

(From  
A PROJECT IN BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS  
CTCR Publication, 1969)

## THE HERMENEUTICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF APOLOGY IV

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*(The projected study on this subject will run to five or six chapters, more than half of which are already completed. What follows is not a chapter-by-chapter outline but only a highlighting of some of the study's findings so far.)*

The Fourth Article of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession may yield help for Biblical interpretation today. But it can do so only when we heed how that article's own Biblical interpretations stick to the specific theological issue at hand, justification solely by faith, or to put the issue as a question: How to "commend works without losing the promise." In other words, it is not enough to look merely for the general literary procedures in Melancthon's exegesis (like his interpreting passages in their own context or according to their grammatical-historical meaning), which for the most part were by then the common stock of northern European humanism and by now have virtually become truisms. But justification entirely by faith, together with what this means for interpreting Scripture, was at that time hardly a truism. Nor is it now. But that already has hermeneutical significance. For then it is impossible to ask how Scripture is to be interpreted without constantly asking how men are to be saved. Biblical hermeneutics is at no point separable from Biblical soteriology.

The hermeneutical situation of Apology IV contains not just the two components of a Bible and an interpreter but at least a third component as well: the interpreter's critics — in this case the Roman Confutatores. Yet in concrete fact isn't that the hermeneutical situation still today? The interpreter's task is to cope not only with the text but with the text in the face of his own contemporary "accusers" (*adversarii*), who accuse on the basis of a contrary Biblical interpretation of their own. It is noteworthy that in the case of Apology IV the opposition was coming from the theological "right," and the Reformers were here being accused of innovating and of betraying the heritage of the past — worst of all, the Scriptures. At other times during the Reformation the opposition came from the theological "left." But even then the opponents were no less Scripture-quoting than the Roman Confutatores were.

But why did a Biblical interpreter like Melancthon have to take his opponents so seriously as all that? Why not simply ignore them? Why dignify their criticism as if it were itself an essential ingredient in his own exegesis? Answer: Because these critics, for one thing, had had a great deal to do with formulating the question before the house, defining the very issue. True, one of Melancthon's monumental achievements in Apology IV is the way he succeeds finally in reformulating the question. Here too is a moral for hermeneutics today: Embattled as the Biblical interpreter may be, he need not supinely accept the question in the legalistic form his critics put it to him but may instead have to restate it until it becomes a question directly about the Gospel. What this demands of the interpreter, however, is that he must then interpret not only Scripture but his opponents as

well — or rather reinterpret them — so as to avoid having his Biblical exegesis dragged down to the subevangelical level of their question.

For Melanchthon, however, there was still another reason for taking his critics seriously: Their criticism had quoted in its own support very formidable evidence from Scripture. This Biblical counter-evidence he could scarcely ignore. On the contrary he subjects it to a most careful cross-examination. His intention is to get down to the bottom, to the "sources" (*fontes*) of his opponents' objections. And these sources of theirs were at least in large part Biblical. In the course of this source analysis Melanchthon does isolate also a non-Biblical source, the critics' *opinio legis*. But even that non-Biblical factor of theirs seems to get some encouragement from Scripture, at least from that motif in Scripture which Melanchthon classifies as *lex*. Though their *opinio* is merely that, an exaggerated opinion, still what it is an exaggeration of is thoroughly Biblical, the Biblical *lex*. They have elevated to a saving truth what, though it is not saving, is still truth. And the *lex* motif in Scripture does on the face of it seem to contradict the evangelical motif, the "promises." That the promises are ours entirely by our faith and independently of our "works of the Law," Scripture does at times seem to deny. Question: Could it be then that there is "bad" Scripture which drives out "good" Scripture? This delicate question, which the Confessors boldly faced (and faced it when even their own critics had not dared to do so) dare not be faced any less boldly by the Biblical interpreter today.

Although Melanchthon finally answers this question — this question of Scripture versus Scripture — with a no, his answer is by no means automatic. One of the most treacherously difficult operations he first has to perform is to distinguish the *lex* motif in Scripture from its *promissio* motif — a distinction his critics saw no need to make, preferring as they did to regard Scripture as a self-evident unity. And what makes Melanchthon's distinguishings more difficult than ever is that as a matter of fact large and important sections of Biblical literature — for example, passages about repentance or about rewards — do indeed combine both *lex* and *promissio* into a most intricate togetherness. The critics saw no need to put asunder what God had joined together.

But neither of course was that Melanchthon's intention. The trouble was that the togetherness which the critics saw in Scripture was not the togetherness which is really there. They misjoined *lex* and *promissio* unbiblically because of that "source" (admittedly Biblical) from which they had taken their start and to which they had erroneously given priority: the *lex*. But you cannot start from just anywhere in Scripture, no matter how true and divine that may be. Unless you start from Scripture's *promissio*, you wind up with a legalistic mishmash which is neither *promissio* nor *lex*.

This is why Melanchthon first had to distinguish these two motifs, the legal and the promissory, in order ultimately to relate them back together the way they belong: internally at odds with one another yet able to coexist effectively in one and the same passage, really in one and the same sinner — provided that sinner takes Christ's victory over the law *sola fide*, entirely on faith. Only in Christ is the Law given its full Biblical due and yet reduced to its Biblical position of subdominance. And the only way to "have" this Biblical Christ — and hence to keep both promise and Law intact in their Biblical togetherness — is by faith, not first by actualizing Him in faith's works. That, that and no other doctrine of Scripture's wholeness

(not even the doctrine of its whole inspiredness, which of course Melanchthon's critics likewise believed) is the secret of Scripture's deepest diversity and its ultimate unity. Could anything be more significant hermeneutically than that?

To have the promised Christ altogether by faith is the only way to "use" Him for what He historically was and is: the coming true of sheer merciful promise. Any other way than the *sola fide* is to render Him and His whole history "unnecessary." For what else was that whole long Biblical history, both fore and aft, but the history of God's *promissio* — not only His revealing of it but His making the promise and keeping it, historically — the historic judgments of His *lex* to the contrary notwithstanding? Throughout that Biblical history, as in human experience generally, promises are made to be trusted. Not only does faith need the promise, but as Melanchthon adds, the promise also needs faith. This is the only way to benefit from a promise at all and still honor it as the promise it is: by trusting the promissor's own goodness, especially when he is known to have no illusions about ours. To try instead to insure his promise by realizing it on our own is to make his promise needless.

Melanchthon's reply to his Roman accusers is that by obscuring the *sola fide* they have let Biblical history (which is nothing if it is not promissory) simply go to waste. In that case it might just as well not have happened. Then Christ has died in vain, and there is no "need" of Him. Here we might interject: Could it be that some exegetes today (including those who speak most glowingly about "faith") require only a minimalist Biblical history because, with a kind of subconscious and perverse honesty, they are living out Melanchthon's warning? Having lost the promissory secret of Biblical history (which for Melanchthon was the one reason faith "needs" that history), perhaps they have now done the only consistent thing of discounting that history. How ironic that would be!

Melanchthon's solution, on the other hand, is not merely to insist that all Biblical history did in fact take place. That much the Roman Confutatores would also have insisted, and still he claimed that for them the history's happening was really quite pointless. No, his solution was rather to recover within that history its basic "need" of having happened at all: Jesus Christ, God's promise kept, who is ours only by faith. Melanchthon's sort of interpreter — and Luther was only one of his models, the Biblical writers themselves having set the pace — realigns the Biblical record again and again with what was really going on there: God subduing His *lex* with His *promissio*, so that good works could freely be commanded and "commended without losing the promise."

If here and there in the Biblical record the accent on *promissio* had been "omitted" — conspicuously by the Confutatores and sometimes seemingly at least by the Biblical writers themselves — then that accent needed now to be "added" by the faithful interpreter. Still that "adding" was not a case of making Biblical history over into something it was not, into some allegorizing re-creation by the interpreter's own pious imagination. It was simply a case of having no good evangelical reason for saying *that* a Biblical event happened until it was clear first of all *what* it was that happened. And those Biblical passages which were the most "clear" passages of all, and hence the clearest clues to *what* God was doing throughout, were those which announced that He was justifying the ungodly by faith alone — as He does still.