

Some spin-offs from Justification by Faith Alone

Colleagues,

We are in the last month of our three months working with the Lutheran Church in Singapore. For my last seminar session with pastors, I've been asked to show how the "Augsburg hermeneutic" works when addressing three topics—Biblical authority, church and ministry, and ethics. Anyone of those is already enough for more than one session, but I'll try to respond to their request. Here's my first draft. Y'all actually get to see it before they do with this Thursday posting, since the seminar session is May 10. So if you detect some bloopers, let me know before then. **Peace & Joy!**

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Addressing Issues—New or Old—Using the “Wagon Wheel” of the Augsburg Confession

With farmboy memories I've used a wagon wheel as visual image for the organizational pattern of the 28 articles of the Augsburg Confession. The hub of the wheel is the Gospel. There is only one doctrine, says AC 5, the doctrine of the Gospel itself. All the remaining doctrines [plural], the many articles of the AC, are but articulations of the one doctrine at the hub. They are spokes coming out from the hub. They “articulate”

[pun intended] the Good News at the hub when you move on to discuss other topics—church, sacraments, ministry, civil righteousness, even the doctrine of sin! The rim of the wheel that holds the doctrines firmly anchored in the hub is the “proper distinction between law and Gospel,” the Augsburg hermeneutic for reading the Bible, for reading the world.

Introduction



If the topic, the issue, is already a spoke in the wheel, then look and listen to how “they” did it: a) keeping the spoke grounded in the Gospel hub, and b) using the “proper distinction between law and Gospel” (the rim) to keep the spoke anchored in the hub. The purpose is that finally this article

of faith or practice “articulates” the Good News centered in Christ crucified and risen.

If it’s a new topic—something that was no problem in the 16th century—then put that into the wheel as a “new spoke,” and do the same thing with that topic that they did with their topics. Many new topics—often controversial—have come since then: human slavery, authority of the Bible, women in church leadership, church growth, “contemporary” worship, charismatic gifts, tithing, prayer, global capitalism, homosexuality, lay and clergy relationships, etc.

1. Example of a New Spoke: Authority of the Bible.

There was a debate on Bible in the 16th century, but it was not about Biblical authority. Both sides in the Reformation struggle agreed that the Bible was authority. Both said: “scripture alone” (*sola scriptura*). Evidence: the Roman Confutators criticize the Augsburg Confession severely and the main source for their criticism is the Bible passages. See the last 2/3 of Apology 4. They say “We are arguing from *sola scriptura* and you Lutherans are wrong. Scripture contradicts your teaching, especially your teaching about justification by faith alone.” Melancthon begins at that very point of Bible interpretation in the Apology Article 4 (“Justification”). He presents the Reformers’ “law/promise hermeneutic” and contrasts it with the Roman Confutators’ “law-only hermeneutic.” A law-only hermeneutic simply says: “That’s literally what the Bible says! So believe it. Teach it. Practice it.” But if it is all “law,” then you will never get to the Gospel—even when you are speaking of Jesus. Apology 4 says you first have to discover the law/promise lenses, and then use those lenses to do your “*sola scriptura*.” There are two ways to practice “*sola scriptura*.” The Confutators are

also doing “sola scriptura” but they never get to, they never find, the Gospel. One reason is that using their law-lenses they aren’t even looking for it, so no wonder they don’t find it. And when they do stumble upon it in a Biblical text, they still read it as law.

Case study #1-

Both Jesus and his Jewish critics agree on sola scriptura. The Hebrew scriptures are authority, the word of God. His critics simply point to passages [If she is caught in adultery, stone her to death] and they say: “Sola scriptura. That’s clearly what the Bible says.” Jesus says “You are reading it wrong. The lenses you’re supposed to be using as you search the scriptures are lenses that show how the scriptures point to me.” John 8:1-11 is a classical example.

Case study #2-

Paul is fighting the same battle with his Galatian Christians. Both sides say sola scriptura. Paul, no surprise, says the law/promise lenses are needed to read scripture aright. And then in Chapter 4 he illustrates his hermeneutic: “Tell me, you who are so Torah-addicted, what does Torah (first five books of Moses) say? It says 2 covenants already in the OT, both with Abrahamic roots. One is law and Sinai, one is promise leading to Christ. One is slavery, one is freedom. One is death and one is life.”

Case study #3-

The conflict between the Lutheran confessors and the Roman Confutators on justification is a repeat performance of this classic and constant either/or ever since Jesus came to earth. It continues today—both in liberal and conservative evangelical churches. The

Galatian heresy, their “other gospel” in conflict with the genuine Gospel, happens over and over again throughout church history. The Bible is read as a law book—by Christians! And the same thing happens that Paul said to the Galatians: “If you read the Bible as law, Christ’s death means nothing.”

Reading the Bible as a law-book simply will not fit as a “spoke” in the Lutheran wheel where the hub at the center is the “theology of the cross.” Such Bible-reading is a spoke in a different wheel, a wheel Luther called “theology of glory.”

2. Old Spoke: Church and Ministry

See Augsburg Conf. and Apology Art. 5, 7, 8, 14, 15, 28. Introduction

Ecclesiology was central to the conflict in the 16th century. The Confutators claimed that the Bishop of Rome as Peter’s successor was at the center of Christian ecclesiology. The Confessors said: “No way. Christ is the center. Pope not really necessary. Could be tolerated if he didn’t compete with Christ and Gospel at the center of the wheel.” But if/when he does compete with Christ, as happens when we HAVE TO accept his authority—no matter what he says—then that’s a new law, new legalism. Then it’s an either/or. Lutheran ecclesiology is “gospel-grounded” in the hub, and the distinction between Law and Gospel is used to keep legalism, coercion, and other “false Gospels” out of the fabric of the Body of Christ.

3. AC/Apology Article 5

Ministry is God’s “second” action after Christ’s work of salvation to get that salvation distributed to sinners who need it. “In order that we may attain faith” God set up the “pipeline system” of preaching and sacraments as

“instruments” [as “media,” says the German text] to mediate Christ’s benefits so “that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.” There is no mention here of clergy, of “ministers.” There is no “spoke” in the wheel for “called and ordained pastors.” The word “ministry” means the process whereby the benefits of Christ (from the first century) get to sinners of later centuries “so that we might receive the promise.” Of course, humans will be the agents for this pipeline work. But the pipeline-working, not the pipeline workers, is what ministry is.

AC/Apology 7& 8: What is the Church?

Art. 7: Church is wherever ministry (as defined above) is happening. Wherever Gospel proclamation and sacraments “administered according to that Gospel” is happening, there is “church.” That also defines the church’s “unity.”

Art. 8: Church is wherever people are trusting the action described above. In any given congregation, there will quite likely be people “mingled..remaining” with the believers who do not trust what Gospel and sacraments offer. That is no surprise. The Donatists (back in the fourth century early church) were wrong. Preaching and sacraments done by unbelievers, if they are done according to Christ’s “institution and commandment,” are “effectual, efficacious.” They work to make faith happen. The unfaith of the person preaching does not make Christ’s promise invalid.

4. Old Spoke: Lutheran hermeneutic for ethics

Lutheran hermeneutics alerts us to the fact that legalism is implicit every time someone asks you: “Pastor, what is the right thing to do in this case?” When Jesus was asked

such questions, he NEVER answered them. Instead he often asked a counter-question.



-Stoning the woman caught in adultery? “Which of you is sinless? Throw the first stone.”

-Taxes to Caesar? “Whose image is on the coin?”

-Make my brother divide the inheritance fairly with me! “Who made me a judge in such matters?”

-Healing on the Sabbath? “What do you do when one of your animals falls into a pit on Saturday?”

5. Why does he do that? Lutheran answer is: All these questions are legalist questions. The “fuller message”

behind the question is: "Tell me what is right, so that by doing it I will be righteous."

Strictly speaking "ethics" is discussion, investigation, about our "ethos." About the value, the quality, that comes to persons and their actions by some evaluator, some measuring stick that determines whether it is good or bad, right or wrong, OK or not-OK. Final measurer, evaluator, of course, is God. But according to our Lutheran hermeneutic God measures us in two very different ways: Law or Gospel. Law measures our thought, words and deeds and gives the "ethos" verdict, the value judgment, according to law's way of measuring. The law says "sin" when the action is contrary to God's rules. It says "righteous" when the action conforms to God's rules.

Gospel ethos (value judgment) focuses on the human heart. Does this heart trust God's promise in Christ? Then this is an OK-person, righteous. Distrusting the promise leaves you still "not-OK." Notice how Jesus re-defines "sin" in John's Gospel. "Sin = that they do not believe in me."

This is at the center of Jesus' constant conflict with his fellow Jews (often with his disciples too). They always ask: "Is it permitted?" But that is always a law-question. There is no Gospel-answer to law-questions.

So Lutherans always "do" ethics from the fundamental base of the difference between law-ethics and Gospel-ethics. That's what Melanchthon is talking about in Apol. 4 when he says the whole debate might be expressed as follows: "How to commend good works without losing the promise." So at one place he spells out the difference between law-obedience & gospel-obedience. Let's look at some of these Apol 4 texts.

We can also observe such law-Gospel ethics present in the AC/Apology articles 6, 20, 26, 27. These articles keep ethics grounded in the hub and use the distinction between law and gospel to keep legalism out of the picture even when they talk about “fulfilling” the law and “keeping” the law. Fulfilling and keeping are not the same thing. Only Christ-trusters “fulfill” the law. Sinners can “keep” the law, at least some of it that comes in the law’s “second” table.

AC 6 “New Obedience”

“This faith” (= faith-trusting-the-promise) “is bound ...should ... must ... is necessary to ... bring forth good fruit.” The image is that of a fruit tree. The “must, should, is bound, necessity” language is not the language of coercion [=law], but the “necessity of consequence” in the language of the Gospel. If you ARE a mango tree, you consequently WILL produce mangoes. That’s what mango trees do. If you ARE Christ’s “new creation,” you produce “new creation” fruits, “fruits of the Spirit” (Gal. 5).

None of these faith-fruits “merit favor before God.” “Faith alone” [term used for the first time here in the AC] has already taken care of that..

[There is no Apology Article 6 on “New Obedience.” That was all included in Apology 4:122-182 “Love and the keeping of the Law.”]



AC 20 “Faith and Good Works”

“We are falsely accused of forbidding good works” by our focus on faith alone. Which is not true. Just look at the things we’ve published on this topic. But, of course, we do it differently from the way our critics do it. We start with faith (which they ignore) and then show how faith produces good works. We keep “good works” away from the justification process, so Christ and faith are not lost. Instead of forbidding good works, as our critics claim, we “show how we are enabled to do good works.” Namely, the way to do good works is to start with faith-in-Christ’s-promise. Works that start anywhere else will never be “good enough” to please God.

Apology 20 “Good Works”

Melanchthon is very angry after reading the Confutators’ criticism of AC 20. “What can we say about an issue that is so clear?” “Those damnable writers of the Confutation . . . blaspheme Christ.” “We [will] gladly die in the confession of the article” about good works “Paul fairly screams” against what the Confutation says. What they do is “shameful.”

AC 26 “The Distinction of Foods”

Rules and regulations about fasting, other ceremonies, other traditions have been made a requirement, a “you

must do" in order to be a "real" Christian. All this is "in conflict with the Gospel." Here are the bad results. These requirements: 1) "obscure the doctrine of grace and the righteousness of faith;" 2) they exalt human commands higher than God's commands; 3) they bring great dangers to conscience . . . driving people to despair since they could not keep all these requirements. So "the Gospel compels us" to reject them.[There is no Apology Article 26.]

AC 27 "Monastic Vows"

Monastic vows claim to be a way to "attain perfection," to become super-righteous beyond the righteousness of "normal" Christians who stay in the world and work in their callings in the world of God's left hand. "What is this but to diminish the glory and honor of the grace of Christ and deny the righteousness of faith?"

Here is what "Christian perfection" really is: "honestly to fear God and at the same time to have great faith and to trust that for Christ's sake we have a gracious God; to ask of God, and assuredly to expect from him, help in all things which are to be borne in connection with our callings; meanwhile to be diligent in the performance of good works for others and to attend to our calling." Conclusion: Christian "perfection" happens by staying in the world where God has placed us to do his left-hand work and not running away from those callings to enter the monastery.

Apology 27 Monastic Vows

"The issue is the kind of doctrine which the . . . Confutation [is] defending, not the question whether vows should be kept." We respond using Luther's book on "Monastic Vows" of 1521.

1) *"It certainly is not a legitimate vow if the one making it supposes that by it he merits the forgiveness of sins before God."*□

2) *"Obedience, poverty, and celibacy [the three standard monastic vows] are not "more perfect services than other ways of life." They are not "counsels of the Gospel. . . . neither justifying services nor perfection."*□

3) *The vow of celibate chastity is a vow about something over which we have no control.*□4) *Monastic life entails "ceremonial traditions—e.g., selling masses for the dead—that obscure Christ."*□

5) *Scriptural support regularly cited for monastic vows violates the "rule" of "clear" Gospel passages of Scripture.*

"We ...reject the hypocrisy and the sham worship of the monks, which Christ cancels with one declaration when he says (Matt. 15:9): In vain do they worship me with the precepts of men."

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