

# THE WORD OF GOD IN THE LUTHERAN TRADITION

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**THESIS 1** It is not Martin Luther, but rather the Lutheran confessions, (the Lutheran symbols) that are the doctrinal yardstick for Augsburg Confessing Christians. These symbols, the three ancient ecumenical creeds together with the 16th century reformation confessions (= "as our symbol in this epoch" 504:5), are *norma normata*, norming yardsticks subject to yet another yardstick, the *norma normans* of "the Word of God (which) is and should remain the sole rule and norm of all doctrine " (505:9).

**THESIS 2** The term "Word of God" in the Augsburg tradition is first of all an assertion about God before it is a predicate about the Bible or anything else. "Word of God" = humanly accessible God-data. There is more to God than is available to us in the Word of God, "yet one cannot deal with God or grasp him except through the Word of God" (116:6?). Such restriction, such "limited access", though contrary to our chronic Adamic yen for "more" or even for "different and better" God-data, is itself finally good news. For us and for our salvation *satis est*. Here "more" would be "less".

**THESIS 3** Under the rubric of "humanly accessible God-data" the Holy Scriptures as Word of God are not the last in a hierarchical line of authorities, but the fons the source, the "bubbler" of access to the prophetic and apostolic witness, and

thus “source and norm.” Perhaps the most daring claim of the Augsburg tradition is that this *fons* also provides the “form of doctrine” and thus an intra-Scriptural rule” for interpreting Scripture itself, as well as any subsequent doctrine, liturgy, or ethos which claims the name “Christian.”

**THESIS 4** When the Word of God is “used” according to that “form” and “rule”, “it illumines and magnifies the honor of Christ and brings to pious consciences the abundant consolation they need”(107:2). This double-dipstick, the Christological-liturgical and the pastoral- soteriological, constitutes the criterion proposed by the Augsburg tradition for the Word of God ruling in our world today. The code-word is “Promise.”

## Commentary to Thesis 2

To view the Word of God as limited access data made available to us for “dealing” with God is not a premise, but a conclusion of Christian experience. After the Christ-encounter we see that the yen to get beyond and behind the givens offered us by God is more akin to original sin, than to anything else. To pull away the veil and see God as *deus nudus* is one of the primordial urges of all the children of Eve and Adam. It is a form of the *eritis sicut deus* temptation originally offered and regularly repeated to humankind.

This was one of the points of sharp debate between Lather and Erasmus in 1525. So many of our vexing conundrums would be resolved, said Erasmus, if only God Himself were not so inscrutable. Luther replies: “Now, God in his own nature and majesty is to be left alone; in this regard, we have nothing to do with him, nor does he wish us to deal with him. We have to do with him as clothed and displayed in his Word, by which he presents himself to us.... He sets bounds to himself by his word, but has kept himself free over all things. The Diatribes

(Erasmus's monograph) is deceived by its own ignorance in that it makes no distinction between God preached and God hidden, that is between the Word of God and God himself." "We must discuss God, or the will of God, preached, revealed, offered to us, and worshipped by us, in one way, and God not preached, nor revealed, nor offered to us, nor worshipped by us, in another way. Wherever God hides himself and wills to be unknown to us, there we have no concern."

Not only is it intellectual folly for us to grasp for something constitutionally beyond our reach as the data of *deus absconditus*, but it is soteriological folly as well. For if we ever were somehow to break through to an encounter with God "unclothed", God *per se*, the encounter would kill us. Isaiah's inaugural vision in chapter 6 is the paradigm for face-to-face encounters between unclothed sinners and un-clothed divinity. "Woe is me, for I am undone!"

Even if such a glory-hungry theologian were not to get "zapped" in the process of storming the divine boudoir, Lather notes another fate that might even be worse: "the wisdom which beholds the invisible things of God as perceivable through such accomplishments, puffs up, blinds, and hardens man altogether"(Heidelberg thesis ffS2).

Yet the Word of God, *deus revelatus*, God revealed, preached, offered to us and worshipped by us is something else. Here is God accessible, deal-with-able in a way that does not destroy us or harden us into the prison of unbelief. Over and over again the Augsburg crowd use the adjectives "ausserlich" and "leiblich" for the Word of God—externally and palpably, tangibly available to us. That gives a certain fluidity to the term "Word of God." Scriptures, of course, are the Word of God under this rubric. Christ as deus revelatus in person, of course, is Word of God. So is good preaching of the Gospel; ditto for the

sacraments, and Christian liturgy: God revealed, preached, offered, and worshipped. From this perspective it is no surprise to hear that “baptism is nothing else than the Word of God in water” (510:1).

The accent is not on the supernatural, the noumenous, the other-worldly—all of which are surely there in *deus absconditus*, *deus nudus*, the *mysterium tremendum et fasciosum*. Rather the accent is on the data that is down here on the ground, external and palpable, not lofty, but lowly—decidedly low-key like a helpless baby in a manger under the shadow of a cross. A theologian whose agenda is to deal with such Word of God data, says Luther, is “rightly to be called theologian, viz., the one who perceives what is visible of God, God’s backside (Exodus 55:25), by beholding the sufferings and the cross”(Heidelberg thesis #20).

Why be content with such low-key data for divinity? For us and for our salvation it is sufficient. *Satis est*. To want more, or different, or better God-data is finally to give the given data a vote of no-confidence—with deadly consequences.

## Commentary to Thesis 3

There was no serious debate during the reformation era about the Bible being the Word of God and its being authoritative. That surprises some protestants sometimes. After the Augsburg Confession was presented in June 1550 the Roman party presented a response in short order, the *Confutatio Pontifica*. This Roman response did not cite tradition ancient or modern to prove the Augsburg Confessors wrong. Instead the Roman theologians argued from the foundation of *sola scriptura*. In response to AC 4 on justification they said: “it is entirely contrary to Holy Scriptures to deny that our works are meritorious” or again “ascription of justification to faith alone is diametrically

opposed to the truth of the Gospel....” When Melanchthon made his counter-response to the *Confutatio* he notes that fact at the very outset: “Our opponents brag that they have refuted our Confession from the Scriptures.”

The reformation era debate in Germany about the Bible was not whether, but what: not whether it was authoritative, but what its authority was. Of course it is the Word of God, but what does it say authoritatively? How can you tell when Christian confession, Christian doctrine of a later time actually has the authority of the original *fons* bubbling for it?

The Lutheran symbols address that question head on, starting with Melanchthon’s awareness that Biblical hermeneutics had become the stage on which the drama proceeded after the *Confutatio* said what it did. Any confession, their own included, say the confessors, needs norming, needs safeguards. Their own confession, so they say, has such a safeguard. In their own rhetoric it is their claim to be confessing a genuinely Biblical “form of doctrine...drawn from the Word of God” (*Form der Lehre...aus Gottes Word genommen*) (506:10).

But if the Confessions are taken from the Scriptures, what “form” do they take? What is it about the Scriptures that shapes these confessions scripturally? Is it simply that the Confessions are supported throughout by numerous, individual Bible quotations? That they are. And that is important. But the *Confutatio* had that too, and if that were all, we could easily lose sight of the Biblical forest for the trees, the way the Pharisees did. Scripture is also a grand whole, with its own characteristic structure throughout. It too, and first of all, has a unique “Form.” And what is that? What is the original form of the Word of God which in turn in-forms the Confessions—without which any confession, though it might still be Biblical here and there, would be badly de-formed?

Or put the question in other words. For all Christian teachers and teachings, as the Lutheran symbols insist, Scripture is the “only rule,” [*die einige Regel unica regula*] (464:1. 465:7, 505:9). However, not only does Scripture rule or regulate those writings which come after Scripture and stand outside it. Also, Scripture has its own internal rule by which all Biblical writings themselves are regulated. If the exegetes should misread that “rule” within Scripture itself—as the confessors’ critics seemingly did at Augsburg—then they miss the whole point of Scripture, no matter how many Biblical passages they quote. Then it is impossible for the exegetes themselves to be “ruled” by Scripture.

But then the crucial question is: what is this fundamental intra-Biblical *regula*? It is, as the Apology of the AC states: “the distinction between the law and the promises or Gospel”; this “rule...interprets all the passages they [viz., our critics] quote on law and works” (132:185-186). Or as the Apology usually prefers to put it, quoting directly from Scripture: “apart from (Christ)you can do nothing” (John 15:5); “without faith it is impossible to please God” (Heb. 11:6); “since we are justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:1) (147:269; 148:277; 186:56 and *passim*).

This grand motif, the distinctive Gospel ruling over the Law, is what the confessors call the Biblical *regula*. Here is Scripture’s own inner “regulator.” “This is,” as the Apology declares, “the essential proclamation of the Gospel”(148:274). “That Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, ‘was put to death for our trespasses and raised again for our justification,’” say the Smalcald Articles, “on this article rests all that we teach and practice,” (292:5). This alone is the “form” which informs Scripture, and by which alone Scripture in turn determines the Confessions’ “form of doctrine.” This alone is the “rule” which regulates Scripture, and by which alone Scripture in turn

exercises “sole rule” over the Confessions.

Finally, it is this distinctively evangelical “form of doctrine...drawn from the Word of God”— and not some other, lesser form drawn from the Word of God—to which “all other writings are to be...regulated”(506:30). All other writings and all Christian confessors, preachers, worshippers, and bearers of the Christian ethos. Is that one scriptural “form of doctrine,” the Biblical Gospel distinct from and superseding the Biblical Law, still powerful enough to “regulate” Christian confessing, and worshipping, and living today? Or better do we still have the faith that it can? That is the ecumenical proposal, the proposal for evangelical catholicity coming from the Augsburg tradition—in the 16th century and in the 20th. To believe or disbelieve the Word of God is to say Yes or No to that option.

## Commentary for Thesis 4

The “pay-off” for such rubrics for the Word of God is finally pastoral and liturgical—honoring Christ as the Lord he intends to be and having his merits and benefits transferred to the ownership of those for whom they were originally intended—sinners, the “sick”, the “non-righteous. “The worst dishonor that can be done to Christ is to render him use-less—in Paul’s words, “as though Christ died in vain.” The confessional axiom is Christus manet mediator (Christ continues to be the mediator—for Christians, mind you) if for no other reason than that lex semper accusat (the law always accuses—even Christians!). “For who (of us Christians) 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 lives up to the requirements of his calling? Who loves his neighbor as himself? Who is not tempted by lust?” (150:16?)

To comfort consciences is not to make guilty introspective souls feel good about themselves. "Conscience" in the Reformers' psychology was less Freud's super-ego than it was what Freud designated ego—the reflective, evaluative, decision-making center of my self. It is at the center of my self-perception my self-worth, my self-management that the gospel of Christ comes as a word of God's promise.

Promise is the favored word in the AC for the Gospel. A recent crop of Luther researchers think they can document that the "breakthrough" for Brother of Martin came when he caught hold of (or was himself caught by) the simple sentence: *evangelium est promissio*. This was an important shift from what the word Gospel had regularly meant in much of medieval theology. It was seen as a *philosophia coelestis*, or the *lex Christi*, or the historical report of Christ's biography.

Now the Gospel is an historical report, but it is more. It is a compelling assertion about today and not simply yesterday. Even more it is the Promise personally addressed to the hearer about his/her future history, the potentiality of what is to come – a potentiality that points beyond the here and now—to what the promisor claims to carry out for me in our common joint future. No wonder promise and *fiducia* are corollaries. Untrusted promises carry with them no future. Trusted promises have heady futures if the promisor is trustworthy. And that's why the Christic promise when put to use "brings pious consciences the abundant consolation they need."

The ruling promise (because it is the Promise of the crucified and risen Lord) has the *exousia* to bridge all gaps that stand between it/Him and the needy client—whether individual, a whole nation, or an entire planet. Gaps between the Promisor and the clients for whom His promise is intended continue to arise willy-nilly. The promise is the gap-spanner, the Word of God



ruling new turf into His regimen, and re-gaining old turf that slipped out from under his dominical authority.

*Promissio*, say the Augsburg Confessors is the secret, the open secret of the Word of God. *Promissio* is also the secret of our *missio*, i.e., His *missio*. For the one sending us on our mission is Himself the keeping of God's promise. And the gaps across which we move in our *missio*, are finally spanned by that same promise—of Himself by the Spirit through the Word of God.

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