

Gospel Reductionism

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The Word of God, at first a spoken word, has come under attack since Satan tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden. From the time, also, that God "caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning," the attacks have not abated, nor do we have reason to think that they will cease until the Lord destroys all opposition at His second coming.

In the meantime, we are also to be alert to the realization that the "devil is not always at one door." He may attack the Word at the point of its inspiration, of its clarity, of its sufficiency, or of its interpretation, or he may be at several doors at one time. One of the great battles at the moment in Lutheranism in America--and certainly elsewhere also--concerns interpretation of the Word. This struggle is not isolated from the prior and continuing battles concerning inspiration, authority, inerrancy, and the like. In other words, all these aspects of the Word anti its use are closely interrelated, and to err in one is to be in danger of undermining the correct teaching in respect to the others. In fact, the present controversy swirls around the very attributes of Holy Scripture.

One of the strong attacks against the authority of the entire Holy Scriptures in our day is generated by an alleged special reverence for the Gospel. For the humble Christian this is a disarming approach, for he prizes the Gospel above all else; if only that is left unsullied, is there any cause for concern? Highly as we respect the Gospel, we do not serve the purpose of the Gospel, nor do we honor it, when we employ it to denigrate any part of God's Word.

That there is controversy and debate here is readily acknowledged by both factions in the dispute. One of the proponents of "Gospel Reductionism," Dr. Robert C. Schultz of the Department of Theology, Valparaiso U., states at the beginning of a review of the controversy:

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod is currently engaged in conversations about its understanding of Scripture. No controversy has been of such decisive and divisive significance since the Altenburg debate on the nature of the church. Those who stand outside the organization and therefore at some distance from the controversy cannot view the situation with bemused detachment.¹

The controversy has been variously designated. The term Law/Gospel Reductionism has been attributed to Dr. J.W. Montgomery and some essays of his on this subject in 1966.² It has also been referred to as the Law-Gospel Debate or the controversy on Gospel Reductionism. Montgomery in his essays describes Gospel reductionism 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. Dr. Edward Schroeder, formerly chairman of the department of theology at Valparaiso University and now professor of systematic and historical theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, summarizes the charges against Gospel reductionism by saying that these changes confuse the material and formal principles of Lutheran theology.³ Then, after restating the definitions of these two principles, he adds that opponents of

¹ Robert C. Schultz, *Reflections on the Current Controversy in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod: An Attempt to Express Pastoral Concern*, in *The Cresset*, October 1977, p. 7.

² Cf. J. W. Montgomery, *Crisis in Lutheran Theology*, Vol. 1, pp. 81–123.

³ E.H. Schroeder, *Law-Gospel Reductionism in History of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod*, CTM, Vol. XLIII, 1972, p. 232.

reductionism argue that the Confessions and our tradition hold to a careful distinction between these two principles.

While the disturbance has only recently surfaced in a rolling boil, Dr. David Scaer of Concordia Seminary, Springfield, Illinois, contends that it has been simmering in LC–MS circles since the late 1940's and early 1950's.⁴ Dr. Edward Schroeder contends, in the aforementioned article, that it was at the Bad Boll Conferences, which concluded in 1954, that this influence spread into Missouri, especially by way of Dr. F. E. Mayer. But he tries to bring Walther and Pieper to the defense of his position, as well as Luther, Melancthon, and other confessors of the Reformation. He writes:

The distinction between Law and Gospel is the operating yardstick whereby the confessors practiced their Gospel reductionism. . . The confessors of 1530 look very much like Gospel reductionists.⁵

Just what is the nature of the controversy concerning Gospel reductionism? The battle being waged in the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod will certainly serve to reveal its nature, even though there may be elements of the struggle difficult to assess. In 1971 the President of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod presented a report to his church on the basis of another report from the Seminary Board of Control, which in turn was based on the report of a special fact–finding committee. Part Four of the report contains a table of divergent positions held by various members of the Faculty, with the synodical position listed in the first column and other positions listed in the second column. Under Article III, *The Holy Scriptures, D. Bible and Gospel*, the following two positions are stated:

Synodical Position

The Scriptures are the only source and norm of doctrine in the church (formal principle), while the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the chief doctrine of the Bible and the heart of the Christian faith (material principle). The Gospel is a basic presupposition for the interpretation of Holy Scripture (that is, one approaches the Scriptures expecting to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ and to relate all that he reads there to Him), but it does not determine the meaning of the Biblical text. Whatever the text says is the meaning of the text and is to be accepted as such because it is the Word of God. The grammar, context, and literary form of a text determine if it is to be understood literally or otherwise.

Other Positions

The Gospel is not only the center of the Christian faith but the criterion of acceptable Biblical interpretation. Thus no interpretation of a Biblical text need be rejected unless it harms the Gospel. Considerable latitude needs to be given in the interpretation of the Bible in a non–literal, non–historical way, so long as this does not affect the Gospel. For example, the fall of Adam and Eve or the world flood need not be accepted as factual so long as the doctrinal lesson of sin and grace is preserved in the interpretation.⁶

⁴ David P. Scaer, *The Law-Gospel Debate in the Missouri Synod*, The Springfielder, 1973, p. 156.

⁵ E. H. Schroeder, *op. cit.*, pp. 236f.

⁶ *Report of the Synodical President to the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod*, 1971, p. 28.

The first position above declares the Holy Scriptures to be the source of all doctrines that are to be taught in the church.

These teachings, if used according to the principles laid down in the Bible itself will convict the sinner of his sin (the Law) and will lead him to a knowledge of Jesus Christ as his personal Savior from sin (the Gospel). The 'Valparaiso Theology' holds that Gospel, as the preached good news about Jesus Christ and the forgiveness of sins, is the basis of theological work. It also holds that the Scriptures when used by themselves can lead to conflicting opinions and thus the Gospel as the presupposition of faith must be used in approaching the Scriptures.⁷

The conflict between these two positions is further set forth in *A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles*, a statement also emanating from the office of the President of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in 1972. While, as we have stated before, this controversy impinges on several doctrines or several aspects of the doctrine of Holy Scripture, it is particularly pertinent to quote from two sections of Part IV of this document. Under IV, B. *The pose of Scripture*, it is confessed:

We believe that all Scripture bears witness to Jesus Christ and that its primary purpose is to make men wise unto salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. We therefore affirm that the Scriptures are rightly used only when they are read from the perspective of justification by faith and the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. Since the saving work of Jesus Christ was accomplished through His personal entrance into our history and His genuinely historical life, death, and resurrection, we acknowledge that the recognition of the soteriological purpose of Scripture in no sense permits us to call into question or deny the historicity of factuality of matters recorded in the Bible.⁸

The following section of the document, C. *The Gospel and Holy Scripture* (Material and Formal Principles), focuses more sharply on the problem when it states:

We believe, teach, and confess that the Gospel of the gracious justification of the sinner through faith in Jesus Christ is not only the chief doctrine of Holy Scripture and a basic presupposition for the interpretation of Scripture, but the heart and center of our Christian faith and theology (material principle). We also believe, teach, and confess that only "the Word of God shall establish articles of faith" (SA, II, 11, 15), and that "the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments are the only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged" (FC, Ep. Rule and Norm, 1) (formal principle). The Gospel which is the center of our theology is the Gospel to which the *Scriptures* bear witness, while the Scriptures from which we derive our theology direct us steadfastly to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.⁹

⁷ David Scaer, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

⁸ *A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles*, 1971, p. 20.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

To sharpen that focus still further, the Statement here, as throughout the document, states its rejection of false positions by a series of anti theses:

We reject the following distortions of the relationship between the Gospel and the Bible (the material and formal principles): 1) That acceptance of the Bible as such, rather than the Gospel, is the heart and center of Christian faith and theology, and the way to eternal salvation. 2) That the Gospel, rather than Scripture, is the norm for appraising and judging all doctrines and teachers (as for example, when a decision on the permissibility of ordaining women into the pastoral office is made on the basis of the "Gospel" rather than on the teaching of Scripture as such). 3) That the historicity or facticity of certain Biblical accounts (such as the Flood or the Fall) may be questioned, provided this does not distort the Gospel. 4) That Christians need not accept matters taught in the Scriptures that are not a part of the "Gospel."¹⁰

Of the above cited antitheses it is especially number two that will be found to strike at the heart of the Gospel reductionist theory. Though the position of the proponents of Gospel reductionism might be documented from a variety of sources, we shall refer especially to a document prepared in late 1972 by the moderate (liberal) faculty majority at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, a document prepared, at the urging of district presidents, to set forth the confession of the embattled majority. This document is entitled *Faithful to our Calling – Faithful to our Lord*. The opening Preamble, as early as the second paragraph, makes clear what the faculty majority thinks the issue to be:

At the heart of the discussions in our Synod is the question of whether the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is the sole source of our personal faith and the center of our public teaching. Is the Gospel alone sufficient as the ground of faith and the governing principle for Lutheran theology? Or is something else required as a necessary condition? It is our conviction that any effort, however subtle, to supplement the Gospel so that it is no longer the sole ground of our faith or the governing principle for our theology is to be rejected as un-Lutheran, contrary to our confession, and injurious to the mission of the church)¹¹

This document consists of a rather brief *Affirmations of Faith* (a Trinitarian Confession) and a lengthier section of Discussions of Issues divided into eight parts. In accord with their attitude over against the Verbal Inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, the framers of this document also make clear in the preamble that not all of the professors subscribe to the precise wording of the document. They intend the document to illustrate "how the Gospel governs our handling of theological topics."¹² Illustrative of their method is Discussion IV, Par. 2, wherein they state:

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹¹ *A Christian Handbook on Vital Issues*, Chr. News, 1963–73, p. 821.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 821

We, as Lutherans, start with the Gospel of Jesus as the center of the Scriptures, the heart of our theology and the core of our lives. That conviction governs our interpretation of the Scriptures, the way we perform our task as theologians, and how we live. Because the Gospel is the center of the Scriptures, all of their parts must be understood in relationship to that center. The relative significance of each teaching of the Scriptures must be discerned by relating it to that center. Any tendency to make the doctrine of the inspiration or the inerrancy of the Scriptures a prior truth which guarantees the truth of the Gospel or gives support to our faith is sectarian. The Gospel gives the Scriptures their normative character, not vice versa. We are saved by grace alone through faith in Christ alone, not through faith in Christ and something else, even if that something else be the Bible itself.¹³

So there you have it in pretty plain words. If there is any improvement to be noted in the circumstances of the present controversy, it is that both sides quite readily admit that a difference exists. The difference basically concerns the roles of Scripture and Gospel in the exegetical process. Though terminology may differ, so that some refer to the controversy as the Law–Gospel debate, or some denominate the new departure as Gospel reductionism or Law/Gospel reductionism, even the proponents of the latter methodology do not completely denounce those terms:

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.¹⁴

The adherents of the position espoused in *Faithful to our Calling – Faithful to our Lord* claim that its methodology is in accord with the Confessions and true Lutheranism and that the “scholastic” position of those who posit both material and formal principles is sub–Lutheran or even un–Lutheran. The Faculty Statement claims that its position is not only correct, but the true Reformational and Lutheran one (though some of their own number would shudder at the use of those two terms to distinctly set apart their hermeneutical approach), and that a review of history is needed for those who think otherwise.

One of the many essays in defense of the Faculty Statement is one written by Dr. Paul Bretscher, formerly of Valparaiso University, entitled “The Log in Your Own Eye.” Using the metaphor of Matthew 6, Dr. Bretscher identifies the sound eye as the pure doctrine of the Gospel, exhibited in the Confession made by the reformers at Augsburg, “as they found it in the Holy Scriptures.”¹⁵ He makes quite clear that those who hold to the dual principles (formal and

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 823–824.

¹⁴ E. H. Schroeder, *op. cit.*, p. 235.

¹⁵ Paul Bretecher, “The Log in Your Own Eye,” *CTM*, April 1972, p. 665.

material) are quite incapable of performing benign surgery on the specks in the eyes of Gospel reductionists, for the latter really represent the Reformation position:

This is a simple test for that speck, which anyone can take. What comes to mind first with the phrase “The Word of God”? a) The holy, inspired, inerrant Bible? Or b) The words God speaks from heaven out of that Bible to comfort our hearts? Is believing the Bible the same thing as believing the Gospel? Is Bible reading and study itself a means of grace? Is it the glory of the Reformation that Luther restored the Bible to the church, or the Gospel? What has happened to us) when the formal principle has displaced the material in the center of our thinking?¹⁶

That the Confessions approach Scripture Christologically will hardly be denied by either side in this controversy. The fact that the Confessions do not have a specific article on Scripture has been used as an argument against the place of the formal principle in Lutheran Confessional theology. Edmund Schlink, a German theologian concludes that it was a “theological decision” to omit an article on Scripture, because the authority of the Scripture is grounded on the Gospel and not on a doctrine of inspiration, and emphasis on the latter might have obscured the former.¹⁷

We agree with Ralph Bohlmann when he states that there is no evidence in the Confessions or elsewhere to support the idea that the omission of an article or articles on Holy Scripture in favor of a Christological approach to Scripture was a conscious “theological decision.”¹⁸ Arthur Carl Piepkorn, in a brief essay entitled “The Position of the Church and Her Symbols,” in speaking of the “verbal” aspect of inspiration in early orthodoxy, writes:

If there was one point of universal agreement among all of these (he has just mentioned Calvin, the Council of Trent and pre–Reformation scholasticism) aside from the nude assertions of the Ecumenical Creeds, it was the authority, the inspiration, and the inerrancy of the Sacred Scriptures. It is not surprising, therefore, that we do not have an explicit article on the Sacred Scriptures in the Lutheran Symbols.¹⁹

One certainly has to read the Confessions with filtered lenses to miss the authoritative role ascribed to Holy Scripture in the faith and life of the church. The well–known excerpt from the Epitome of the Formula of Concord reads:

We believe, teach, and confess that the sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas together with (all) teachers should be estimated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament alone, as it is written Ps. 119, 105: Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path. And St. Paul: Though an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you let him be accursed, Gal. 1, 8.²⁰

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁷ Cf., Ralph Bohlmann, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran confessions*, p. 25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁹ *Concordia Theological Monthly*, Vol., XXV, No. 10, October, 1954, p. 740.

²⁰ *Triglotta*, “Formula of Concord, Epitome”, p. 777.

A shorter paragraph in the Thorough Declaration reiterates:

First (then, we receive and embrace with our whole heart) the Prophetic and Apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the pure clear fountain of Israel, which is the only true standard by which all teachers and doctrines are to be judged.²¹

What should be clear from these citations is that Scripture is considered as both the source *and norm* of doctrine. Again from the Epitome we read:

The Holy Scriptures alone remain the only judge, rule and standard (*Richter, Regel and Richtschnur*), according to which, as the only test— stone (*Probierstein*), all dogmas shall and must be discerned and judged, as to whether they are good or evil, right or wrong.²²

On the basis of such declarations in the Formula of Concord, Ralph Bohlmann concludes: “Thus the statement of the Formula of Concord that the Holy Scriptures are the only rule and norm in the church is not a mere principle. It is practiced throughout the confessions both in theses and antitheses, and with reference to both doctrine and life.”²³

But these same confessions are not bashful about saying that Law and Gospel are the basic message of Holy Scripture and that justification by grace for Christ’s sake is the center of all Scripture. This is so because of the divine purpose of the Scriptures: “that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name,” (John 20, 31) and the divine power of the same, for they “are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.” (II Tim. 3, 15) The Confessions are also quite insistent that these Holy Scriptures are to be divided into the two chief doctrines, the law and the promise (a favorite term with Melancthon which he takes from Paul’s epistles and Hebrews). The Formula of Concord is oft quoted regarding the importance of the distinction between the Law and the Gospel:

As the distinction between the Law and the Gospel 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, we must guard it with especial care, in order that these two doctrines may not be mingled with one another, or a law be made out of the Gospel, whereby the merit of Christ is obscured and troubled consciences are robbed of their comfort, which they otherwise have in the holy Gospel when it is preached genuinely and its purity, and by which they can support themselves in their most grievous trials against the terrors of the Law.²⁴

So where, precisely, do the two contending factions in this controversy differ from one another? Both can make statements upholding the importance of the doctrine of Scripture and of the chief article of that Scripture, the doctrine of justification of salvation by grace alone

²¹ *Ibid.*, 851.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 779, par. 7.

²³ Ralph Bohimann, *op. cit.*, p. 46f.

²⁴ *Triglotta*, “Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration”, V, 1, p. 951.

through faith; yes, also the importance of the proper distinction between the Law and the Gospel. It must also be admitted that not all of the protagonists of one position or the other necessarily agree in all their contentions, certainly not in their use of certain terminology. Reductionists generally contend that the elevation of the formal principle breeds “biblicists,” and with sinful human nature being what it is, who will not admit the possibility that someone may distort that principle to aver that faith in the Bible is an end in itself (Cf. the great controversy concerning the place of good works in the Christian life.) Surely, on the other hand, proponents of Gospel reductionism have often wandered far afield and embarrassed even some of their own kind by denying truths vital to the Gospel which they allegedly esteem so highly. And are not these latter in graver danger because in belittling or discarding the real doctrine of Scripture they destroy, or at least endanger the basis of our knowledge of the Gospel?

In the second of his 1973 Reformation Lectures at Bethany Lutheran College, Dr. Robert Preus refers to the *Hauptartikel Principle* employed by Melanchthon in the *Apology* and by Luther in the *Smalcald Articles*. Having then asked the pertinent question whether Luther is here imposing something alien or extra – biblical on Scripture, he answers:

Not at all. And this can be said for two reasons. First, never in our Confessions does this overriding Christological principle violate the intended meaning of a biblical passage or pericope. Never do Luther or Melanchthon or the writers of the *Formula of Concord* use such a principle to interpret a text grammatically or historically. Never is their procedure a substitute or shortcut for the grammatical exegesis. Second, the *Hauptartikel* is itself subject to all the rigorous canons of grammatical exegesis. This is clear from the fact that the article of Christ or justification is ordinarily included in a series of articles all purporting to be drawn from Scripture and to be a summary of Christian doctrine. Luther’s statement (SA II, ii, 15), “The Word of Cod shall establish articles of faith and no one else, not even an angel,” applies to the *Hauptartikel* as well as any other article of faith. Furthermore, the longest discussion in the Confessions (Apology IV) centers in a defense of the *Hauptartikel*, justification by faith. And here Melanchthon clearly draws his conclusions from the Scriptures. It is true that he expresses his *Hauptartikel Principle* before he proves it from the Scriptures . . . but he does indeed exegete these passages dealing with justification, and he does so to establish the doctrine itself and its centrality (Apology IV, 107, 293–4). He specifically says, “What we have shown thus far, on the basis of the Scriptures and arguments derived from the Scriptures, was to make clear that by faith alone we receive the forgiveness of sins for Christ’s sake”²⁵

Just a little earlier, in Lecture I, Dr. Preus showed from Luther’s dealings with Zwingli that Luther was no reductionist, but that Zwingli certainly was. Zwingli could not believe in the real presence because he did not think it physically possible, but then he also held that it was not necessary to believe in the real presence because the Gospel of justification did not demand it. In an oral gloss upon his own essay text Dr. Preus remarked that Luther could have showed a Gospel – reduction need for the real presence (“given . . . shed . . . for remission”), but he didn’t.

²⁵ Robert Preus, *Bethany Lutheran College Reformation Lectures*, 1973, No. II, paragraphs 6 and 7.

As the Confessions and the Lutheran Confessors clearly maintain and practice it, there is an intimate connection between the *sola scriptura* and *solus Christus* principles. The formal principle has meaning only in the unfolding of Scripture's Christological content for its saving purpose. The material principle has its validity and authority only from the Holy Scriptures that have been given by God and are employed by Him in bringing man to faith in Jesus Christ. "What confessional Lutheranism affirms is an indissoluble unity of Gospel and Bible, not one versus the other."²⁶ To attempt to drive a wedge between Christ and the Bible is the work of the devil. Neither the Scriptures nor the Gospel propose this as a live option. The Bible centers in Christ and Christ himself submits totally to it. Gospel reductionists would likely cringe at hearing the children sing: "Jesus loves me, this I know, *for the Bible tells me so.*" The problem, as David Scaer points out--and others, we may add--is basically one of epistemology: how do I know about Jesus Christ? The Scriptures are the cognitive principle in theology because they have been given us by God to tell us of Christ. Luther's dictum, *Die ganze Schrift treibt Christum*, is not a wedge for Gospel reductionism.

²⁶ Horace Hummel, "Gospel & Bible," Occasional Papers published by *Affirm*, Spring 1973, p. 28.