

The Augsburg Aha! – “Human Will and Human Works”

Colleagues,

Here’s the final installment of handouts that Ron Neustadt and I used these weeks with students in Springfield, Illinois on the theology of the Augsburg Confession (1530). This one is on Human Will and Human Works (Augsburg Confession articles 6, 17-21).

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

An introductory word about ethics in the theology of the AC. The Agenda for the Augsburgers is: How to “praise and teach good works in such a way as not to abolish the free promise and not to eliminate Christ.” Expressed positively: “How to keep the Gospel at the center and promote ethics at the same time.” Practically expressed it speaks to the issue raised in a recent ThTh posting [#509], where the pastor, called to account by a naval officer for not mentioning Christ when preaching a sermon on “ethics, living the Christian life,” responded thus: “Yes, we need a Savior and the Gospel brings us the Good News that that Savior is Jesus who died and rose for us. [However] I do not feel that every sermon needs to make that point directly. Sermons can also address how we live our Christian life.” Does that indicate that he did indeed preach Christ when salvation was his topic, but when it was ethics, he could do that without “necessitating the crucified/risen Messiah?”

If so, then he needs to hear that this was exactly the position the Augsburgers decried in the AC and Apology. A sermon commending good works that does not necessitate Christ, that

doesn't "need" THE promise in urging Christians to action, is clearly a Christ-less sermon. Such sermons are "Jewish or Turkish (=Muslim)," in the language of the AC, but not Christian. "Caveat praedicator." Let the proclaimer beware.

AC 6 The New Obedience.

The German AC text says: The faith that justifies us "should produce good fruits and good works," and "we must do all such good works as God has commanded," doing them "for God's sake & not place our trust in them" for healing our relationship with God. That agenda, as St. Ambrose said, is "through faith alone." [This is the first time in the AC that the expression "faith alone" occurs.]

The Latin AC text says: Faith "ought" [Latin: *debeat*] to bring forth good fruits & it "behooves" [Latin: *oporteat*] faith to do the good works commanded by God.

N. B. the "fruit-bearing motif" (Gospel-grounded motivation) and the language of "God has commanded" (motivation from God's law).

Confutation says: The "oughts and shoulds" about good works in AC 6 are right and proper. However "ascribing justification to faith ALONE is diametrically opposite the truth of the Gospel." Here are 10 Biblical texts to support our point. When the Augsburgers quote St. Ambrose to support their faith-alone idea, we say it is "in no way pertinent."

Apology. There is no Article 6 in the Apology. Melancthon included it in his big essay in Apology 4 on Justification. His opening sentence in Apology 4 is: "In the 4th, 5th, and 6th articles, and later in the 20th, they condemn us for teaching justification by faith alone."

AC 17 Christ's Return

AC 17 makes the standard confession of what is confessed in the Apostles Creed. Concludes with two rejections. Rejected is the teaching that everyone will be saved. Rejected is the teaching of millenialists who claim that before the end "saints and righteous people alone will possess a secular kingdom and will annihilate all the ungodly." Proponents of both of these teachings were on the scene in 1530.

The Confutators agree. There is no rejoinder in Apology 17.

AC 18 is about Freedom of the Will.

About which AC 18 says: Yes and No. (Note: The Latin term translated "will" is "arbitrium," meaning "the ability to choose.")

Yes: The Confessors say: humans have "some" freedom to choose, i.e., "an outwardly honorable life & to make choices among the things that reason comprehends." The Latin AC text calls this "civil righteousness" (= right things in terms of human [= civic] society).

No: With reference to a sinner's relationship with God, there is no ability to choose, since sinners are already shaped by an "arbitrium" that has already made its choices: not to fear God, not to trust God, and instead of that to be concupiscent, "curved back into the self." Only with the assistance of the Holy Spirit (= God's merciful intervention) can this imprisoned arbitrium be changed. The Latin text adds a condemnation of the Pelagians.

Confutation 18 says this is OK. Claims that the right way on this issue is the middle way between Pelagians and Manichaeans

(both designated heretics in the early church). Pelagians give too much, the Manichaeans too little freedom to human will. Then follow a string of Biblical texts to support this.

Apology 18 asks the Confutators how the Pelagians, whom they condemn, are really any different from what their own scholastic theology teaches. The possibilities for “civil righteousness,” “outward works” of goodness, where the Reformers grant that the will has some freedom, are acknowledged. But even so, “civil righteousness is rare among men.” And with reference to our God-relationship, sinners are “stuck” (un-free) in the shape that their God-relationship has when they were born into the world. Frequently Melanchthon will use the adjective “spiritual” to refer to this God-relationship where human will is un-free. Where human will does have “some” freedom, he uses such terms as “human,” “philosophical,” and “civil.” His use of the term “spiritual” [geist-lich] here does not mean spooky or non-material [geist-ig]. [German has two different words to signal the difference. English has only only the one word, “spiritual.”] “Geistlich” designates the depth relationship, the primal relationship, between humans and God, between the Spirit of God and our own human spirit. It’s a “coram deo” term for the divine-human interface. The only known agent for moving us from a bad “geistlich” relationship to a good one is the Holy Spirit. That’s what “spiritual” means in the English translation here.

Just for fun, read these two paragraphs from Luther.

“Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.” Matthew 6:10

People say: “Yes, certainly, God has given us a free will.” To this I reply: “To be sure, He has given us a FREE will; why then will you not let it remain free but make it your OWN will?” If you do with it what you will, it is not a free will. It is your own will. But God has given neither you nor any man your own

will, for your own will comes from the devil and from Adam. They made the free will which they received from God into their own will. For a free will desires nothing of its own. It only cares for the will of God, and so it remains free, cleaving and clinging to nothing.

Hence you see that in this prayer God commands us to pray against ourselves, and so teaches us that we have no greater enemy than ourselves. For our will is the greatest power within us, and we must pray against it: my Father, suffer me not to have my will. Oppose my will and break it. Come what may, only let Thy will and not mine be done. For so it is in heaven; self-will is not found there. Let it be the same here on earth. Such a prayer, if it is offered, hurts our nature, for self-will is the deepest and mightiest evil in the world, and there is nothing which we love more than our own will. –Exposition of the Lord's Prayer for simple lay-folk, W.A. 2.104f.

AC 19 is about the Cause of Sin.

Even though God created everything, God is not the “cause” of sin. Sin's reality in the world is the work of the devil and the “will” of sinners just described above.

[Footnote: In Gen. 3, both Adam and Eve seek to trace the blame, the cause, for sin back to God's own self. But God doesn't accept their counter-charge. As they do this, they “prove” that they are now original sinners, humans “not fearing God.” “Fearing God” means to accept responsibility for my own sin as God shows it to me. “Not fearing God” is to pooh-pooh God's verdicts and sit in judgment on God ourselves.]

Confutators say: AC 19 is OK, and the Apology 19 merely repeats the earlier AC assertion.

AC 20 Faith and Good Works

This article basically summarizes our class readings and discussions from Article 4 on Justification. Notice all the “code” terms: We don’t forbid good works at all. Rather we show how they can be done “in faith.” FAITH (=promise-trusting), that’s what makes any work “good.” So we start by teaching: “Don’t try to use works to reconcile God, get merit, etc. For reconciliation with God use Christ. Don’t despise or displace Christ’s merit and grace with merits of your own.” Folks with “God-fearing and anxious consciences,” (= serious Christians) find our teaching to be “the greatest consolation.” Conscience, conscience, conscience (=people’s self-perception, self-evaluation) is a major agenda for us—and in the Bible. Faith is the key. Faith is not “believing the history” about Jesus, but trusting the “effect of the history—forgiveness of sins, grace, etc.” FAITH is to be understood not as knowledge...but as confidence which consoles and lifts up terrified hearts.” [Note the root of the word confidence: fide = faith.]

After faith is rightly focused, then first folks are free to be able to do good works, and we do indeed promote that. Here’s our rhetoric: “It is necessary to do good works.” “It is the will of God.” Christ-trusters “are so renewed and endowed with new affections as to be able to bring forth good works.” Summary: (46:35) You cannot accuse us of “forbidding good works. On the contrary...[our teaching] shows how we are enabled to do good works.”

Confutators: Only one objection. We said it before (at Article 4 on justification): “works do indeed merit the forgiveness of sins.” Lots of Bible passages say so. The AC 20 opinion was condemned in the church a thousand years ago.

Apology. Melanchthon just throws up his hands! “What can we say

about an issue that is so clear?" He doesn't mince words: "those damnable writers of the Confutation who so impudently blaspheme Christ." (227:2) We simply must stand up and confess this hub of the wheel, even if martyrdom awaits us. (227:7) He repeats the core statements from AC 20, applies the law/promise hermeneutic to the Bible texts which the Confut. quotes, says the claim that this doctrine was condemned 1000 yrs ago is "completely false." We're with St. Paul: "We do not overthrow the law about doing good works; we uphold it." We commend good works by teaching "faith" first and then urging the faith-full to good works. [What more can I say?]

AC 21 Cult (=worship) of the Saints Honor the Saints, yes. Pray to them, no. Honor them: 2 ways (read AC 21 text). What are they?

Do not pray to them. For 3 reasons. What are they?

CONFUT 21 AC is wrong about no prayer to saints. There are many Bible quotes that talk about the saints praying, the angels too. [Many of these quotes are from the Apocrypha and the OT.]

APOL 21. Yes, there are Bible passages that talk about the saints praying, but none that say we should pray to them, or even ask them to pray for us. The right way to honor the saints is as we said in AC 21. For anyone—saints or even Christ himself—to be a propitiator (a middle-person between us and God) 2 things are needed. Christ has both of them, the saints none of them. What are these two things?

Devotion to Mary. Apology 21:27 says: "Granted that blessed Mary prays for the church. . . [and] she is worthy of the highest honors." And then a few lines later "The fact of the matter is that in popular imagination the blessed Virgin has completely

replaced Christ.” How does Apology 21 seek to correct the error of Mary “replacing” Christ, and still hold on to the claim in the first sentence?

Theology of the Lutheran Confessions
Final Examination

Name.....

I think my grade in this course should be _____

This Examination asks you to write 3 essays.

Section A. (two essays)

Select two topics (=two spokes) from the Wheel of the Augsburg Confession (our diagram of the wheel–hub, spokes and rim—from our first class session) and write one essay on each of those two topics that you chose.

In each essay answer the following:

- A. What is the teaching of the Augsburg Confession and the Apology on this “spoke,” this article of faith?
- B. What is the connection between this article of faith and the Hub of the Wheel, the Gospel center of the diagram? How does the “rim” (the proper distinction between law and gospel) affect the teaching on this article of faith? [E.g., if you did NOT pay attention to the rim, how might that affect the spoke?]
- C. Give an example of a false teaching on this article, and then show how you would respond to that false teaching.

Section B. (one essay)

Select one of the following and write an essay to answer the question:

- A. Melanchthon says that the Confutators were reading the Bible in the wrong way—even though they use many Bible passages in their statements. What was their “wrong way?” What does he say is the “right way?” Why does he think that his way to read the Bible is better?
- B. In our discussion of AC 5 we said: “This article understands the term ministry to be like a pipeline.” Use the “pipeline” picture to describe what all is happening when “ministry” takes place.
- C. Answer this question:
How has my own “working theology” changed during this course in the Lutheran Confessions? If yes, describe How? and Why? If no, describe Why not.

This is a take-home examination. Please return your completed examination to us via e-mail or USPS.