

The Augsburg Aha! — “Sacraments”

Colleagues,

Here’s the next installment of class handouts that Ron Neustadt and I are using with students in Springfield, Illinois for the course on Lutheran Confessional Theology. From the three previous postings of this material that were sent your way, at least one response has come back each time saying “send more.” So with that groundswell I’ll continue to do just that. [There are two more sessions still to come: Church and Secular Authority (AC 14-16, 23, 26-28) and then Human Will and Human Works (AC 6, 17-21).]

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

Theology of the Augsburg Confession: Sacraments.

THE CONFESSORS’ ANGLE OF VISION

The “specs” for talking about church and sacraments—repeated over and over again—are simple: Is it according to, or contrary to, the Gospel? Note: the criterion is not “according to, or contrary to, the Bible.” Rather all church proclamation and practice are measured by the yardstick of the Good News itself. To be sure, the Bible, esp. the NT, is the primary source for understanding what the Gospel is, but the Gospel itself is the criterion for measuring things. That Gospel is the Good News about [a] Christ’s merits and benefits and [b] his promissory offer, [c] freely given to sinners, [d] inviting them to trust

Him. [Note the four items.] This is the “dipstick” for measuring everything that claims to be Christian: doctrine, liturgy, ethics, church leadership, church programs, everything. Often in the Augsburg Confession and the Apology Melanchthon will condense these four items into just two “sides” of the dipstick: [1] Do Christ’s merits and benefits get used or wasted? [2] Do sinners (troubled consciences) get the comfort Christ wants them to have so that they can live in freedom as “little Christs” in the world?

Example: In AC/Apol 13 on Ecclesiastical Rites.

When the late medieval church made certain rites into absolute requirements (“you gotta’s”), the confessors say: these practices burden consciences, are contrary to the Gospel, and dishonor Christ who alone is necessary for salvation. “The chief worship of God is the preaching of the Gospel.”

Moving now to the sacraments—

Remember the earlier definition of “ministry” from AC 5. Ministry is “pipeline-for-the-promise.” This ministry is an add-on, we might say, after Christ’s Easter that “God instituted . . . God provided . . . in order that we may obtain this faith [that justifies].” The ministry pipeline—Gospel proclaimed and sacraments enacted—mediates the “goodies” of Christ’s promissory word/work to later generations living in other places. So in the background of everything the confessors say about sacraments is this notion of the PROMISE-PIPELINE. If some sacramental actions or traditions block the promise from coming through the pipeline, or reduce it to a trickle, they must be reformed. All the “changes” that the confessors have already made in their congregations by 1530, they say, have followed this axiom.

AC 9. **BAPTISM**

No conflict between confessors and confutators on this. Both agree that Anabaptist theology is contrary to the gospel. In

Apology 9, we hear the “promise-pipeline” reason given for this: “It is most certain that the promise of salvation also pertains to little children . . . Therefore is it necessary to baptize little children in order that the promise of salvation might be applied to them according to Christ’s mandate.” In a side comment here Melanchthon gives the Lutheran reason why there is none of THIS sort of salvation outside the church. Salvation “does not pertain to those outside the Church of Christ, where there is neither Word nor sacrament, because Christ regenerates through Word and sacrament.” No Word-and-sacrament, = no promise-pipeline flowing, = no salvation.

There is a rather pragmatic proof that God approves of infant baptism. It goes like this: infant baptism has been the custom in the church for 1500 years. If God “disapproved” it, said “That’s a no-no,” then “the Holy Spirit would have been given to no one, no one would have been saved, and ultimately there would be no church.” But there IS church in our day—consisting of folks who were baptized in infancy—so it must be OK. God would not be mocked, if that’s what infant baptism were doing. Therefore the hard verdict: “The Anabaptists who condemn the baptism of little children teach wickedly.”

AC 10

THE LORD’S SUPPER

affirms the real presence: body and blood of Christ “truly present/really present” in the bread and wine.

Confut. says: What they say about real presence is fine, but concomitance must be asserted [=both Christ’s body and his blood are present in the wine, both also present in the bread]. Also transubstantiation, the orthodox teaching on HOW the elements become Christ’s body and blood, must be affirmed. [I.e., although the appearance of bread and wine remains the same, the “sub-stance”— what “stands-under” those appearances – changes.

Transubstantiation = change of substance.]

Apology 10 acknowledges the agreement, but side-steps the two “ya gotta’s” about concomitance and transubstantiation. It speaks of Christ “truly and substantially present” in the LS, “truly offered [note the Gospel’s verb “offer” in contrast to the law’s key-verb “require”] . . . to those who receive the sacrament.” Frequent use of the term “participation.”

AC 11 & 12

CONFESSION AND THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE

We keep Private Confession and Absolution in our congregations, but we don’t require the penitents “to enumerate all trespasses and sins [as the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) required], for this is impossible.” The rubrics mentioned above about “promise-pipeline” are applied throughout the Apology’s response to the Confut. It is bad theology/practice to “force, torture, ensnare, impose, require” when addressing guilty consciences. When the Confutators speak of Confession/Penance and never even mention Christ’s promise or faith in this promise as the way “to console consciences,” their fundamental defect is clear. There is no Good News there. “Console, encourage, liberate” a sinner’s accusing conscience, that is the Gospel’s language and intent in Confession and the sacrament of penance.

USE OF THE SACRAMENTS

AC 13: They are not merely signs about who is Christian, but even more “signs of God’s will toward us for the purpose of awakening and strengthening faith.” Ergo, sacraments are “rightly used...when received in faith.” Therefore we reject the “ex opere operato” teaching (=if you are present when the action is happening, you receive the benefits). Not so; if you don’t trust the promise coming through the promise-pipeline of the sacraments, the benefits pass you by.

Confutators say: Fine, but the number of them, 7, must be affirmed, and the confessors must show how their words in AC 13 apply to all of them, and then see to it that their people observe all 7 of them.

Apol. 13 “Numbers schnumbers!” Throughout the church’s history the numbers have varied. Important is to preserve what’s been handed down in Scripture. Our own definition (since there is no definition in the Bible, because the term is never used) of a sacrament is: “a rite (= a liturgical action) commanded by God, to which promise of grace has been added.” [Call it a “promise-pipeline authorized by God.”] By that definition there are three “genuine” sacraments. The remaining four (of the traditional 7 in the Roman church) don’t qualify, each for its own reason. God has put no “promise-pipeline” trademark on confirmation, marriage, ordination or last rites. Other items in the N.T. could almost qualify, if you took this or that particular slant on them: e.g., ordination—if the accent was on preaching the Gospel—could qualify, so also prayer and alms-giving.

Much more important than the number is “to know how to use the sacraments.” No surprise, it is by “trusting the promise.” Just do a word count in the last 3 paragraphs of Apology 13: promise appears 8 times, faith 15 times.

BOTH KINDS IN THE SACRAMENT

AC 22

We distribute both bread and wine to all who come to the Lord’s Supper. Those are the rubrics from Christ himself when he created this promise-pipeline: “Eat and drink of it, all of you.” To say, “Bread and wine only for the priests, but only bread for the laity” is simply “contrary to the institution of Christ.” The N.T. and major church fathers—popes included—testify that “both kinds” has been the church’s practice. “No one knows when/how this custom of receiving only

one kind was introduced.” But since it contradicts Christ, it has to be changed.

Confutation 22

responds with the bald assertion that “there has always been a distinction in the church between lay communion under one form and priestly communion under two forms.” That is documented with a reference to the sons of Eli in the OT and the conclusion “laity ought to be content to receive [only] one part.” Yes, “Christ did institute both forms of the sacrament,” but for good and proper reasons “the church, directed by the Holy Spirit [came] to forbid the laity from receiving both the bread and the wine.” Some of those reasons included “to combat heresy” and to avoid spillage of wine by “the old, young, tremulous, weak and mentally impaired” among the laity. In short, “because of many dangers the custom [bread and wine for the laity] has been discontinued.”

Apology 22

You can imagine Melanchthon’s response.

“Consider their impudence: Their chief reason is to exalt the status of the clergy . . . Our opponents are joking when they refer to Eli’s sons . . . Only a tyrant would say: ‘They ought to be content [with bread only]’ . . . They change Christ’s ordinance.” And then at the end: “Let them figure out how they will give an account of their decisions to God.”

THE MASS

AC 24. We are faithful, devoted, earnest Mass-observers. We’ve removed some of the accumulated abuses, which the bishops in the past did not do. Such abuses as: A) Claiming that Christ died to make satisfaction for our original sin only; with the mass we make sacrifices for all other sins. B) The mass works ex opere operato [=performance of the action automatically bestows the benefits]. 3) Nearly total absence of using the mass to awaken

faith, to comfort consciences with the promise. Instead we say: since the “operation” going on in the mass is a promise-pipeline “operation,” it is NOT a merit-bestowing work on our part, NOT a “sacrifice” from us to God, but God’s distribution to us of the benefits of Christ’s sacrifice. That is the only place to talk about “sacrifice” in the promise-pipeline of the mass.

Confutation 24

AC 24 is OK, as far as it goes, but . . . A) the mass ought to be done in Latin, since it is not necessary for the receiver to hear or understand the language. B) abuses need to be corrected, but money for mass is OK, C) Christ is indeed offered as a sacrifice to God in the Mass. Scads of ancient theologians, and the Bible too, testify that the mass is a sacrifice. D) Even the word Mass (from the Hebrew) means sacrifice. E) Abrogating private masses (where no congregation is present) is wrong. F) If one mass is a good thing, multiple masses are even better.

Apology 24

“Sacrifice” is an ambiguous term, so we left it alone in the AC 24 text. Here’s our take on sacrifice: Sacrament and sacrifice signal two different directions of action between God and people. Here’s the difference: “Sacrament is a ceremony or work in which God presents to us what the promise joined to the ceremony offers. By contrast, a sacrifice is a ceremony or work that we render to God.” “There are only two kinds of sacrifice. One is the atoning sacrifice, a work of satisfaction for guilt and punishment that reconciles God, conciliates the wrath of God or merits the forgiveness of sins.” [There has been only one like that in world history. You know who did it.]. “The other is the thanksgiving sacrifice . . . does not merit forgiveness or reconciliation, but is rendered by those already reconciled as a way for us to give thanks for having received forgiveness of sins.” Fancy words for these two kinds of sacrifice are “propitiatory” and “eucharistic” (from Greek word eucharistia =

giving thanks). One reconciles sinners to God (sinners can't do that under any circumstances), the other is an action coming from already-reconciled sinners responding to God.

For the confutators to draw analogies from the O.T. sacrifice system and apply it to the mass is to ignore that "Levitical (=OT) worship" was abrogated on Good Friday [the tearing open of the temple curtain, that blocked off the Holy of Holies from the common folk, signalled that now the Mercy-seat of God is wide open to all]. The ex opere operato notion ["doing the operation" is all it takes] is wrong with reference to the mass too. The N.T. letter to the Hebrews gives "the primary support for our position." Sacraments "work," not according to the rubric "ex opere operato," but "ex fide operato," [=when faith is operating] and therefore masses for the dead are an "insult to the Gospel." The dead have no functioning ears/hearts to hear, and then trust, the promise. A corpse can't do that, nor can my promise-trusting be transferred to them. Nor can it be transferred to anyone alive. "Faith that recognizes mercy makes alive. This is the principal use of the sacrament, through which it becomes clear both that terrified consciences are the ones 'worthy' of it, and how they ought to use it."

Conclusion: "The dignity of the mass and its proper use . . . is a great cause and a great issue, not inferior to the work of the prophet Elijah in condemning the worship of Baal." When the people of the OT introduced Baal-worship, ex opere operato theology was at the base of it, a belief "that sacrifices merit the forgiveness of sins, rather than receiving it freely through faith. . . . But this notion clings to the world, and always will, that [human] services and sacrifices make atonement" [=give us a better "credit balance" with God].

CONCERNING CONFESSION

is a repeat of AC 11 and 12. Repeated here because AC 11 and 12 presented "our teaching" on this sacrament, and now, AC 25, spells out "abuses corrected" as Confession and Absolution is practiced among us. The conclusion is: "confession is retained among us both because of the great benefit of absolution (which is confession's principle and foremost part) and because of other advantages for consciences."

Confutation 25

say "our views regarding confession have been given above in Article 11." The importance of the three parts of this sacrament is reiterated: contrition in the heart, confession with the mouth, and a work of satisfaction. "This is perfect and fruitful repentance."

There is no Apology 25, since Apology 11 and 12 have said all that needs to be said.