

The Augsburg Aha! – Church and Secular Authority (AC 14-16, 23, 26-28)

Colleagues,

Here's the next-to-last installment of class handouts that Ron Neustadt and I are using with students in Springfield, Illinois for the course on the Augsburg Confession of 1530. One more still to come: Human Will and Human Works (AC 6, 17-21). And after that the take-home Final Exam!

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

CHURCH AND SECULAR AUTHORITY

AUGSBURG CONFESSION 14 Order in the Church

“Order” here signals ordination. We do not approve of self-appointed “public preachers or teachers.” They should be “rightly called” by existing church authorities.

CONFUTATION 14

Right! Now please stick to that commitment

APOLOGY 14

But it's tough when many of the current bishops (the folks authorized to “rightly call” pastors for our parishes) refuse to do so because our pastoral candidates now are “gospel-grounded” in their theology. [They're alumni of Wittenberg University!] “When bishops compel our priests either to reject and to condemn the kind of doctrine that we have confessed, or

by new and unheard of cruelty they kill the unfortunate and innocent people,” then we must find other ways of carrying out our commitment to “rightly call” pastors. These bishops are destroying the church by blocking Gospel-grounded pastors. We have a clear conscience on this matter, for Christians have a “right”—a Christ-given right—to be nurtured by Gospel-grounded pastors. So we devise other ways to carry out this rubric of “rightly call.” “Let the bishops ask themselves how they will give an answer to God for breaking up the church.”

AC 15 Church Rites, Church Regulations

Any practice is OK if a) it doesn’t burden consciences, and b) isn’t contrary to the Gospel. In the final sentence a third reason is given for the danger of rites and regulations, namely, that people turn these practices into means for self-justification. It’s that Adamic “*opinio legis*” at work. These traditions “through which people imagine they can earn grace and make satisfaction for sin are good for nothing and contrary to the gospel.”

CONFUTATION15

Although the first part of AC 15 is OK, that final sentence above “is completely rejected. For it is false [to say] that human ordinances instituted to placate God and make satisfaction for sin are against the Gospel.”

APOLOGY 15

[If you’ve been doing this “Augsburg-theology-course” from the beginning, you could write Melanchthon’s response yourself.] “We never dreamed . . . that they would openly Judaize and openly supplant the gospel with the teaching of demons.” Then follows a long list—pages and pages—of church practices that must be removed because they fail the test specified in AC 15. They do indeed place new burdens upon the consciences of Christians, and they are contrary to the Gospel. Over and over

again as these practices are commended to believers, "Christ is obscured." When people think they are worshipping God by performing such rites, they need to hear that "the chief worship of God is to preach [and then believe] the Gospel."

AC 16 Civil Affairs, Civil Government [God at work in the secular world]

[Preliminary note: When Americans hear the word "government," they immediately think of politics. Not so for the German and Latin titles of AC 16 – "weltliches Regiment" and "de rebus civilibus." First one means "any exercise of authority out in the world." That includes parents, school teachers, traffic cops, judges, "managers" of all kinds—at home, on the farm, in the workplace, at the office—and finally political leaders too. Second one means "anything pertaining to citizens." That's everything that comes with living out in the world, the same laundry list just mentioned. The contrast is NOT between church and state, but between what God is doing in the "old" creation (where God's law with its "you gotta, or else..." is the authority in charge—call it "coercive" authority) and what God is doing in Christ's "new" creation (where the "authority" of the forgiveness of sins, call it "promise," runs the show). "Fairness" and "forgiveness" are the opposite "nickel words" for these 2 different sorts of authority. Though these 2 terms are very different from one another, yes, conflicting, God's authority "author"izes both of them.]

AC 16 says:

All good and lawful work in the world [not just "church" work] is good and godly—even a "just" war. The Christians groups [such as the Anabaptists] who say Christians should not be involved in such worldly work—because it's the devil's realm, not God's regime—are wrong. The Gospel does not destroy the "good" that God is doing in the non-church world. The world

(because there are now sinners there) needs to be “preserved.” God has “ordained” [=created] such secular structures [“ordinances”] to do such preserving work in the world.

CONFUT 16.

We have no problem with AC 16.

APOLOGY 16.

The confutators say they agree with AC 16, but take a closer look. Para. 2. Our theology here is based on an important distinction: Christ’s kingdom, and the kingdoms (structures) in the political world. [Greek word “polis,” at the root of the word “political” (and of “police!”) means first of all “the city, human society,” not merely “politics”]. This distinction is based on the distinction between Law and Gospel which is at the center of AC/Apol 4.

Para. 3. Yet even in Reformation times, some folks [e.g., Carlstadt, Luther’s colleague at Wittenberg University] said all secular structures are ungodly. They said we must remove all these structures and replace them with structures grounded on the Gospel. But that cannot be done. Gospel & faith work in people’s hearts. It’s only human beings who can be “grounded in the Gospel.” Even if you wanted to, you cannot make society’s structures Gospel-grounded. Why not? It’s impossible. Societies have no “heart,” the organ needed to trust the Gospel. The Gospel is at work only in believers. Not everybody in society is a believer. So you can’t make the Gospel the organizing principle for such a society, even if you did try. It won’t work. The Gospel is never coercive. God’s law at work in the world is always coercive. It always comes with an “or else.” When the Gospel is made coercive, it’s no longer Gospel.

Para. 6. Past enemies of the Gospel have also said that the Gospel wants to destroy structures of secular society. But such

people—Julian, Celsus—understood neither the Gospel, nor what God is doing in secular society when they said that. The Gospel does not replace the godly “law-grounded” ordinances of civil society.

Para. 9. Christian perfection (leading a holy life) does not call us to run away from godly work in secular society. The whole monastic movement is based on this idea that saying no to normal life in secular society is God’s preferred form of Christian life. That idea is just plain wrong with its notions of poverty (cannot have money) and celibacy (not to marry is holier than to marry) as God’s preferred pattern for Christian life.

Para. 13 Many Christians working in the secular world have “testified how they were helped” by this theology “after the theories of the monks had troubled them and put them in doubt whether the Gospel permitted such public and private business.”

AC 23 Married Pastors.

Again, there is no Bible word that says pastors must be unmarried. And in the N.T. they were. Also in the early history of the church. “Required” celibacy for pastors came very late in Western church history. That was not the case in churches of the East.

CONFUT 23

The church can change the rules and did so after many years of married pastors. At the center of the argument is the Augustinian view of sex. Sex is always sinful.

APOL 23

Church cannot change the rules that contradict the NT. Sex is a gift from God, not sinful in itself. When it is sinful it is because sinners take something good from God and use it for sinful purposes.

AC 26 The Distinction of Foods

Three things are wrong about all the rules and regs on fasting, required ceremonies, etc. 1) they obscure Christ and his Gospel, 2) they obscure the genuine commands of God, which tell what works God himself wants us to be doing, 3) they burden consciences, since nobody can keep all the requirements. They are “diametrically opposed to, in conflict with, the Gospel.” So “the Gospel compels us” to disobey them.

CONFUT 26

“What AC 26 says must be rejected.” Why? 1. All power is from God. God has given his power to the church. Therefore what the church decrees should be obeyed. 2. The Bible says so: “Obey them that have the rule over you and submit.” 3. Therefore you princes and cities (who submitted the AC) be warned: If you disobey church authority, your subjects will learn to disobey you. 4. Faith is not obscured by such ordinances, nor is the Gospel obscured. 5. It’s false to say that no one can keep them all. Would Mother Church be such a cruel mother – commanding us to do things that are impossible to do? 6. The church forbids certain things about food, “as an easier way to keep God’s commandments.” The freedom which the confessors hype is “alien to the faith and discipline of the Church.”

APOL 26

The Apology makes no response to the Confutation on this one.

AC 27 Monastic Vows

Monasticism has a very checkered history. The early associations were commendable, but things went downhill fast. Insiders know what goes on in the monasteries these day. Not good. Worst of all, though, is the “kind of pseudo-Gospel” that arose with monasticism: 1) that monastic vows were equal to baptism as a means of grace, and (then later) even better than baptism. 2) Thus monks were considered superior to “normal”

Christians. Their vows gave them more merits than Christians had who stayed in their callings in the world. 3. The monastic mandate to sexual continence contradicts God's own command that men and women marry, contradicts the sex drives that God created. 4. Before God monastic vows, made to merit justification and grace, are void because they "detract from the glory of Christ, obscure and deny the righteousness of faith." 5. Monasticism feeds an "invented" notion of Christian perfection, contrary to what genuine Christian perfection is. And what is that? Here are the specs: "fear and trust in God through Christ...diligence in good works for others and attending to our callings" out in the secular world. 6. Summa: "Inasmuch as all these things are false, useless, and invented, monastic vows are null and void." Period!

CONFUT 27

"All things must be rejected which in this article have been produced against monasticism." A typical statement: "Monks endeavor to live more nearly to the Gospel, that they may merit [sic!] eternal life. Therefore what has here been charged against monasticism is wicked."

APOL 27

Melanchthon's 13-page response to the Confutation here is one that you students by now could write yourselves. It's justification-by-faith-alone all over again. He cannot refrain from calling them some uncomplimentary names (which, of course, you students would never do). Sample: "The whole monastic system is full of counterfeits, so they quote passages of Scripture under false pretenses." (22:44) On such quoting of the Bible: Bible passages "ought to be interpreted according to the rule, that is, according to the sure and clear passages of Scripture, not against the rule or the(se) passages. It is a sure thing that our observances do not merit the forgiveness of sins or justification." Monasticism as practiced in our day

fails the test of being Christian, since it cannot be fitted into the Gospel-hub of the wheel of faith.

AC 28 Authority and Power of Bishops.

Great controversy. Bishops have confused the two “powers” that God has put into the world: the power of the church (Gospel) and the power of the sword (law). Confusion comes because the bishops’ power is not seen “according to the Gospel.” All the power that bishops have is for Gospel-related things. The only source for that power is the Gospel itself. When bishops do use coercive power to enforce churchly rules and regulations: 1.they are acting contrary to the gospel, 2.they burden consciences, 3.they destroy Christian liberty, 4.they imply that their rules are necessary for justification, 5.they dishonor Christ. And if that last one is not enough, there comes this: Even the rules made by the apostles in the NT are changeable if they do any of the 5 items mentioned above. How so? Melanchthon gives some examples.

CONFUT. 28

The confutators make no distinction between the two “powers.” The authority to “require” some behavior of people and the authority to “offer” forgiveness are the same “juridical” authority a bishop possesses. Thus coercive power is part of a bishop’s authority—especially when someone’s salvation is at stake. In refusing to acknowledge the juridical authority of bishops the Augsburg Confessors are ignoring the clear Biblical mandate “Obey your leaders” (Hebrews 13:17).

APOLOGY 28

Repeats AC 28. When the Confutators call the Augsburgers to “obey your leaders,” Apol. 28 responds: “This statement requires obedience to the Gospel; it does not create an authority for bishops apart from the Gospel. Bishops must not create traditions contrary to the Gospel, nor interpret

traditions in a manner contrary to the Gospel. When they do so, we are forbidden to obey them by the statement (Galatians 1:8), 'If anyone preaches another Gospel, let him be accursed.'"

For class discussion: In your church today—what would a “bishop according to the Gospel” do? What would such a bishop not do?