

The Augsburg Aha! The Gospel is a Promise, an Honest-to-God Promise. A Second Look at the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article 4.

PART I. AN AHA! FOR INTERPRETING THE BIBLE

Thesis 1:

The Augsburg Aha! happened first at Wittenberg, an Aha! about Biblical Hermeneutics.

That is not the usual description of Luther's reformation Aha! The standard description in Luther scholarship doesn't mention hermeneutics. Here's an example from Jaroslav Pelikan, major guru for the 55-volume edition of Luther's works in English:

Luther became the Reformer, he tells us, when he was pondering the meaning of Paul's words (Rom. 1:17), "In [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'" How could it be the content of the gospel of Christ, as "good news," that God was a righteous judge, rewarding the good and punishing the evil? Then he suddenly broke through to the insight that the "righteousness of God" here was not the righteousness by which

God was righteous in himself (passive righteousness) but instead the righteousness by which, for Christ's sake, God made sinners righteous (active righteousness) through justification. When he made that discovery, Luther said, it was as though the gates of Paradise had opened. [THE ILLUSTRATED JESUS THROUGH THE CENTURIES. New Haven: Yale UP. 1997. p.171f.]

Here Pelikan is drawing on Luther's own words in the year before he died, in the preface for the Complete Edition of His Latin Writings (Wittenberg 1545). But in another place—a couple years earlier—Luther describes the same Aha! and highlights the hermeneutical element in it. So which was chicken and which was egg? The Aha! about justification or the Aha! about how to read the Bible? Here's the Aha! about hermeneutics:

Table Talk #5518: Around the time Luther turned sixty someone asked him: "Qui locus primum moverit Doctorem." Literally: What was the primary Bible verse that moved the doctor?

His answer:

"Ich war lang irre, wuste nicht, wie ich drinnen war. Ich wuste wol etwas, oder wuste doch nichts, was es ware, bis so lang das ich uber den locum ad Rom.1. kam: Iustus ex fide vivet [Rom 1:17]. Der halff mir. Da sah ich, von welcher iustitia Paulus redet: Da stand zuvor im text iustitia [Rom. 1:16], da reumet ich das abstractum und concretum zusammen und wurde meiner sachen gewisz, lernet inter iustitiam legis und euangelii discernirn. Zuvor mangelt mir nichts, denn das ich kein discrimen inter legem et euangelium machet, hielt es alles vor eins et dicebam Christum a Mose. Aber do ich das discrimen fand, quod aliud esset lex, aliud euangelium, da riss ich her durch."

English translation:

"For a long time I was confused (misled, mistaken). Didn't know what I'd gotten into. I knew I had my finger on something, but

didn't know what it was. Until I came to the passage in Rom. 1:17, 'The righteous one shall live by faith.' [Luther may have heard it equally translatable from the Greek: 'The righteous-by-faith (person) shall live.'] That text helped me. I saw just what sort of righteousness Paul was talking about. [Because] in the previous verse (v.16) was the word righteousness [of God], so I connected (rhymed) the abstract concept (righteousness in God's own self) with the concrete term (an actual person righteous "by faith"). And I got clarity about what I was doing. I learned to distinguish between the law's righteousness and the gospel's righteousness. Previously I was off-base on one thing, namely, that I made no distinction between the law and the gospel. I held them both to be the same and said that Christ differed from Moses only in historical time and in degree of perfection. But when I discovered the "*discrimen*" (dividing line, interval, distinction, difference), that the law is one thing and the Gospel is something else, that was my breakthrough." [That was my "Aha!"]

So was the Aha! about the righteousness of faith, or about hermeneutics? How the righteousness of God works, or how to read the Bible? Answer: Yes. But Luther uses the "breakthrough" word for the hermeneutical Aha!

Thesis 2:

Melanchthon then took this Aha! to Augsburg in 1530-31, where it became the public hermeneutics of Lutheran confessional theology.

Here are the opening paragraphs of Apology 4 on justification:

"In the fourth, fifth, and sixth articles, as well as later in the twentieth, they [our critics] condemn us for teaching that

people receive the forgiveness of sins not on account of their own merits but freely on account of Christ, by faith in Him. They condemn us both for denying that people receive the forgiveness of sins on account of their own merits and for affirming that people receive the forgiveness of sins by faith and are justified by faith in Christ. But since this controversy deals with the most important topic of Christian teaching which, rightly understood, illumines and magnifies the honor of Christ and brings the abundant consolation that devout consciences need, we ask His Imperial Majesty kindly to hear us out on this important matter. Since the opponents understand neither the forgiveness of sins, nor faith, nor grace, nor righteousness, they miserably contaminate this article, obscure the glory and benefits of Christ, and tear away from devout consciences the consolation offered them in Christ. But in order both to substantiate our confession and to remove the objections that the opponents raise, we need first to say a few things by way of a preface in order that the sources of both versions of the doctrine, the opponents' and ours, can be recognized.

"All Scripture should be divided into these two main topics: the law and the promises. In some places it communicates the law. In other places it communicates the promise concerning Christ, either when it promises that Christ will come and on account of him offers the forgiveness of sins, justification, and eternal life, or when in the gospel itself, Christ, after he appeared, promises the forgiveness of sins, justification, and eternal life....

"Of these two topics, the opponents single out the law (because to some extent human reason naturally understands it since reason contains the same judgment divinely written on the mind), and through the law they seek the forgiveness of sins and justification. But the Decalogue requires not only outward civil works that reason can produce to some extent; it also requires

other works that are placed far beyond the reach of reason, such as, truly to fear God, truly to love God, truly to call upon God, truly to be convinced that he hears us, and to expect help from God in death and all afflictions. Finally, it requires obedience to God in death and all afflictions so that we do not flee or avoid these things when God imposes them.”

Note.

The “sources” of “both versions of doctrine” are not differing texts from which the doctrine is drawn—Bible only vs. Bible and tradition—but different ways of reading the agreed-upon text, the Bible. The hermeneutic is THE source for the differing doctrine. Change THIS source and you change the doctrine.

It was that way in Jesus’ own day as he debated the agreed-upon text with his critics. The same for Paul in Galatia. And ever since in church history. Gerhard Ebeling: “Church history is the history of how Christians have read the Bible.”

Thesis 3:

So was it a hermeneutical Aha? or a soteriological one? Answer: yes.

I don’t think I learned the hermeneutical aspect of this Augsburg Aha! in my seminary days in St. Louis 57 years ago. Nor even in Erlangen 54 years ago where I took Lutheran Confessions from Paul Althaus and Dogmatics from Werner Elert. I must have learned this from Bob Bertram. In the days of the LCMS turmoil about Biblical inspiration Bob wrote an essay—a mere three pages—for the LCMS’s Commission on Theology and Church Relations titled: “The Hermeneutical Significance of Apology 4.” His axiom there was: “Biblical hermeneutics is at no time separable from Biblical soteriology.” How you read the Bible is inseparable from how you think people get saved. And vice versa.

That's what Apology 4 says! Which came first, the Aha! about hermeneutics, or the Aha! about Gospel—chicken or egg?

And that's why Apology 4 is so long.

The many pages of Apology 4 on Justification (60 pages in the Tappert edition of the Book of Concord [Philadelphia, 1959], 400 paragraphs!)—Article 4 in the Augsburg Confession itself has only 49 Latin words!—are Melanchthon taking the Biblical texts that the Confutators cite—passages that seem to reject “faith alone,” as the Confutators read them—and using the hermeneutic of law/promise, enunciated as “prolegomena” at the outset of Apology 4—to show that “these passages support our confession.” He does so showing the two different soteriologies that are present in the two different interpretations of these disputed Biblical texts.

Needed in both ELCA and LCMS—surely at their seminaries—is a semester-long seminar devoted to these 60 pages of Apology 4. In both LCMS and ELCA the law/promise distinction is universally affirmed. But it is largely a shibboleth, a mantra, publicly proclaimed and then ignored when it comes to actual Biblical exegesis. It doesn't get “used.” Most likely because people don't know how to use it. Where in the theology that comes from either place do you [ever] see that hermeneutic practiced? I don't read everything coming from these churches, but I'm still waiting to see one that does it. Melanchthon's 60 pages say: *Tolle, lege. Tolle, disce.* “Here's how to do it, how to USE it. Learn.”

Thesis 4:

That leads to a number of additional Aha's.

The first Aha: There is only one alternative to reading the Bible with law/promise lenses: reading it as God telling us what

to do.

The hermeneutics of “our opponents [is] of these two—law and promises—[to] select the law and by it they seek forgiveness of sins and justification.” That has always been the alternative—“selecting the law and by it” remedying the human malady. When Luther in 1518 presented his Heidelberg Theses, “Selecting the law and by it seeking justification” was at the center of the theologies of glory which he denounced. The “glory” in glory-theologies seeks God without the cross, because it is also “glorifying” human ability to achieve salvation, if “they would only get busy and DO such and so.” That’s with us today. Theologies of glory are achievement theologies. Some belief, some ethical work, some liturgical practice, some spiritual experience, some SOMETHING, that you COULD do if you really wanted to—is the linchpin for God being merciful to sinners.

The second Aha: Justification by faith alone is the one and only doctrine there is in the Christian Gospel.

The rhetorical role of *sola fide* in the text of the AC and in the text of the Apology is different. “Sola fide” does not appear in the AC article on justification at all! Is that a signal that the confessors didn’t (yet) see that *sola fide* was the “jugular” in their conflict with Rome? The term “*sola fide*” first appears in AC 6 on New Obedience (ethics!). And here it just “slips in” (no big deal) in a quotation ascribed to Ambrose [actually Ambrosiaster] “Whoever believes in Christ shall be saved . . . not through works but through faith alone. . . .”

Jaroslav Pelikan taught us this in a confessions class at Concordia Seminary in 1950: According to the AC (Art. 7) there is only one doctrine in Christian theology, the “*doctrina evangelii*,” the doctrine (singular noun in Latin), namely, the one doctrine (teaching/proclamation) that IS the Gospel. The

notion of “gospel in all its parts” [a favored Missouri phrase in my lifetime] is not thinking of Gospel as the AC/Apol. does. How many “parts” are there to a promise? E.g., to Christ’s words: “Son, be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven”? Promises are “simple” one- sentence offers, one-sentence commitments. “I plight thee my troth....” The Gospel is simplex, a one-something, not complex, many parts. Jesus’ words too when he passes on the assignment to us disciples: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you don’t, they won’t be forgiven.” It’s that simple.

Though only modestly present, as a technical term, in the AC, faith-alone, trusting that promise, is without doubt the cantus firmus of the entire Apology.

Third Aha: If you start with the Gospel as promise, faith-alone is the only conclusion you can draw.

Melanchthon “proves” the *sola fide* claim initially with a very simple syllogism. He starts with the simple equation: the Gospel is a promise—stated, possibly for the first time in Lutheran “systematic theology” in his LOCI COMMUNES. Promises don’t “work” unless they are trusted. So, “only by faith does any promise work.” The Gospel’s promise too. But that syllogism only works when you’ve had the Aha! Namely, that the Gospel is God’s Promise. Not a divine “you gotta,” but an offer, a gift, a freebee, a “Here, catch!”

Thesis 5:

Even so, we can trace the flow-chart of the Augsburg Aha! –sotto voce, perhaps—through the heart of the Augsburg Confession.

It is my hunch that even when the AC was presented on June 25,

1530, the Confessors, including Melanchthon, did not yet know what the neuralgic point was that would rankle their Roman critics. Not until they read the "Confutation," the refutation of their confession by their critics, did they learn/see/know that the "*sola fide*" (faith alone) was what the fight was all about. That was clearly what the opposition said. Melanchthon said in no uncertain terms as he composed Apology 4 that the fight was about *sola fide* – "in Articles 4, 5, 6, and 20 they condemn us for *sola fide*" – AND that the *sola fide* fight was a fight about Biblical hermeneutics. "Biblical hermeneutics is at no time separable from Biblical soteriology." Applied in this case: "*Sola fide* soteriology is at no point separate from law-promise hermeneutics." That must have been another Aha! after the confessors read the Confutation.

I suggest that all this is implicit in the Augsburg Confession itself, but not explicitly focused on *sola fide* and law-and-promise, which then later were revealed to be the "offense" for Rome of both the soteriology and the hermeneutics of the AC.

Here's a proposed walk through the AC articles:

Article 1 says that the Christian faith is about God, the Triune God. [Note. "Triune God" is not simply the "true and correct" way to talk about the true God, but the way to talk about God and have it come out Gospel. E.g., apart from Christ, God is not "Abba," apart from the Holy Spirit there is no access to Christ. Melanchthon, possibly for diplomatic reasons, does not accentuate this in AC 1. He simply says: "We are Nicene orthodox." A sample of how Luther speaks of the Trinity as God-talk that is Gospel comes at the end of his treatment of the Apostolic Creed in the Large Catechism. Here ML runs the Trinity "in reverse." First we encounter the Holy Spirit in Word and Sacrament, the Holy Spirit connects us to Christ, Christ connects us to God as Father.]

Monotheism without trinitarianism is NOT good news. It takes Christ to validate calling God Father. This claim is fundamental for Christian conversation with people of other faiths.

Article 2 says: with this God we're in trouble. The trouble is: all people come into the world as sinners. They do not trust this God, they do not fear his critical evaluation, and they are "concupiscent," humans curved into themselves.

Article 3 tells about God's solution to the problem, Jesus the Christ. He is God the Son, the Word made flesh—crucified, risen, etc. as the Apostles Creed says. This Christ-solution continues working through the ages via the Holy Spirit.

Article 4 is about faith, describing how sinners (Art. 2), when they appropriate the solution (Art 3), become OK ("righteous") before God (Art. 1). The key terms are: "forgiveness, by grace, because of Christ, through faith."

Article 5 describes how this faith happens. God has set up a delivery system [the technical term here is "ministry." Ministry here does not mean the clergy.] This delivery system is Gospel-preaching and the sacraments-enacted. The Holy Spirit uses such ministry [as means, or instruments, or agencies, a "pipeline"] to bring the benefits of Art. 3 to sinners today. When this ministry happens, faith can happen.

Article 6 describes the new kind of obedience, the ethics, the "fruits" and "works," that flow from such faith. [The new in this NEW obedience is that (in St. Paul's terms) it is "the obedience of faith," not "the obedience of the law."]

Article 7 describes the church as the community of forgiven sinners formed by the ministry of Gospel-and-sacraments.

Subsequent Articles—8 to 28—channel the pulse and flow from this

theological heart throughout the body of the Christian community and the individual Christian. Imagine, if you can, an old-fashioned wagon wheel: hub, spokes and rim. These articles “articulate” the Gospel Hub as it applies to a particular spoke. In fact, all 28 “spokes” of the AC are articles that articulate (pun intended) the Gospel. Even Art. 2 on Original Sin is “Gospel-grounded.” Sin is a malady so bad that it takes “rebirth through Baptism and the Holy Spirit” to fix it. Those words “articulate” what the malady is in terms of the Gospel that heals it.

All 28 articles of the AC/Apol. “articulate” the Gospel-promise center when the radius is turned to focus on this or that specific spoke, and the “hermeneutics” of law/promise serves as the rim to keep all the spokes anchored in this hub.

Thesis 6: Central to the Augsburg Aha! is replacing the nature/grace axiom of scholastic theology (for hermeneutics and soteriology) with the Bible’s own law/promise hermeneutics and soteriology.

I am not enough of a Reformation scholar to know if Luther or Melanchthon themselves ever spoke of the law/promise Aha! replacing the nature/grace axiom that dominated scholastic theology and its hermeneutical consequences. But that is what Luther is saying in that Table-talk citation above. He used to read “Moses and Christ” as qualitatively the same—with only quantitative differences. [“...non differre nisi tempore et perfectione”] For in nature/grace hermeneutics both were revelations of God’s grace—Moses incomplete, Christ complete.

The nature/grace axiom (going back to Augustine?) was terminologically a bad idea from the beginning. There is no

corollary in Biblical vocabulary for “nature.” It comes from Aristotle’s briefcase. And coming as it does as the first term in the pair, it distorts grace (a genuinely Biblical term—*chesed* and *charis*), so that grace becomes “a metaphysical medicine, revealed in the scriptures, now passed down through the sacraments of the church, to heal the damage done to human nature by original sin.” [Pelikan, in his sem class of 1950].

One grad student back at Seminex once traced the term “grace” in Apology IV and discovered that Melanchthon does indeed use it frequently, but as the 400 paragraphs unfold, “mercy” [*misericordia*, Barmherzigkeit] takes over as Melanchthon’s favored term. And no wonder. If grace is not medicine, but a relationship, then “mercy” compels you to think in I-thou terms, but not about a medicine chest.

You need completely different tools, vocabulary—even “grammar,” Luther said—to articulate law/promise theology in place of nature/grace. Because there is a subtle (or not so subtle) soteriology that “fits” with nature/grace. The “nature” part—damaged, but still functional—is called upon “*facere quod in se est*” [to do what it has within it] on the salvation agenda. Then medicinal grace comes in to finish what’s still to be done, what damaged nature can’t bring to completion. It’s an easy step from nature/grace hermeneutics to the Old Adam’s irrepressible *incurvatus* into Pelagianism—whether full-blown, or just the “semi” Pelagian version of the late Middle Ages.

Thesis 7:

A whole new theological vocabulary arises from this Aha! chain-reaction in Apology IV. Especially useful for “gospel-

sniffing,” detecting “gospels that aren’t THE Gospel” and learning how to tell the difference.

Some samples from the “new” rhetoric of Apology 4.

A. God’s grace is relational mercy—discussed above. Grace is “*favor dei*,” God’s favor for sinners, God’s clean-contrary-to-law relationship to sinners in Christ. This grace is NOT God’s generic goodness encountered in the gifts from a creator’s hand. Of course, creation’s gifts come from God’s hand. But they are gifts from God’s left hand, gifts that obligate us beyond our capacity—or our willingness—“to thank and to praise, to serve and obey him,” as Luther says in the Small Catechism. To make that emphatic he immediately adds the sentence: “This is most certainly true.” I.e., our incapacity/unwillingness to meet the obligations that come with such lavish giving on God’s part is “most certainly true.”

B. “*Lex semper accusat*” (& therefore) “*Christus manet mediator*.” The law always accuses (and therefore) Christ [needs to] remain as mediator always as well. Because of the law’s *semper*, Christ the mediator is needed *semper* too.

C. Rightful and wrongful addition. The Confutators do wrongful addition: adding non-Biblical “*opinio legis*” to Biblical “*lex*.” [See “I” below.] Rightful adding is: Adding the Gospel to a Biblical text where there is none. The Augsburg Aha! puts a caveat to the mantra: “Just preach the Biblical text!” Not so. Law/promise lenses are needed for every text—before you preach on that text. If the promise is absent, then it is incumbent on the preacher to add it. The preacher’s calling is not “preach the text,” but “preach the Gospel.” “Defective” texts need help. “Over and over we say that the Gospel of Christ must be added to [texts that] preach the law.” [Apol 4:257, 260, 263, 287]

D. Checking the “use” of the Gospel by applying the double dipstick. Melancthon’s constant complaint in Apol 4 is that the opponents “obscure the glory and benefits of Christ, and tear away from devout consciences the consolation offered them in Christ.” Misused Gospel, or preaching a non-Gospel, is both a Christological “heresy” (in “praxis” Christology) and fundamental pastoral malfeasance.

E. Checking the key verbs. Law “requires.” Gospel “offers.” The ease with which “must” becomes the operative verb in today’s preaching vitiates the Gospel offer “Here, catch!.”

F. The “saint-ly” sins. Even Promise-trusters are law-defective. “For who loves or fears God enough? Who endures patiently enough the afflictions that God sends? Who does not often wonder whether history is governed by God’s counsels or by chance? Who does not often doubt whether God hears him? Who does not often complain because the wicked have better luck than the devout, because the wicked persecute the devout? Who lives up to the requirements of his calling? Who love his neighbor as himself? Who is not tempted by lust?” [Tappert 130:167]

That places front and center before us Luther’s first of the 95 theses. When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said “Repent,” he called for the entire life of believers to be one of penitence. Consequently, every day “*Christus manet mediator.*”

G. When preaching “obedience,” the law/gospel distinction is to be operative: Gospel-obedience vs. law-obedience. “We must speak technically because of certain carping critics: faith is truly righteousness because it is OBEDIENCE to the Gospel. . . . Our good works of OBEDIENCE to the law can be pleasing to God only because this OBEDIENCE to the Gospel takes hold of Christ, the propitiator, and is reckoned for righteousness (Rom.8:1). This faith gives honor to God, gives him what is properly his: it OBEYS him by accepting his promises.” (Tappert 155:308f)

H. From that follows a distinction in worship: "Worship of the gospel is to receive good things from God, while worship of the law is to offer and present our goods to God. We cannot offer anything to God unless we have first been reconciled and reborn. The HIGHEST WORSHIP in the Gospel is the desire to receive forgiveness of sins, grace and righteousness."

It is so easy to confuse the two yet so easy to detect the difference once you know what to be listening for. Ob-edience (ob-audiencing) is a listening-to. The verbs reveal what you are listening to—from God's side "require" or "offer," from the human side "offer to God" or "receive from God."

I. *Opinio legis*. [*opinio* = supposition, conjecture] The law "supposes" that the person it speaks to can do what it calls for. Second supposition is that if you do what is required, you merit some reward, and if you do not, then you get negative consequences. This "conjecture" constitutes the primal theology of every Old Adam, Old Eve, the chronic drive to be "right." As Fred Niedner puts it: "The most fundamental drive in human beings is not sex, but the drive to be right. If you don't believe that, just get married."

The conjecture is so compelling because it is so reasonable. It would be madness for good not to be rewarded and evil not to be punished. Law and reason are Siamese twins. Yet when they reign, Christ departs. It's an either/or.

"They teach the law in such a way as to hide the Gospel of Christ. The opponents' whole system is derived either from human reason or from the teaching of the law rather than the Gospel. They teach two modes of justification—one based upon reason, the other based upon the law, neither one based upon the Gospel or the promise of Christ." [Tappert 150:286f.]

J. In scholastic theology Paul's trio of "faith, hope and love"

were the virtues that defined a “righteous” person. Obviously you could not be fully righteous with only one of the trio, the faith part. So “*sola fide*” was non-sense. You were at best 1/3 righteous with faith alone.

With law/promise hermeneutics and theology-of-the-cross soteriology this trio is redefined Biblically as relationships, NOT as virtues, qualities now “inhabiting” a person, three distinct “*habitus*”-es, positive habits I now have that I didn’t have before.

No need to go into discussion of where hope and love (in addition to faith)–the classical

“theological virtues”–fit in. As Biblical terms they are not “virtues” at all in the vocabulary of Aristotle, but variations on trusting the promise. Melanchthon demonstrates how the three “Good News” terms–gospel, promise, forgiveness of sins–are all synonyms. Faith as the fitting response to any of these three is not a “virtue,” a moral “plus” in the responder. Faith is a “having” of something you didn’t have before–crisply stated in Luther’s epigram: “Glaubstu hastu; Glaubstu nicht, hastu nicht.” [When you believe, you have; when you don’t believe, you don’t have.] And what the person of faith “has” is Christ together with all his benefits. Luther’s other favorite synonym for faith–alongside the Pauline “*fiducia* / trust”–is St. John’s term, “Christum habere/having Christ.”

K. We need to have some sympathy for the agony of the Confutators: They knew the facts of life: if works don’t merit anything, don’t get rewarded, why will anyone do good works at all? Result: ethical chaos. But that yen to attain merit is not to be satisfied. Rather it is the chronic disease of all original sinners that needs to be exorcised, finally put to death. [Is that what St. Paul was referring to in Rom.7:7 when he tells us that it was the contra-covet-commandment which

brought home to him his own sinfulness—namely, he was coveting righteousness, working hard to get it— when the law’s contra-covet commandment finally revealed to him that the very “coveting” of righteousness—even before you got any—was already fundamental sin?] The *opinio legis* covets righteousness; it needs to be crucified. It’s an either / or. Either you keep Christ in the equation, and the yen for merit/rewards gets excised. Or you keep rewards/merits in and Christ must be excised. It’s that simple.

“By this rule . . . all passages on works can be interpreted.”
I.e., not excluding Christ the mediator. [Tappert 164:372]

L. Commending Works Without Losing The Promise.

“The rule I have just stated interprets all the passages they quote on law and works. For we concede that in some places the Scripture presents the law, while in others it presents the Gospel, the free promise of the forgiveness of sins for Christ’s sake. But by their denial that faith justifies and by their doctrine that because of our love and works we receive the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation, our opponents SIMPLY ABOLISH THE FREE PROMISE. [Tappert 132:185ff] If the forgiveness of sins were conditional upon our works, it would be completely unsure and the promise would be abolished. Therefore we call upon devout minds to consider the promises, and we teach them about the free forgiveness of sins and the reconciliation that comes through faith in Christ. Later we add the teaching of the law. And we must distinguish between these, as Paul says (II Tim.2:15). We must see what the Scriptures ascribe to the law and what they ascribe to the promises. FOR THEY PRAISE WORKS IN SUCH A WAY AS NOT TO REMOVE THE FREE PROMISE.”

“We cannot set any works of ours against the wrath of God, as Paul clearly says (Rom.5:1).” [Tappert 134:195]

PART II. AN AHA! FOR INTERPRETING THE WORLD

Thesis 8:

If this hermeneutical/soteriological change signals different theological universes, it will inevitably have equally tectonic consequences for “interpreting the world,” the “stuff” that fills our world(s). IN BOTH BIBLICAL LANGUAGES—HEBREW & GREEK—GOD’S WORD AND GOD’S WORK ARE SYNONYMS. DABAR. LOGOS / RHEMA

God is at work in the world with two regimes, as the ambidextrous deity of the Scriptures. Lutheran “Two Regimes” language is about “THEO-logy,” about how God operates in our world. It is not initially about “ethics,” how humans are to operate in this world. As with all God- operations in our world, our human position is that of responder. We are second in the line-of-action sequence. Key here for responding to both of these diverse God-actions is to respond “responsibly,” a response from us that is “fitting” for the differing divine initiatives that come from God’s left and right hands. Since the two initiatives are different, the same is true for the “fitting” responses.

PART III. AN AHA! FOR FOLLOWING CHRIST IN THE WORLD.

Thesis 9: Distinctively Lutheran ethics build on law/promise hermeneutics in “reading” both the Scriptures and God’s ambidextrous work in the world. The PROMISE always has the last word, even as the LAW of God is on the screen. Bob Bertram’s DEXTRA acronym signals the relationship between God’s two hands: different, equivalent, cross-over, trusses, replaces, (finally) antiquates. The reigning rubric is Melanchthon’s: to commend good works without losing the PROMISE.

Possibly Professor Keller will touch on this in his keynote address. Why? Because Werner Elert’s THE CHRISTIAN ETHOS is unique among Lutheran ethics textbooks in making this divine doublet—law and Gospel—the blueprint for his entire book. Results: 1) Any “third use of the law” is jettisoned. Why? It inevitably “loses the promise” while commending good works. 2) The ethical imperatives in the Bible need distinguishing: Law imperatives and Grace imperatives differ fundamentally because of the differing “grammars” of Law and Promise. 3) In place of the law’s third use comes a “second use of the Gospel” (for ethics). This second use of the Gospel commends good works without losing the Promise. 4) Important for Augsburg theologians today is Elert’s deconstructing the “orders of creation” confusion that surfaces over and over again when that term appears in theological discourse today – either to be praised or to be damned. Here too law/promise hermeneutics brings clarity.

One example of ignoring the Aha! for ethics and thus losing the promise is the ELCA's recent report from the sexuality task force. Law/promise hermeneutics is affirmed in shibboleth fashion, but then ignored as the two "sides" of the debate come to expression.

PART IV. AN AHA! FOR BEING THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD

I defer to Strelan's and Kleinhans' presentations.

Useful resources for me on this topic are R.R. Caemmerer's THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD and Part III of Elert's THE CHRISTIAN ETHOS: "The Objective Ethos of the Body of Christ."

CONCLUSION

The Gospel is a promise, an honest-to-God promise. Promises work by "faith alone." Today there is lots of talk in our midst about "people of faith." In America it is a "pc"-term for believing anything that qualifies as spiritual or religious. Not so the faith that rebirths sinners into God's beloved kids. Augsburg confessors need to be saying that loud and clear. Christian faith is case-specific, Christ-specific. And not some "generic Jesus" either, but the cross-marked one offering forgiveness: "Young man, you'll be glad to hear this. Your sins are forgiven." "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." Christ-specific faith trusts Jesus as "wording" God's own voice to us when he offers forgiveness. Should there be some doubt about Jesus' authority for such a task, on Easter God ratifies Jesus as God's own voice for forgiveness.

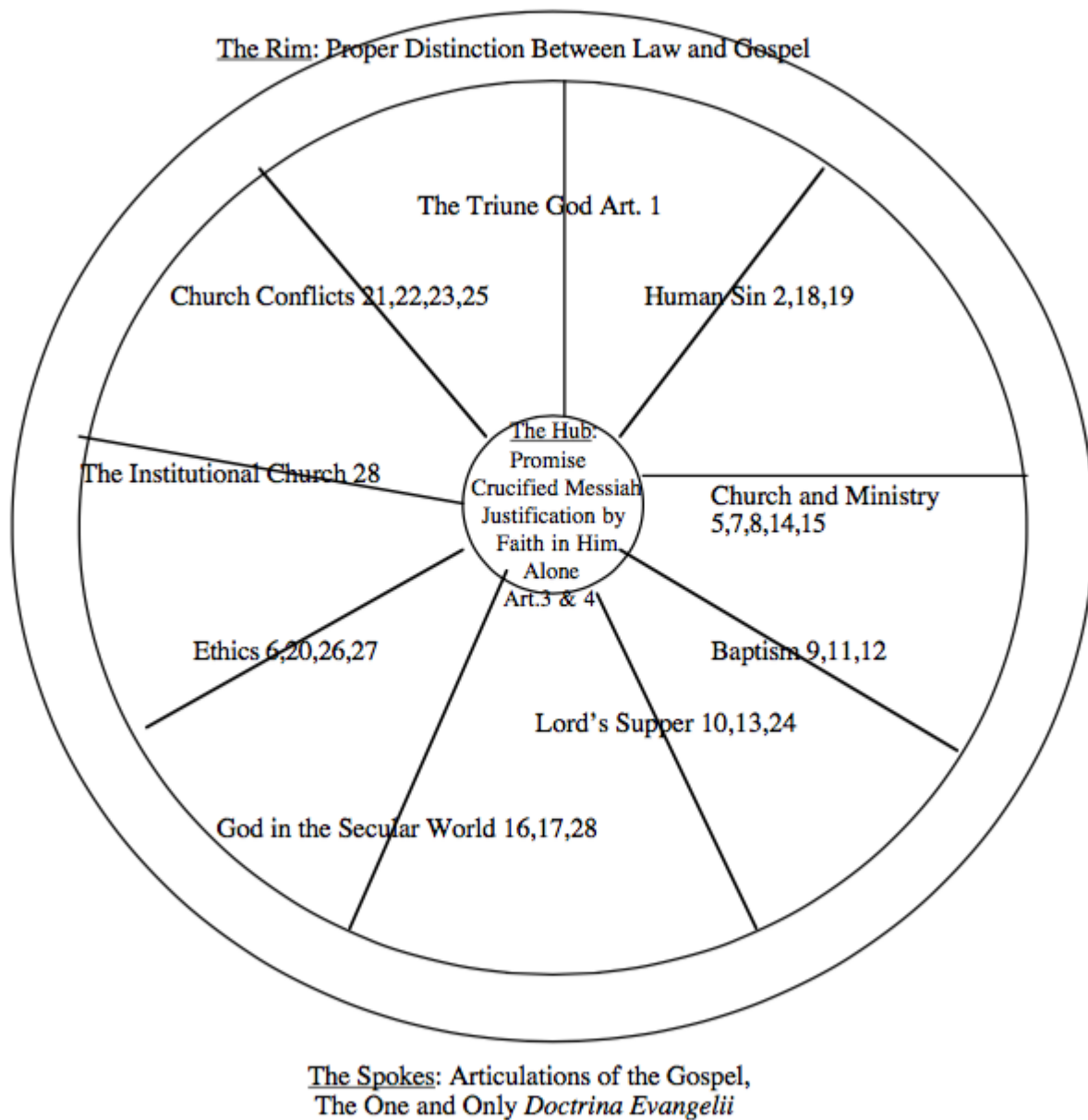
Because human sin and human death are Siamese twins, in order to save folks from one you have to save them from the other. So forgiving sinners and undoing death are equally yoked. St. Paul is emphatic about that (I Cor. 15): If Christ didn't trump death, then sin isn't trumped either. No resurrected Jesus, no forgiven sinners, and any faith in such forgiveness is fiction. Sin, death, law are the DNA triple helix of the "first Adam, a man of dust."

"But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead. The last enemy IS destroyed." The second Adam now has death behind him. So do those who trust him. "God gives us this victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." His post-Easter DNA gets swapped for ours—by faith alone, of course. It's a new triple helix in the genetic code of Christ-trusters: forgiveness of sins, life that lasts, an honest-to-God promise.

We have God's Word for it.

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St. Louis, Missouri
January 2, 2007

The Theological Paradigm (The System) of the Augsburg Confession of 1530



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