred to them. But not so with the Gospel. Unless it is preached to them, at historic places and times, they cannot be the saints it says they are."

"Secondly," said I, "this only underscores the special necessity

of the historic Crucifixion. What makes the Gospel come true for its believers is not their believing it, their subjectivity, the virtue or the rightness or the intensity of their faith. What makes the Gospel come true from them is that Jesus Christ, to Whom in their believing they entrust themselves and Who graces them now with His benefits, has in fact died for them and risen again, once for all."

"Thirdly," Schneeweiss concluded, "only because He was once for all – one Savior for all men – did the experiences of His first believers, recorded by prophets and apostles, need to be recorded for us. Through their story we can of course identify with them. But that alone is not enough. It is only because He identifies Himself with them and us alike that, through their story, we are identified with Him. That is what makes their inspired story our means of grace. 'Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples...These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ,...and that believing you may have life in His name'."

Here I paused, and Schneeweiss offered a pfennig for my thoughts. "I am thinking," said I, "of a parishioner who is a case in point. There was this woman, poor despondent soul. Her history had been a revelation – of the Law. Not that she denied Christ died and rose again, or even that He did so for mankind. But for her? That was where she faltered."

"Ja, ja," said the old pastor knowingly, "and what did you say to help her?"

"I reminded her that our Lord must indeed have chosen her, for who else but He was speaking His Gospel to her that very moment! Could Christ's promise to her be anything but true, I asked her, since He was taking the pains to come to her then and there?"

"See then," Schneeweiss nodded, "how necessary it is that Christ

should come in His Gospel, historically, in order for His Gospel to be true for every sinner?"

"I suppose then," said I, "that the same unique necessity applies to Christ's saving history also in the Old Testament promises. There too, if the promise was to be true for the patriarchs or for Israel or for Ninevah, the promise had to be acted out and spoken and heard, at particular times and places and among particular people. If the promise had not historically been given them, then the promise would not have been true, not for them."

Once more Schneeweiss and I, antiphonally, inserted the three qualifications. "First," said he, "compare the way the Law needed history with the way the promises needed history. The Law needed the history of Israel only to reveal what had been true of her all along. But the promise needed her history, her history of deliverance and assurance, in order to effect a New Truth about her, to incorporate her into the coming redemption."

"Secondly," said I, "the promise Israel needed to hear, since it was as yet only a promise, needed sooner or later to be kept, historically and geographically. The faithfulness of Israel's Lord, like a promissory note, was true only in view of its historic fulfillment. What established His faithfulness was not the corresponding faithfulness of His people but His own faithful fulfillment, in the Virgin's Son in the fullness of time."

"Third," Schneeweiss concluded, "only because the history of Israel's grace is the history of that Holy Seed who graces all – all men and all nations – did Israel's peculiar history need to be recorded for us. Only because in Christ all the nations of the earth are blessed can the story of Abraham's blessing – or the story of Israel's blessings in the Sinaitic desert! – be

means of grace for us.”

“So it was for Cross purposes,” I punned, “that the whole history of grace needed to happen, in both testaments, in order that the truth of the Cross might be true for all. Conversely, for the history of grace to be true the Cross was needed, first and finally for all.”

XIII. The Law Too Needs the Cross

“The history of the Cross,” said Schneeweiss to my surprise, “is needed also by the Law.”

“But I thought we agreed,” said I, “that the Cross is needed to effect the New Truth whereas the Law needs only enough history to reflect the Old Truth.”

“Gewisz,” he replied, “but which one even in history is it which alone can thus make the Law ‘old’ and keep it in second place? What else but the Cross? Only the Cross can keep the Law in a place of subordination and, finally, defeat. Only the history of the work of Christ can reduce the Law to a mere revelation. Else the Law and its works and its history could pretend to be soteriology. What happens when men no longer look to the history of Christ, exclusively, to effect the truth of their salvation? They make the truth of their salvation depend instead on that other history, the history of the Law and its works, the history of their own religiousness. Of course, they still let the truth of their salvation depend upon historic fact: The fact of their believing they are saved, the fact of their own certainty, the fact of their orthodoxy, the fact that God’s inerrant truth is cherished inerrantly by them. But then the whole biblical history, not only of Adam and Moses but even of Christ, becomes but the means, the guarantee, of our own reliable rightness. Then Scripture needs to be inerrant in order that we might be

inerrant, inerrantly trustworthy. Then the history of our Lord is displaced by the history of us, which, apart from Him, is the history of the Law and its works. For this legalistic inversion, this pharisaic fallacy, my boy, the Cross of Christ and only the Cross of Christ, can spare us.”

I agreed. “Furthermore,” I added, “the pharisaic fallacy is but the obverse of the Judas fallacy. Suppose this pharisaism does afflict us and our faith becomes, in effect, a faith in faith itself. Then, like Judas, we are candidates for despair when the faith, in which we have trusted, is shaken. Then it will do little good to assure us that Christ died for our sin and rose again, for that will seem irrelevant to our problem. Then we shall say with a shrug, Of course He died for us, and of course we have been baptized into His death. But that, we feel, is hardly what we need to know. What we need is a restoring of our religious self-confidence. Our cry will not be, If only I am forgiven. That we are forgiven will seem self-evident, almost trivial. Rather our cry will be, If only I were sure of my self – of my beliefs, of my Synod, of Genesis, of my worthiness at Holy Communion. Then that, presumably, that sureness, would be something we could count on. So the history (our own history) under the Law now usurps that unique effectiveness and necessity which, evangelically, belongs only to the history of Christ. This indeed is despair, not only of ourselves by also of Him.”

“What is more likely,” said Schneeweiss, “is that, instead of despairing, we simply suppress the Law from the outset, but suppress it by some means or other than the Cross. If the obverse of the pharisaic fallacy is the Judas fallacy, then the obverse of legalism (whether of a Judas or a pharisee) is antinomianism – the anomic fallacy. The Law, we may still grant, reveals God’s demands upon us. But his condemnations? Hardly. Sins? Yes. But original sin? Well, maybe. The wrath of God? Not really, only psychologically. And why not really? Because God is

kind and forgiving by nature. By nature, you notice, and not by recourse always and only to the dear, holy Cross. The antinomian subordinates the Law, but how? By a self-evident, timeless Gospel which, since it needs so little history, is nearly Christless and Crossless. On these terms it is enough that Christ in His life and death revealed the loveable truth about God which would have been true anyway. Why should believers, each day over, exchange their own life-histories with the substitute history of their Redeemer, if His history showed them once for all how God likes people directly and immediately, with or without the Cross? Oh no, my boy, to subordinate the Law by any means other than the Cross is, again, to rob Christ of His glory and to rob poor sinners of His precious benefits."

XIV. Footnote on Inspiration

There is no need to recount in detail what Schneeweiss had to say about inspiration, of which he spoke more glowingly, by the way, than even we do. Our point of departure was the sentence in The Brief Statement, "The holy men of God who write the Scriptures wrote only that which the Holy Ghost communicated to them by inspiration. (B.S. 211)" Yet, as I might have expected, Schneeweiss insisted that inspiration, too, depends on historic circumstance, especially the historic Jesus Christ. Otherwise, he warned, inspiration smacks of enthusiasm. I asked, "How about the Spirit's direct outpouring upon the disciples at Pentecost?"

"Ja, ja," he said, "Pentecost especially shows how the inspired apostles needed first of all to have witnessed, with their own eyes and ears, the historic Lord Jesus. Remember Peter's Pentecost sermon: 'Men of Israel, hear these words. Jesus of Nazareth...you crucified and killed...This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses'. (Acts 2:22-32) Remember too how the Jewish council, without denying Peter and John might be

inspired, forbade them to ascribe their power to the historic, flesh and blood Jesus. To which the apostles replied, characteristically, 'We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard'. (Acts 4:20)"

After several similar quotes from Scripture, Schneeweiss cited the Confessions on the subject of enthusiasm: "For even to Moses God wished to appear first through the burning bush and the spoken word, and no prophet...received the Spirit without the Ten Commandments...Saint Peter says that when the prophets spoke, they did not prophesy by the impulse of man but were moved by the Holy Spirit, yet as holy men of God. The Holy Spirit would not have moved them to speak while they were still unholy, still they were not holy without the external Word.' (S.A. 11-13)"

XV. The Light and the Stone

The conclusion was tempting: Our Brief Statement's article on Scripture underplays the Scripture's own christological foundation, the distinction of the Gospel from the Law.

Schneeweiss, however, refused to let me draw this dark conclusion. "Here now," he smiled, lifting up my chin, "you surrender too quickly, my boy. You must leave no stone unturned."

"What stone!" I moped.

Stumped only temporarily, he scanned again our article on Scripture. Finally his ancient finger caught the passage he was looking for. It read: "With the Confessions of our Church we teach also that the 'rule of faith'...according to which the Holy Scriptures are to be understood are the clear passages of the Scriptures themselves..." (B.S. 212) "There it is," beamed Schneeweiss, leaning back and expecting me to brighten.

I assured Schneeweiss I was grateful for his good intentions, of course, but...

He blushed and mumbled something about "Good intentions, nothing – this is the communio et consolatio fratrum."

This phrase reminded me in turn of Luther's talk about the Christhood of all believers. But that only revived my misgivings about the passage Schneeweiss had just quoted from the Brief Statement, so obviously unchristological. Rule of faith, indeed! "I fail to see," I complained, "how this rule does anything to restore the benefits of Christ to our de Scriptura."

"Perhaps the passage could be a little more explicit," he conceded, "but what it does say, my boy, is that biblical understanding is ruled by the clear passages."

"Clear passages, yes, but what about the Gospel of Christ?"

"Well now," he smiled, "you must have forgotten momentarily what the term 'clear passages' means in the Confessions. If we check the Apology where that hermeneutical rule is laid down, we make an exciting discovery. We find that 'the certain and clear passages', referred to there, are those very passages in Scripture which clearly and luminously exalt the benefits of Christ. The passages about justification by grace alone are the clear light. They illumine all the rest of Scripture, even its dark passages." (Ap. XXVII, 60, 60; also IV, 269, 277, 280, 284, 286, 376, 388.)

"That is news to me," said I, slightly cheered by this assist from the Confessions. "I would have supposed that by 'the clear passages in Scripture' we meant simply those passages whose meaning is immediately transparent, verbally lucid and vivid, regardless of their theological content. For example, the Genesis passages regarding the six days. The dark passages, on

the other hand, would then be the riddles about Melchizedek in Hebrews or the beast in the Apocalypse.”

“Oh no,” said Schneeweiss gravely, “the dark passages are those which seem to darken the Gospel, darken it by seeming to propose another Gospel, a legalistic soteriology. For example, James’ sentence, ‘A man is justified by works and not by faith alone’, (Jas. 2:24), or Paul’s ‘the doers of the Law will be justified’ (Rom. 2:13). ‘Forgive and you will be forgiven’ (Lk 6:37). ‘Redeem your sins by showing mercy. (Dan. 4:27). ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.’ (Mt. 5:7) A man may accept Scripture and yet be unclear about the Gospel which alone illumines Scripture. If so, he will find scriptural ground for obscuring that Gospel, and hence for obscuring the Scriptures themselves. Scriptures are clear when, distinguishing Law and Gospel, they are clear about Christ the only gracious Justifier. If Scripture contained anything else, then that would be not only contrary to Christ but, as the Apology says, contrary to the Scriptures themselves – contra Scripturas.”

“I see you follow your own advice,” I smiled, “you do leave no stone unturned.”

“No stone,” he said, “except that One beyond whom there is nothing more to seek, the Stone which the builders rejected. Therefore, it is baseless to say with the apostle (Eph. 2:20), ‘We are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets’, unless we specify with him (and here I joined in the chorus): ‘Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone’.” Whereupon we both laughed Spiritedly, and less from amusement than mutual joy.

Valparaiso University, 1962

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