

Law-Gospel Reductionism in the History of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod

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This essay proposes to trace a segment of the history of hermeneutics in The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod insofar as the distinction between Law and Gospel plays a role in that history. The study is important because in recent years one school of thought in the Synod has stated that some pastors and teachers are confusing the proper relationship between the two by practicing what these critics call “Gospel reductionism.” This criticism seems to have been launched in the Synod in two conference papers that John Warwick Montgomery delivered to eight different audiences in the spring and fall of 1966. In these essays Montgomery used the term “Law/Gospel reductionism” to designate a hermeneutical practice that he finds objectionable. The term was widely disseminated by virtue of these eight oral presentations and by the subsequent publication of one of the papers in the lay-aimed publication *Lutherans Alert* (August-September-October, 1966) and by the later publication of both papers in Volume I of Montgomery’s own collected essays, *Crisis in Lutheran Theology*.¹

According to Montgomery, one of the prime offenders in the practice of gospel reductionism is Walter R. Bouman. At considerable length Montgomery criticizes Bouman’s drawing on the theology of Werner Elert for this point.² Montgomery rightly senses the important historical role that Elert played in the renewed accent on the distinction between the Law and the Gospel in the Missouri Synod’s theology in the last decade and a half. We shall return to Elert’s role in the discussion in a moment, but first we must clarify what the critics are criticizing when they call something “Gospel reductionism,” or when they use the fuller term “Law/Gospel reductionism.”

Thus it is charged that “Law/Gospel reductionism” confuses the “material and formal principles of Lutheran theology.” The “formal principle” is that the Bible is the inspired Word of God and the source and norm of all doctrine or, in the words of F. E. Mayer, “the formal principle of Lutheran theology is *sola scriptura*, Scripture alone.”³ The material principle is the article of justification by grace through faith which according to the Lutheran Confessions, is a synopsis and summary of the entire Christian truth.⁴ It is argued by opponents of “reductionism” that the Confessions and our tradition hold to a careful distinction between these two principles.⁵

In Montgomery’s essays Gospel reductionism is described as a hermeneutical procedure that calls for interpreting Biblical texts with the Gospel, or the distinction between Law and Gospel, as the basic exegetical norm. The criticism of this Law/Gospel reductionism affirms that this sort of exegesis allows great latitude in interpretation as long as textual interpretations do not affect the Gospel. Thus, for example, according to critics the Law/Gospel reductionists can argue that cosmological or mythic aspects in Joshua and Genesis are to be interpreted as such inasmuch as this interpretation does not affect the Gospel.⁶

Even though the fathers seldom if ever used the word “hermeneutics” or the neologism “Law/Gospel reductionism,” the distinction between Law and Gospel is used by C. F. W. Walther, Francis Pieper, and F. E. Mayer in the very way that contemporary critics of Gospel reductionism are criticizing.

No one disputes the centrality of the distinction between Law and Gospel for Walther’s theology.⁷ But its centrality was not maintained after Walther’s death, although it continued to be remembered on the theological agenda.⁸ The reintroduction of the theme—especially for the practice of hermeneutics—into the Missouri Synod is associated with the late Lutheran theologian Werner Elert (d. 1954). Members of the current faculties of the church’s schools at St. Louis, River Forest, and Valparaiso, spurred on by the work in historical and systematic theology produced by Elert, are undoubtedly primes movers for nudging the topic back toward the center of the Synod’s theological agenda.

Elert’s concentration of the distinction between Law and Gospel as the central theologoumenon of the Lutheran Reformation was exacerbated by two items in his own German situation. One was the way the distinction was largely ignored (perhaps unconsciously) in the Reformation studies of Holl and Troeltsch. Elert sought to counter this in his large two volume *Morphologie des Lutheriums*.⁹ The second was the way the distinction was explicitly opposed by Karl Barth, who admitted that it was indeed central to the Lutheran Reformation, but considered it a central *mistake* of the Lutheran Reformation. Elert responded to Barth in his own dogmatics and ethics and in his explicit critique of Barth entitled *Law and Gospel*.¹⁰

Just how Elert became known in the theological discussions of the Missouri Synod would itself make an interesting historical study. Just who in the Synod discovered this stern Prussian from the Lutheran Free Church tradition is hard to tell. His *Morphologie* was reviewed within months after it appeared in Germany in the CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY by Theodore Engelder, who gave rave notices for the exposition of Law and Gospel and the doctrine of justification he found therein. But Engelder was offended (predictably?) by Elert’s critique of the inspiration doctrine of post-Reformation Lutheran orthodoxy and by Elert’s noting some small steps sideways taken by the Formula of Concord in relation to the *evangelischer Ansatz*.¹¹ Only one other notice about Elert appeared in the CTM (VIII [October 1937], 738-740) before Paul M. Bretscher’s eulogy in the March 1955 issue. (XXVI, 211-214)

More likely it was oral tradition that kept Elert before the eyes of some in the Synod. In any case, in the late 1940s and early 1950s he was being mentioned in theology classes at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, with sufficient commendation by Professors Bretscher, Mayer, and Pelikan—to name a few—that several seminary graduates from that student generation went to Erlangen University for the explicit purpose of studying under Elert. The most significant apostle of the rediscovery of the distinction between Law and Gospel in the Synod was Robert C. Schultz, one of those graduate students. His doctoral dissertation under Elert was published under the title *Gesetz und Evangelium in der Luthereischen Theologie des 19ten Jahrhunderts*.¹²

After this brief review of recent history in the Synod on the return of the distinction to the active theological marketplace, the question must still be asked: What is it that critics of Law/Gospel reductionism don’t like about it? We have already noted that Montgomery perceives that it is the distinction used as a hermeneutical procedure

which is really at the base of his discomfort. Yet the evidence is by no means in whether the critics or the alleged reductionists are “in keeping with our Lutheran confessions.” In my brief contribution to the Caemmerer *Festschrift*¹³ I sought to document that the critics are in error on this point and that the distinction between Law and Gospel is indeed the hermeneutical touchstone that our confessions give us. Thus anyone concerned about his *quia* subscription to the Lutheran Symbols would hardly take umbrage at anyone using the centrality of the Gospel, even “reducing” issues to Gospel or not-the-Gospel, as his Lutheran hermeneutical key for interpreting the Bible.

By referring to the formal and material principles, the critics make their point that in their view *sola Scriptura* has primacy, by which they regularly mean a particular theory of biblical inspiration. And then, they reason, since we have an inspired revelation from God we look into the Biblical texts and do indeed find the Gospel as the central message. The section on Mayer below graphically illustrates why that seemingly logical line of reasoning is finally just that, a line of *reasoning*, and not necessary. (It is not even helpful, and it is potentially competitive to justification by faith alone.)

If the expression “Gospel reductionism” did not already carry such a pejorative flavor, it would serve as a good label to describe what regularly happened in the early years of Reformation confessional history. Already in the confessions preceding the Augsburg Confession—at Schwabach and at Torgau—the confessors evaluate the abuses in teaching and practice of the late medieval church by tracking down their actual or potential impingement on the Gospel. The reformers actually put into practice a means of evaluating issues by leading them back (*reducere*) to the Gospel. If there was no way that the Gospel was either abated or abetted by a particular practice or Biblical interpretation, then the confessors were content to ignore it or, at most, to give it skimpy treatment. No issue is important enough to fight about if it is only at a “sub-Gospel” level. Thus the distinctions about fasting, liturgical practices, images in church buildings, marriage of the clergy, whether women should cover their heads in church (even though it is admitted that St. Paul expressly says they must) were all included in the realm where Christian freedom prevails.

The reformers did not get excited about one position or its contrary on such questions, so long as these questions stayed—as well they might—on a sub-Gospel level. Only when a practice or an interpretation was “upgraded,” so to speak, to be significant in the area of salvation; only when a person was considered better or worse before God because they did or did not practice one or the other thing, only then would the confessors address the issue head on—and with vigor! This happened, for example, when clerical celibacy was understood as making the clergy better in God’s sight than married Christians are or when image-donors or worshipers using images as media for devotion thought that their action would give them special merit. In such cases an adiaphoron, an item having no effect on the Gospel in principle, had been pushed into the center where the Gospel alone has jurisdiction. That made it a competitor to the Gospel and by virtue of the confessors’ own practice of Gospel reductionism (literally *re-ducere*: bringing the issue back to the Gospel) they would pronounce their *damnamus*. The competitor had to go—not a priori, not in principle, but only when in practice something became a competitor to the Gospel of Christ’s justifying a sinner.

It is hard to read the Montgomery essays, and those from others who stand with him in the criticism of Gospel reductionism¹⁴ without hearing them pushing their

convictions about Biblical inspiration as a *requirement* before God will really be pleased with a person. Clearly they do not want to be saying that, but the argument is always at the very edge of a soteriology which says: “Of course, Jesus Christ is the center for God’s approval of any sinner, but it is Jesus Christ plus just this little something—admitting that the Bible is God’s verbally inspired book—in the way I perceive those terms. Then you have the fullness. Otherwise there is one thing you lack.” The Reformation’s biggest *damnamus* and Paul’s *anathema* in his Letter to the Galatians are addressed to a Jesus-plus-something soteriology that follows that paradigm.

The distinction between Law and Gospel is the opening yardstick whereby the confessors practiced their Gospel reductionism.¹⁵ That distinction gave them a theological Occam’s razor to keep from multiplying gospels (or from expanding the Gospel to include more and more things that one *must* believe) and to perceive when something was Gospel and when it was not. Thus the distinction is not a doctrine in itself. But it is a procedure practiced as an auxiliary theological tool in theology and proclamation to keep the Gospel “gospel.” And that is not easy. It is quite unlikely that everyone could easily see the point of the hassle between the Lutherans and the Roman Catholics in the 1530s. For the Roman theologians with whom the Lutherans were debating would readily have said, “Of course, Gospel; of course, grace, *sola gratia*; of course the Scriptures (the whole Scriptures, by the way, and not just the Pauline parts favored by you Lutherans); of course, faith; of course, Christ as sole Redeemer.” Was it perhaps all just a tempest in a teapot?¹⁶

In the face of this widespread agreement, even on an authoritatively acknowledged Bible by both sides, Melanchthon conducted a master-class kind of demonstration, a tour de force, in Apology IV to show how the distinction between Law and Gospel, when practiced as a theological razor, cuts through to expose where the Gospel really is and where it really is not in the debate of the day. The confessors of 1530 look very much like Gospel reductionists.

C. F. W. WALTHER

Walther used the distinction in just this classic way in his famed lectures on Law and Gospel.¹⁷ Schultz has shown how frequently Walther went into print or to the podium on the subject of the distinction. Major works are dated 1861, 1878, and 1884-1885. With reference to the importance of the distinction for hermeneutics, on which we wish to focus here, Schultz shows that the distinction was for Walther a fundamental hermeneutical tool. Biographically it was for him something of a *Turmerlebnis* (with Stephan playing Staupitz) that moved Walther from pietism’s kind of supernaturalist exegesis to Lutheran exegesis with the distinction as the fundamental tool.

Walther’s last two publications on the subject of the distinction were originally the lectures he gave Friday evenings at the seminary as a *Lutherstunde*. The first series was shorter—ten lectures on thirteen theses in 1879.¹⁸ The second series was considerably longer—thirty-nine lectures on twenty-five theses that carried over from 1884 to 1885.¹⁹ The substance of the two series presents no significant variations. In both sets of lectures Theses I and IV relate the distinction to hermeneutics. The texts of the two theses in both lecture series are identical. “Thesis I: The doctrinal contents of the entire Holy Scriptures, both of the Old and New Testaments are made up of two

doctrines differing fundamentally from each other, viz., the Law and the Gospel. Thesis IV. The true knowledge of the distinction between the Law and the Gospel is not only a glorious light, affording the correct understanding of the entire Holy Scriptures, but without this knowledge Scripture is and remains a sealed book.”²⁰

In discussing the first thesis Walther did not raise the hermeneutical question explicitly. He sifted through the doctrinal contents of the Bible and focused on the fundamental differences between the Law and the Gospel, which he found at six points: their manner of being revealed, their contents, their promises, their threatenings, their function and effect, and the persons to whom each is addressed. Walther’s formulation and order of the differences is regularly appropriated by subsequent theologians in their treatments of the distinction. For example, Eckhardt and Giesheler adhere to the same format.²¹

The one point where Walther touched on the hermeneutical issue at Thesis I is with the Luther citation that he puts at the base of much of his lecture. It is Luther’s sermon of New Year’s Day 1532 “Wie das Gesetz und Evangelion recht grundlich zu unterscheiden sind.”²² This sermon contains Luther’s dictum, “Whoever has mastered the art of distinguishing the Law from the Gospel should be moved to the front of the class and called a doctor of Holy Scriptures.” Walther discussed the substance of this citation in Thesis IV. Throughout Walther’s treatment of the distinction and in the tradition that followed him this Luther sermon from 1532 figures prominently. The same can be said for Article V of the Formula of Concord, which addresses itself to proclamation of the Law and the Gospel and to the practice of the distinction in parish life, with special focus on conversion. In view of Walther’s own biography, with his conversion so fundamental to his move into and out of pietism, it is easy to see why Article V of the Formula would have double weight in his theology, and especially in his lectures to students on the subject of the practice of pastoral theology.

Only rarely is Apology IV cited in the tradition which Walther initiated. That is perplexing in view of the demon of legalism and work-righteousness that Walther in these lectures sought to exorcise from his students’ preaching and pastoral work. Article IV is rich for that subject as well as for exegetical counsel. The hermeneutical implications of Apology IV have been mentioned above. As we shall see in a moment, what we call the issue of hermeneutics today did not confront Walther head on, and in his own Thesis IV he covered the entire thesis subject in only six and one half pages, so that although he had addressed the issue, he left it underdeveloped.

The text of Thesis IV is a direct appropriation of Article V of the Formula. It labels the distinction “a glorious light, affording the correct understanding of the entire Holy Scriptures, but without this knowledge Scripture is and remains a sealed book.” Walther developed this thought from the Formula as follows: Apart from the distinction the Bible seems to contradict itself over and over again by the antithetical predicates it makes for sinners: damned and saved. If the exegete does not want to conclude that the bible is simply self-contradictory, his only other option (if he does not have the distinction to use) is to harmonize the antithetical affirmations into some mixture that ruins both Law and Gospel. But if the pastor-exegete has the bright light of the distinction—and only if the pastor-exegete has it—does the Scripture become a salutary reality. He concludes with a prayer that God may keep this light kindled which “began to

shine once more in our time. See to it that it is not put out again....If this light is not carefully guarded, it will soon go out.”²³

It is important at this point to note what Walther did not say. Although he himself held to a verbal inspiration theory of the Holy Scriptures, at no point did he make that the logical first affirmation for Biblical hermeneutics, and then deduce the distinction as one of the first and fundamental articles presented in the Scriptures. Although he did not say so explicitly, he talked as if one had to have the distinction spectacles on one’s nose *before* one read the Scriptures in order to hear God’s Word coming out straight from the Bible. It is not a previously acknowledged *sola Scriptura* which will suffice for hearing the truth from the Bible. Thus one can say that unlike Pieper—as we shall see shortly—Walther was not constrained to separate and independently rank *sola Scriptura* and *solum evangelium*.

This is vividly demonstrated in his 1878 lectures, where it is not a doctrine of inspiration that makes for the certainty of the Gospel. Using Luther as an example, he shows how the fact of Scripture’s divine authorship was contributory to Luther’s despair—all those harsh things in the Bible about sinners come straight from God. But when Luther broke through to “joyful certainty...where did this divine certainty come from? Simply from this: God had bestowed upon him the correct light about the distinction between Law and Gospel, and thereby the entire Holy Scriptures became for him clear and divinely certain.” Walther probes the uncertainty and doubt that plague parishioners and finds that it lies for them in the same spot: “that they do not rightly distinguish law and gospel.” And he concludes citing Article V of the Formula that it is the distinction that makes the Gospel clear and that guards against Christ’s merits being eclipsed and Christians being robbed of the comfort they have in the Gospel. To focus certainty anywhere else is to confuse Law and Gospel and open the door again to the papacy.²⁴

In the frequent references to Luther’s sermon of 1532 it is curious that Walther made nothing of the fact that Luther was there preaching against the enthusiasts, precisely against their radical inspirationist-supernaturalist view of the Bible. Thus in the sermon Luther says: “It’s a crazy thing to say [of a Bible passage]: It is the Word of God, the Word of God! God’s Word is not all of one piece but differentiated.” Some things are the Word of God, but “they don’t apply to me.”²⁵ Luther’s constant critique of the enthusiasts is that they are legal-literalists who take every word of the Bible just because it is in the Bible and therefore the Word of God, and yet fail to run it through the sieve of the distinction. Because of this they become legalists in a form worse than the papacy—and what is really disastrous is that the Gospel is thereby destroyed. But Walther made no significant use of this.

The point where Walther did see enthusiast parallels in the situation he faced was the Methodist revivalist tradition. He was of course sharply critical of them, but not for their legalist use of Scriptures. Instead he objected to the pietistic *ordo salutis* they impose on a convert. He recurred to Luther’s sermon to show that by such “pressuring for prayer and internal struggle,” they “deny the Gospel.”²⁶

Walther never weighed *sola Scriptura* against *solum evangelium*, but for practical primacy, he regularly made the latter, as expressed in the distinction, the ultimate touchstone. “Only he is an orthodox teacher who not only presents all the articles of faith in accordance with the Scripture, but also rightly distinguishes from each other the Law

and the Gospel.”²⁷ Walther gave examples of sermons that were Scripturally correct, but “entirely wrong” because the distinction was not practiced. He did not, interestingly enough, entertain the vice versa question whether a sermon might be right on the distinction, but not Scripturally congruent. Is it too much to say that for him the distinction was the mark of Scriptural congruence and therefore he never found himself forced to rank *sola Scriptura* over against the centrality of the Gospel?

This much at least is very clear: Walther did not consider the distinction to be one of the many doctrines in the Scriptures. He quotes at length a passage from Gerhard: “In the chapter on the Gospel, No. 55, Gerhard says: ‘The distinction between the Law and the Gospel must be maintained at every point.’ Mark well—at every point. There is not a doctrine that does not call upon us rightly to divide Law and Gospel.”²⁸ I suggest that the reason that Walther did not prefix a section *de Scriptura* to his treatment of Law and Gospel, as Pieper did, is that he was following Gerhard’s axiom by distinguishing Law and Gospel as he presented his *de Scriptura*. Both from his personal biography and from his pastoral work he had seen how tormenting, how destructive a “naked” *de Scriptura* could be in the spiritual lives of people if the Gospel was not made prior, or at least coterminous, with the statement on Scriptures. “It is a characteristic of Christians to regard the Scriptures as the true infallible Word of God. But when they are in need of comfort, they find none; they cry for mercy...incapable of distinguishing Law and Gospel.”²⁹ The primary requisite for a *salutary* knowledge of the Holy Scriptures is the correct understanding of the distinction between the Law and the Gospel. The Bible is full of light to every one who has this knowledge. Wherever this knowledge is lacking, all Scripture remains a book sealed with seven seals.”³⁰ In one of his many sharp attacks on the papacy Walther argued that despite “the fact that the Popes believe the Bible of the Old and New Testaments to be the revealed Word of God,” the papacy confounds Law and Gospel, and thus remains an enemy of the Gospel.³¹ Here again we see that for Walther *de Scriptura* cannot be ranked ahead of *de evangelio* to insure salutary consequences. For Walther it is the Gospel, as specified in the distinction, which has the primacy for anybody’s salutary use of Scripture. Is that Gospel-reductionism? I think so.

F. PIEPER

What Walther never would do, Pieper tried in what was apparently his first public appearance before a District convention on the subject of the distinction between Law and Gospel—the 1880 Iowa District convention. Pieper was still in his twenties, newly arrived as a professor at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. He told the convention that he was so pressed for time that he had not composed his own theses to lecture on before them, but that he had taken Walther’s thirteen theses on the subject from 1878 and would try to do justice to his assignment via this means.

At the beginning of his lecture on Walther’s first thesis (“The doctrinal contents of the entire Holy Scriptures both of the Old and the New Testament, are made up of two doctrines differing fundamentally from each other, viz., the Law and the Gospel.”) Pieper appended a full-blown doctrine of verbal inspiration. He made the apodictic statement: “Whoever does not believe that the entire Holy Scriptures are God’s Word has given up the foundation of Christianity.”³² Having shown in his line of argument that even in its most miniscule part the Bible is God’s Word written by people driven by the Holy Spirit,

he then moved logically forward: “If the entire Holy Scriptures are God’s Word, then the Law too is God’s word, for it is obviously a segment of the same.”³³

The curious fact is that after this formidable overture with a doctrine of Scripture, the doctrine played no further role in the rest of the presentation. Pieper followed Walther’s form and even his rhetoric in the subsequent theses and never sought to capitalize on the preface which he had placed before the theses. Perhaps at this time he was still of two minds on the whole matter, for there are subsequent statements that seem out of phase with the opening preface.

The same situation appears to be true at the Kansas District convention in 1892, where Pieper once more had the doctrinal essay on the subject of the distinction. Here Pieper presented his own thesis on “The Practical Importance of the Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel.”³⁴ Here again he prefaced the presentation with a full-blown doctrine of inspiration, expanded from his 1880 presentation to concentrate on the word inerrant (*unfehlbar*). “In our time men within Christendom deny that the Holy Scriptures are the inerrant Word of God....If one denies that the Holy Scriptures are the inerrant Word of God, he has thereby sacrificed the grounds for the doctrine and faith of the Christian church....We by the grace of God wish to remain unshaken in the face of this error and steadfastly maintain: The entire Holy Scripture is God’s inerrant Word.” But in the very next paragraph he recognized that the acceptance of doctrine about an inerrant Bible has no necessary connection to salvation.

“Nevertheless not even all those who let Scripture stand as God’s Word are thereby orthodox Christians and teachers. One group of the sects is still holding steadfast, yes, even doing battle for the Scriptures as God’s inerrant Word, and yet they do not teach the way of salvation correctly. Even the papacy acknowledges formally that the Holy Scriptures are God’s inerrant word, and nevertheless the papacy is the Antichrist. For orthodoxy it is also necessary that a man is able to distinguish rightly the two doctrines that run through the entire Holy Scriptures, namely, Law and Gospel....If a man does not learn to distinguish these two doctrines, the entire Scripture is useless for him. For him it remains a closed book; he knows nothing about Christianity and cannot be saved.”³⁵

Even though these two absolute and seemingly exclusive affirmations are in successive paragraphs, Pieper did not attempt to relate how both inerrancy and the distinction are *the one articulus stantis et cadentis Christianae*. He made equally absolute claims about each one, but did not show any connection between the two. It is perhaps noteworthy that he did not mention the opposite option to the sects and papacy—that someone might have the distinction correct and actually use it in interpreting the Bible even though he did not adopt Pieper’s inerrancy doctrine. Sixty years later a group of Missouri Synod theologians at Bad Boll in the 1940s said just that, giving the *solum evangelium* primacy over *sola Scriptura* while not thereby doing the Scriptures a dishonor in their opinion. We will look at this in the section on F. E. Mayer.

But Pieper was himself of two minds about the question. He quoted Chemnitz to say that the distinction between the Law and the Gospel is no tortured *Spitzfindigkeit* (subtlety), but the “fundamental article, which actually is the doctrine of the Gospel, in which the righteousness of God from faith to faith is revealed.”³⁶ He followed Walther’s tradition in calling this the bright light without which the exegete would find the Bible contradicting itself. He even went into the subject of *fides historica* (*totdes*

Furwahrhalten), acknowledging that to hold something as the truth from youth up merely on the grounds of an external authority would be human, not saving, faith. “Even making the reasonable conclusion to accept the revelation as it is laid down in the Bible” is dead *fides historica*.³⁷

In his own way he too practiced Law-Gospel reductionism here. A true teaching of the two natures of Christ as the sole source for grace and an orthodox doctrine of Holy Baptism and the Eucharist achieve nothing if the pastor does not distinguish Law and Gospel. “Mixing Law and Gospel is *the* false doctrine.”³⁸ “If a teacher does not distinguish Law and Gospel, then everything that he teaches, which in other respects is formally correct, is erroneous.”³⁹

The issue of relating the primacy of the inerrant Scriptures and of the distinction between Law and Gospel remains unresolved in these works of the early Pieper. Even in his last great work, *Christian Dogmatics*, the two stand side by side. Because he moved the distinction way back to the third volume of his *Dogmatics* under the general heading of the means of grace,⁴⁰ one would think that the heavy accent on *sola Scriptura* had obviously assumed primacy. And yet tucked way back in the third volume we find statements giving the distinction such primacy as the following: “The Christian doctrine of justification is virtually identical with the discrimination between Law and Gospel.”⁴¹ “Finally it must be pointed out that the differentiation between Law and Gospel is necessary in order to correctly *understand the Scriptures*. The Formula of Concord calls on us to ‘guard with especial care’ this distinction between the Law and the Gospel because it ‘is a special brilliant light, which serves to the end that God’s Word may be rightly divided, and the Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles may be properly explained and understood.’ This statement of the Confession is no overstatement.”⁴²

Pieper is the heavyweight among the synodical fathers giving major support to the contention that *sola Scriptura* has primacy over *solum evangelium*, yet Pieper’s support is ambiguous as he persists in giving with one hand what it takes away with the other.

F. E. MAYER

There is no doubt that the position of F. E. Mayer on the relationship between the formal principle and the material principle as expressed in his magnum opus, *The Religious Bodies of America*, would merit him the label “Gospel reductionist.”⁴³ His four pages (144-147) on “The Formal and Material Principles of Lutheranism” are a classic on the subject, achieved by considerable agony as many of his students in the late 1940s and early 1950s (the author included) knew.

Mayer begins by saying that the formal principle of Lutheranism is *sola Scriptura*. He then asks why the Lutheran Church “nowhere” has a specific doctrinal article on the Holy Scriptures. He offers three reasons.

1. In the confessional era of Lutheranism’s conflict with Rome, the Roman Church never questioned the divine inspiration and authority of the Bible. The Lutherans and the Romans both accepted the Bible as God’s Word.
2. The symbols take for granted many items which a dogmatics would spell out in detail.
3. The Lutheran Confessions have no special article on the divine character of Scripture, because their interest was centered so prominently on a Christocentric approach to Scripture. They have no interest in an atomistic, proof-text, concordance approach to the

Scriptures. The Confessions state that Scripture must always be presented according to its two main parts, Law and Gospel. . . . Thus, according to the Lutheran Confessions, the main thought of all the Gospels and Epistles of the entire Scriptures is that we should believe that in Christ Jesus through faith we have a gracious God. The Apology points out that “enthusiasts,” humanists, and rationalists dissect the Scriptures into individual Bible texts and explain the articles concerning the righteousness of faith in a philosophical and a Jewish [=judaizing] manner. But in this atomistic Biblicist manner they actually abolish the doctrine of Christ as Mediator. Without the knowledge of the Gospel the Bible remains a meaningless and useless book. But when the Scriptures are seen as Gospel, as *evangelium*, the Word of God becomes the sanctuary above all sanctuaries, which sanctifies the person and everything he does.

Wherever this Word is preached, it becomes the power of God, an active and creative Word, and engenders the faith which accepts the Bible as Christ’s inerrant and final Word. This belief does not depend on rational arguments, but it is a divinely wrought faith. . . . In Lutheran theology the believer *does not accept the absolute authority of the Scriptures as an a priori truth, but because he has learned to know Christ as his divine Savior*; has experienced the power of His Word in the Scriptures upon his heart; and relies implicitly on Christ’s own statement concerning the divine character of the Scriptures. It is therefore proper to say that *the formal principle of Lutheran theology is entirely Christological*.⁴⁴

This is Mayer’s description of the *formal* principle. To say that the formal principle is “entirely Christological,” to say that it is part and parcel of the formal principle to see the Scriptures as *evangelium*, is precisely what some designate as Gospel reductionism, an alleged mixing of the Christological substance into the *sola Scriptura* principle, which ostensibly the fathers did not do. Mayer does it in grand style. It may be that some would say that Mayer is not far enough back to be designated a “father.” More needs to be said.

We noted above that Mayer arrived at the understanding expressed in the citation via considerable *Anfechtung* and *Sturm und Drang*. One fundamental element of that struggle, which he let his students know about, was his own anxiety that he might himself be departing from the “fathers.” But the “fathers” he was anxious about were some of the second and third post-Walther generation, many of whom were his own colleagues or immediate predecessors at Concordia Seminary. It is now easier for us to see that at that time Mayer too might have thought that there was only one tradition from the fathers of the Missouri Synod on every subject—including the subject of Scripture and the Gospel.

What Mayer said in *Religious Bodies* was not what he had always said on the subject. Comparing the statement in *Religious Bodies* with his essay in 1937 on “Romanism, Calvinism, and Lutheranism on the Authority of the Scripture,” we see important differences.⁴⁵ He says in the essay: “Both the Papacy and the Calvinism are enthusiastic and rationalistic while the formal principle of Lutheranism is *sola Scriptura*.”⁴⁶ “In Rome the Bible is accepted as God’s Word by authority of the ‘Church,’ in Geneva by the individual believer’s subjective conviction.”⁴⁷ “The absolute and final authority of the Holy Scriptures was the focal point of Luther’s controversy with Rome.”⁴⁸ In *Religious Bodies* he changes his reconstruction of Lutheran history to say that in the confessional era the Lutherans and the Romans had no conflict over the inspiration and authority of the Bible.

In the 1937 essay he sees not only Rome but also Zwingli and the enthusiasts disputing with Luther fundamentally about the authority of Scripture. He summarizes the essay as follows: “Rome and Calvin approach the Scriptures with a material principle which is not found in the Scriptures but which is superimposed on them. Because the Lutheran’s formal principle is *sola Scriptura*, his material principle must be the doctrine of justification, *sola gratia*. This article permeates Scripture and therefore directs and controls all true theological thinking. Every teaching which is not brought into proper relation with the article of justification is *eo ipso* false. The true theological perspective can be maintained only if theology centers in justification.”⁴⁹

What we see here is that in 1937 Mayer had a strong conviction of the supreme importance of the formal principle *sola Scriptura* and also interpreted much of the strife of Reformation history as revolving around the issue of Biblical authority. This emphasis can also be seen in a brief observation he made a few years later in a discussion of “Liberal Theology and the Reformed Churches.”⁵⁰ He stressed in his conclusion that the *sola Scriptura* principle had kept the Missouri Synod from liberalism, and only a firm allegiance to that principle would continue to keep the Synod safe.

Nevertheless the last citation above shows that Mayer realized the importance of the material principle of justification and thus his later full-blown exposition of this was not a totally new departure. In 1937, however, it must be noted that the material principle *follows from* and is *dependent upon* the formal principle *in principle!* In *Religious Bodies* he completely reversed that stance. During the last five years of his life he peppered the pages of the CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY with articles spelling out the implications of this shift in his theological thought.⁵¹

Unknown to historians is the actual significance which the Bad Boll conferences (1948 ff.) had on Mayer. His own published report on the first series of conferences coincides chronologically with the years when the shift took place, as can be read from his own works.⁵² Early in the 1948 conference series Mayer’s presentation emphasized the commitment of German Lutherans in America to the principle of *sola Scriptura*. “A genuine Scripture theologian is also a confessional theologian for an inner necessity compels him to abide unswervingly by a confession which is in full accord with the Scriptures and which repudiates all errors contrary to Scripture.”⁵³

Later in the conference a dispute arose concerning the Synod’s position on verbal inspiration. “Does the Missouri Synod in its dogmatical presentation make the doctrine of the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures the major premise, as it were, the starting point for all theological discussion?” Is it a doctrine of verbal inspiration that is “the *a priori* of all dogmatics, or does Missouri accept the bible as God’s Word according to Luther’s famous dictum “Was Christum treibet”? The question was further asked whether verbal inspiration will not lead to an intellectual and legalistic apprehension of the Bible.”

In response the representatives from Missouri urged three points to explain their position:

- a. We reject every mechanical interpretation of the process of inspiration....
- b. The term “verbal inspiration” is not to be understood as an attempt to explain the manner of inspiration, but to emphasize the mystery of inspiration.
- c. The doctrine of verbal inspiration is not the basis of our systematic theology and is not the major premise of Christian assurance. There are persons who are assured of their adoption as sons

without ever having heard of verbal inspiration. It is possible to believe in the inspiration of Holy Scriptures and yet promulgate gross doctrinal error (example of the Roman Church and of the Millennialists). It is possible to deny the verbal inspiration of the Holy Writ and yet not only confess the evangelical doctrine but testify it to the salvation of many. The doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture does not stand in the relationship of *a priori* but of *a posteriori* to our theology. It is not the broad basis upon which the pyramid of dogmatics is built up. It is not the regulative dogma in our system.⁵⁴

This statement is remarkable for a number of reasons. One is that an official Missouri Synod delegation of theologians, headed by the Synod president John Behnken, made it in 1948, with no evident disagreement in the delegation.⁵⁵ In addition this statement makes two points, both of which are picked up in Mayer's later writings. First is the importance of *was Christum treibet* and the Christocentricity of Biblical interpretation. Second is the rejection of the *a priori* nature of the formal principle. Mayer comments in *Bad Boll* that the Missouri representatives noted "the insistence on the part of German theologians that the approach to the Bible must be primarily Christocentric and only secondarily from the viewpoint of inerrancy"⁵⁶—an insistence that Mayer himself stresses in his post-Bad Boll writings.

Perhaps it is too much to speak of a breakthrough in Mayer's theological reflection on this crux, yet that is the way he presented it in the 1950s. His own theological biography illustrates vividly that there is not just one tradition within Missouri on the normal principle of Scripture. One element of his breakthrough must have been that he discovered this himself about Missouri's theological history.

Missouri has at least two major traditions on the subject, call them what you will. One is represented by the Mayer of the 1937 essay. It is largely congruent with Pieper, although Pieper himself is not completely consistent. The other is consciously and knowledgeably spelled out by the Mayer of the 1950s. The Walther of *Law and Gospel* is congruent with this position. For a synod dominated at the time by Pieper's influence, Mayer's work is definitely a breakthrough. Pieper wished to assert the primacy of the Scriptures and the primacy of the distinction between Law and Gospel (justification), but did not succeed in teaching the Synod how to hold the double primacy together.

Mayer shows a way to do it. He shows how *solum evangelium* is the fundamental norm of Lutheran theology. Is that a formal principle or a material principle? Mayer's answer is yes to the either/or. Mayer shows how such a procedure starting at the Gospel does not do violence to the Scriptures, but rather honors them in a way the rationalist Biblicist never does. For this kind of honor to the Bible is of a piece with the central honor given to Christ when His merits and benefits are used as He intends them to be used.

There are other fathers of the Synod who also have a good word for the sons on the subject of the distinction. Challenging, for example, is Stoeckhardt's critique of the third use of the Law in his article on the subject.⁵⁷ Bente's 400th Reformation anniversary volume is a fascinating study. Eckhardt shows himself to be more than just a bibliographer in his compilation of the Missouri tradition on the subject, especially on the insights he has about the hermeneutical consequences for the distinction. But to return to where we started, there is a good tradition in the Missouri Synod that some of the fathers

(and some of them only some of the time) practice Gospel reductionism—not as an aberration, but at the very core of their theological work. They understand themselves to be faithful to the Lutheran Symbols in so doing, and they do not see Christ or the Scriptures being degraded thereby, but rather that the opposite is true.

St. Louis, MO

¹ John Warwick Montgomery, *Crisis in Lutheran Theology*, I (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1967), 81-123.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 94, 111. Other criticism of Elert, p. 128 f.

³ F. E. Mayer, *The Religious Bodies of America* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1954), p. 140.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 142 f.

⁵ It is a dubious exercise to ascribe the distinction in such phrases as formal and material principle to the Lutheran Symbols, since the terms themselves are not used in the Book of Concord. The distinction between Law and Promise is readily documented in the Confessions; the distinction between a formal and material principle can be read out of (on in to?) the Symbols only with the aid of considerable tortured, historical-critical exegesis.

⁶ Montgomery, *Crisis*, pp. 119-121.

⁷ Robert C. Schultz, “The Distinction Between Law and Gospel,” *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XXXII (October 1961), 591-597.

⁸ Its prominence in the Synod during the first 75 years is seen in the vast bibliographic summary article on the theme “Gesetz und Evangelium” produced by E. Eckhardt in his *Homilitisches Reallexikon*, III (Blair, Nebr.” 1907 to 1913), 227-243. A similar survey of the theme during the first century of the Synod’s history is presented by W. Geihlsler, “The Law and the Gospel,” *The Abiding Word* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1946), pp. 105-123.

⁹ *Morphologie des Lutheriums* (Munchen: C. H. Beck’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1931), 2 vols. Vol. 1 trans. by Walter A. Hansen as *The Structure of Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962).

¹⁰ *Der Christliche Glaube* (Berlin: Furche Verlag, 1940). *Das Christliche Ethos* (Tubingen: Furche Verlag, 1949), trans. C. Schindler, *The Christian Ethos* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957). *Law and Gospel*, trans. E. Schroeder (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967). Unfortunately the English translations of both the *Morphologie* and the

Ethose leave much to be desired. Sadly enough, no publisher has yet been found for the English translation of the dogmatics made by Martin Bertram.

¹¹ CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY, III, (September 1932), pp. 667-674.

¹² (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1958).

¹³ “Is There a Lutheran Hermeneutics?” in *The Lively Function of the Gospel, Festschrift* for Richard R. Caemmerer sr., ed. Robert W. Bertram (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), pp. 81-97.

¹⁴ Montgomery published articles from many of his confreres on this issue in Vol. II of his *Crisis in Lutheran Theology*. The same position is regularly espoused by authors in the new journals *Affirm* and *Sola Scriptura*.

¹⁵ For an opposite point of view see Holsten Fagerberg, *Die Theologie der lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften von 1529 bis 1537* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965), pp. 334-44. Here Fagerberg rejects the notion that the distinction between Law and Gospel is the fundamental hermeneutical principle of confessional exegesis of the Bible. I can only concur in Klaus Haendler’s response to Fagerberg at this point. “Wo liegt das Zentrum, die innere Einheit der von Fagerberg behaupteten Auslegungsgrundsätze? Diese Frage stellt sich um so mehr, als Fagerberg ‘Gesetz und Evangelium’ ‘nur’(!) für die (als partielle verstandene!) Thematik von Glaube und guten Werken gelten lässt, jedoch als das alle anderen Grundsätze Verbindende und sie überhaupt erst Setzende ausdrücklich ausschließt. Indem er dieses tut—wie wir meinen: eindeutig gegen das Selbstverständnis wie gegen die hermeneutische Praxis der Bekenntnisschriften!—, geht ihm die Einheit und Geschlossenheit der reformatorischen Schriftauslegung wie ihrer Prinzipien verloten, eine Einheit und Geschlossenheit, die ja gerade das Kennzeichen dieser Auslegung ist!” *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, XCII (1967), 689. See also Gerhard Gloege, “Die Rechtfertigungslehre als hermeneutische Kategorie,” *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 89 (1964), 161-176.

¹⁶ See Vinzenz Pinur, *Einig in der Rechtfertigungslehre? Die Rechtfertigungslehre der Confessio Augustana (1530) und die Stellungnahme der kath. Kontroverstheologie zwischen 1530 und 1535* (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1970).

¹⁷ Elert designates Walther as one of only two Lutheran theologians of the 19th century who did not lose sight of this authentic Lutheran theological center in a century that otherwise saw Lutheran systematic theology suffer serious setbacks in the “Kampf um das Christentum.” *Law and Gospel*, p. 2.

¹⁸ *Gesetz und Evangelium* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1893).

¹⁹ *Die rechte Unterscheidung vom Gesetz und Evangelium, 39 Abendvorträge*. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1897). Trans. By W. H. T. Dau, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1929).

Unless otherwise indicated below, the citations from this lecture series will follow the Dau translation.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 1.

²¹ A notable exception is F. Bents, *Gesetz und Evangelium* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1917), a commemorative volume for the 400th anniversary of the Reformation. Apology IV figures prominently throughout the monograph, but once again the hermeneutical consequences are not given serious attention.

²² WA 36, 8-42

²³ *The Proper Distinction*, p. 66.

²⁴ *Gesetz und Evangelium*, .p 32 f.

²⁵ WA 36, 12.

²⁶ *Verhandlungen der einundzwanzigsten Jahresversammlung des Oestlichen Districts der deutschen evang.-luth Synode von Missouri, Ohio u. a. Staaten. Anno Domini 1877.* (St. Louis: Druckerei der Synode, 1877), p. 31. This convention essay appears to be a preliminary stage to the 1878 lectures by Walther. Although he was present at the Easter District convention, there is no absolute evidence that the essay was his work. The proceedings neglect to mention who the essayist was. The substance of the presentation, formulated into eight theses, is congruent with the subsequent Walther lectures. That hold true especially for Walther's critique of enthusiasm, which is sprinkled through the 1878 and 1884-1185 lectures.

²⁷ *The Proper Distinction*, p. 30.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 37.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 44 f.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 60.

³¹ Ibid., p. 68 f.

³² *Zweiter Synodal-Bericht des Iowa-Districts der deutschen eveng.luth. Synode von Missouri, Ohio u. a. Staaten. Anno Domini 1880.* (St. Louis: Druckerei des "Lutherischen Concordia-Verlags," 1880), p. 15.

³³ Ibid., p 16.

- ³⁴ *Vierter Synodal-Bericht des Kansas-Districts der deutschen eveng.-lutherischen Synode von Missouri, Ohio und anderen Staaten. Anno Domini 1892.* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1892), pp. 7-57.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 8 f.
- ³⁶ *Iowa Proceedings*, p. 43.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- ³⁸ *Kansas Proceedings*, p. 37. Italics in original.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁰ *Christian Dogmatics*, III (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 222-252.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 244.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 245. Italics in original.
- ⁴³ St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1954.
- ⁴⁴ Mayer, 145-146, 4th rev. ed. 1961. Italics added.
- ⁴⁵ CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY, VIII (April 1937), pp. 260-272.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 261
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 266.
- ⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 270.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 272.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, XV (December 1944), pp. 795-814.
- ⁵¹ For example, "The Function of the Law in Christian Preaching," XXI (1950), 123-129; "Human Will in Bondage and Freedom. A Study in Luther's Distinction of Law and Gospel," XXII (1951), 719-749, 785-819; "Theses on Scripture and Inspiration," XXIII (1952), 284-288; "The Formal and Material Principles of Lutheran Confessional Theology," XXIV (1953), 545-550; "The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel and the Terminology Visible and Invisible Church," XXV (1954), 177-198.
- ⁵² *The Story of Bad Boll* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1949).
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.25 f.

⁵⁵ Included in the delegation besides Behnken were Theodore Graebner, Lawrence Meyer, Alfred O. Fuerbringer, F. e. Mayer, Paul M. Bretscher, and Walter A. Baepler. Ibid., p. 9

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 27.

⁵⁷ “Gesetz und Evangelium nach ihren unterschiedlichen Wirkungen,” *Lehre un Wehre*, XXX (1887), 154-160, 191-205, 241-249, 273-282.