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CONTENTS

Did Jesus Believe in the Biblical Account of Creation?

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Numerous articles have been written on various aspects of what the Bible teaches about creation. Those that are unbiased in stating what the Bible reports will note that the scriptural testimony given is a united presentation. From Genesis 1 to Exodus 20 and throughout the book of Psalms, from the prophetical books of the Old Testament to the Epistles of the New Testament, even down to the last book of the Bible, the Revelation of Jesus Christ—all present the same teaching: that God created the world and everything in it in six 24-hour days.

The purpose of this study, then, is to explore what Jesus believed and taught on the doctrine of creation, especially as reported in the four Gospels.[1]

A. What did Jesus teach?

The Savior made several references to the Biblical account of creation, which are noted below.

Just as in every age, so also in the times of Jesus there were questions about marriage and divorce. One such occasion is recorded in Matthew 19:3: "*The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?'"* The Savior began His reply by going back to the very beginning:

> ***And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate."***

In the parallel account in Mark 10:6-8 we note in particular the Lord's words in verse six: ***"But from the beginning of the creation, God 'made them male and female.'"***

There is more to His answer on the matter of divorce, of course, but it is enough for our purposes here to recognize Jesus teaching authoritatively from Genesis 1 and 2.

Genesis 1:27 *So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.*

Genesis 2:24 *Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.*

In a very different situation Jesus spoke the following to those who did not believe in Him.

> ***"Why do you not understand My speech? Because you are not able to listen to My word. You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it."*** (John 8:43-44)

Here the Savior has recognized as a true event the account of the first temptation in Genesis 3.

Jesus was consistent in His teaching of the Biblical account of creation and the history of events shortly thereafter. He presented Genesis 1-3 as actual events that took place, and He used the facts reported as a truth basis for the applications that He made with His contemporaries.

On Tuesday of Holy Week, when discussing the signs about the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the world, Jesus made the following comment: ***"And pray that your flight may not be in winter. For in those days there will be tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the creation which God created until this time, nor ever shall be"*** (Mark 13:18-19). Cf. also the parallel account in Matthew 24:20-21. We note again how the Savior teaches God's creation of the world and connects it with the "beginning," this time in the context of a yet-to-be future event.

We turn next to the Savior's words in Mark 16:15: ***"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature."*** Here, when the Head of the Church gives His followers the work they are to do in His name, He uses the word "creature," which ties the work of the Christian Church to the foundational event of God's creation of the world.

Did Jesus believe in creation? It does appear that He taught this doctrine on several occasions and in various contexts. But some have suggested something else in explaining the worldview of Jesus during His ministry. About forty years ago, in the wake of the Seminex controversy in the LC-MS, the *Journal*

touched on this topic in a series, "Thy Word is Truth," written by Prof. Clifford Kuehne. Under the section "Christ and Inerrancy" Kuehne notes "an embarrassing situation for those who wish to deny the aforementioned passages [which include the account of the six-day creation], and who yet wish to present Christ as a believable object for Christian faith and trust. For at this point they simply cannot accept Christ's words as they stand. To save face, Christ's face, they have suggested either 1) that Christ accommodated Himself to the faulty theological and scientific views of His day, or 2) that in His state of humiliation (the kenosis) He refrained from knowing any better. Both suggestions ... are subject to serious criticism."[2]

In the same article Kuehne goes on to state a few criticisms to be made of the "Accommodation Theory" and the "Kenotic Argument":

> What about the argument that Christ accommodated Himself to the errant viewpoints of His day, the so-called "accommodation theory"? It is hard to believe. For in the aforementioned passages [Matt. 19:4, Matt. 24:37ff., John 8:56, Luke 17:32], it is not Jesus' friends or foes who have injected into the discussion such topics as the creation or Jonah. No, it is Jesus Himself who brings these subjects up and comments on them. According to the accommodation theory, we would have to charge Jesus with thereby furthering their faulty ideas. ...
>
> Is the kenotic argument any better? On the contrary, it is worse, for it is fraught with even graver dangers. For if Jesus in His state of humiliation was fallible when He spoke of the events of the Old Testament, might He not have been fallible also when He spoke of the events relating to our salvation? Perhaps we must set aside, then, also such passages as John 3:16! The kenotic argument invariably leads to a questioning of the truth of everything that Jesus said.
>
> We need to add, furthermore, that this argument reveals a failure to make a rather obvious distinction. There is a vast difference between not using His knowledge on certain occasions (the kenosis) on the one hand, and speaking falsehood on the other. Scripture affirms the first of these, but emphatically denies the second. Christ specifically says: "To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice" (John 18:37).[3]

B. "If it were not so, I would have told you."

We will not now name those who discount the Savior's testimony by claiming that Jesus was just a child of His day and was merely accommodating His teaching to the popular notions of that time. Rather, we will heed the great Prophet of the Church, who Himself is the Truth (John 14:6). As such He could not and would not accept popular but false ideas so as to gain or maintain a following.

In John 14 the Savior plainly and truthfully states: ***"In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you ..."*** (14:2). Jesus was not in the habit of perpetuating human opinion. In fact, it was His habit to correct misunderstandings and errors, even those of religious leaders, with the divine authority of Biblical truth. Recall, for example, the format Jesus used in the Sermon on the Mount:

"You have heard it said to those of long ago. ..."

"But I say to you. ..."

Using this formula, Jesus corrected six different misconceptions. In the appendix the reader can find Matthew 5:21-22 on murder, 5:27-28 on adultery, 5:31-32 on divorce, 5:33-34 on the taking of oaths, 5:38-39 on revenge, and 5:43-44 on love and hatred. In all of these examples we should recognize Jesus speaking on His own authority—not as a competing rabbi with those in disagreement, not even as a pastor would today who can only say, "Thus says the Lord," but rather as Lord God who always knows and speaks the truth.

We can have every confidence that Jesus would have done the very same thing with the doctrine of the origins of life. Had origins by divine creation been a misconception of the day, would not the Lord, the Teacher with "authority" (Matt. 7:29), have also declared: "You have heard it said to those of old that God created the world in six days, but I say to you ..."? Of course, He did not say this or anything like

this. The teaching of Jesus did not adopt or conform to the perceived thinking of that time. It always spoke the timeless truth of God and exposed the prevailing falsehood of man.

Jesus surely taught the Biblical account of creation and would not have done so if that account were in some way a myth.

C. "Your Word is Truth"

In addition to the statements Jesus made about creation and also the lack of any statements that reject creation, the Savior made many assertions about the Bible being true.

- In His high-priestly prayer He said in John 17:17: **"Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth."**
- Jesus applied this principle to His own words as He stated in John 8:31-32: "**Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, 'If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.'"**
- How would an Old Testament containing some truth, some myth be any kind of a reliable guide? Jesus certainly believed that the Old Testament was totally reliable and said as much: **"You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me"** (John 5:39). The first such Scripture to testify of Christ was Genesis 3:15: *"And will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel."*
- Let's also remember the Biblical principle spoken by Jesus in John 10:35: **"And the Scripture cannot be broken."**

It is not possible to tear out the pages of Genesis 1 and 2 without doing injustice to the rest of Scripture. Furthermore, where does any man get the audacity, let alone the authority, to sit in judgment of the Word of God, as if he in his finite wisdom can decide what word of the infinite God is true? This was not the approach of the Savior. On the Tuesday before His head-crushing defeat of Satan, Jesus declared in Matthew 24:35: "**Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away"** (cf. the parallels in Mark 13:31 and Luke 21:33). The fact that we can read these words today is evidence that Jesus made this promise—and a timeless characteristic of Scripture—come true.

What Jesus said about the permanence of His own words falls right in line with what He said about the smallest detail conveyed in the Old Testament:

"**And it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one tittle of the law to fail"** (Luke 16:17).

Based on the Lord's own testimony, let it be understood that Jesus clearly taught the account of creation. He did so not only as a student of the Old Testament Scriptures, but also as the Prophet of truth, who would have corrected any false teaching and who emphasized the immutable, timeless truth of God's Word.

D. Related Passages about Jesus and Creation

So far we have considered the words of Jesus recorded in the Gospels; a brief look at a few other passages proves to be rather revealing as well.

In the genealogy of Jesus recorded by Luke, the Spirit of God traces the Messiah's ancestry all the way back to Adam: **"Now Jesus Himself began His ministry at about thirty years of age, being (as was supposed) the son of Joseph, the son of Heli, ... the son of Enosh, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God"** (Luke 3:23, 38). This genealogy testifies to the reality of Adam as well as to Jesus, David, and the rest.

The next four passages were not directly spoken by Jesus, as is the case with all the passages in our first three parts. But all four speak directly to the work of Jesus in the creation of all things.

John 1:1-3 ***In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.***

Hebrews 1:1-3 ***God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.***

Colossians 1:15-17 ***He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.***

Ephesians 3:9 ***And to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ.***

These passages clearly demonstrate that Jesus participated actively in the creation of all things. It is therefore more than a matter of Jesus teaching the truth of it. He was there—but not in the role of being an observer or a silent partner. He was one of the architects and general contractors and laborers. **"All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made."** Note carefully the Bible's distinction that Jesus was not part of that creation, but was the firstborn over all creation (Col. 1:15) and before all things in creation (Col. 1:17).

How should we answer the question: *Did Jesus believe in creation*?

On the one hand, we could say "Yes," for He clearly taught it. On the other hand, we should say "No" in this respect that Jesus as Creator of all did not have to *believe* in creation. He *did it* and thus knew it firsthand from experience! While we need to understand by faith that "the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible" (Heb. 11:3), it did not require faith for Jesus to understand the event of or the fact of creation.

Whichever way the question is answered, it is clear that the theory of evolution is an attack on the word and work of Jesus Christ. The same holds true when the theory of evolution is dressed up as *theistic* evolution. In either form such an attack on Jesus as Creator can easily lead to an attack on Jesus as Redeemer.

The Nicene Creed makes a clear and Bible-based confession when it declares: I believe "in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made; who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven. ..."

Endnotes

[1] Most of the passages used in this article, especially those in boldface, are presented again in outline form at the end to exemplify a simple format for use in Bible Class. See the following appendix on pages 9-12.

[2] Kuehne, Clifford. "Thy Word is Truth." *Journal of Theology* 13:1 (Mar. 1973) 11 emph. orig.

[3] Kuehne 11-12 emph. orig.

What did Jesus teach about the origins of life?
A Bible Study for "Evolution Weekend" (1st in Feb.)

A. "Have you not read?"

1. Matthew 19:4-6 And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' [5]and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? [6]So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate."

2. Mark 10:6-8 [Jesus replied] "But from the beginning of the creation, God 'made them male and female.' [7]'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, [8]and the two shall become one flesh'; so then they are no longer two, but one flesh."
3. John 8:43-44 "Why do you not understand My speech? Because you are not able to listen to My word. [44]You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it."
4. Mark 13:18-19 "And pray that your flight may not be in winter. [19]For in those days there will be tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the creation which God created until this time, nor ever shall be."
5. Mark 16:15 And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature."
6. Luke 3:23, 38 Now Jesus Himself began His ministry at about thirty years of age, being (as was supposed) the son of Joseph, the son of Heli. ... [38] the son of Enosh, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God.

B. "If it were not so, I would have told you"

7. John 14:2 "In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you…."

8. Matthew 5:21-22 "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' [22]But I say to you. ..."

9. Matthew 5:27-28 "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' [28]But I say to you. ..."

10. Matthew 5:31-32 "Furthermore it has been said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' [32]But I say to you. ..."

11. Matthew 5:33-34 "Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.' [34]But I say to you. ..."

12. Matthew 5:38-39 "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' [39]But I tell you. ..."

13. Matthew 5:43-44 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' [44]But I say to you. ..."

C. "Your Word is truth"

14. John 17:17 "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth."

15. John 8:31-31 Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed in Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. [32]And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

16. John 5:39 "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me."

17. John 10:35 "... and the Scripture cannot be broken. ..."

18. Matthew 24:35 "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away."

19. Mark 13:31 "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away."

20. Luke 16:17 "And it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one tittle of the law to fail."

21. Luke 21:33 "Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away."

D. Related Passages about Jesus and Creation

22. John 1:1-3 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. [2]He was in the beginning with God. [3]All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.
23. Hebrews 1:1-3 God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, [2]has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; [3]who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.
24. Colossians 1:15-17 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. [16]For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. [17]And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.
25. Ephesians 3:9 And to make all see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Jesus made it clear. He accepted Genesis 1 and 2 as true and taught that God created the world. Furthermore, other parts of the Bible reveal that Jesus participated as God in the creation of all things in heaven and on earth.

The theory of evolution contradicts the teachings of Jesus and is an attack on the Word of God and specifically on the word and work of Jesus.

The Danger of Emphasizing FAITH at the Expense of the OBJECT of Faith, CHRIST

Robert Mackensen

* The reprint below, here offered in memoriam of the writer, Robert Mackensen (1920-2012), first appeared in the February 1964 issue of the *Journal of Theology* (4:1, pp. 1-16). Original footnotes have been converted to endnotes. The citation of quoted material is here provided per MLA guidelines. All Scripture quotations are from the King James Version.

The information contained in this paper divides itself into three sections: I. What this serious danger is, II. The danger truly exists, and III. Some warning signs that indicate the presence of this danger.

I. There is only one real Savior. He is the Lord Jesus Christ. Only because of HIS holy life and sin-atoning death is God a Friend of poor sinners. Jesus Christ has done it all.

Satan, the world, and our flesh are constantly trying to take away this one real Savior by substituting some false redeemer in the place of Christ. These enemies urge sinners to trust that God is reconciled because of other reasons than Christ: reasons such as mighty deeds, gifts of money, church attendance, daily Bible reading, rich prayer life, high morality, respect to parents and other authorities, love for the children, and other deeds of kindness. Such works, beneficial in themselves, become false Christs when they, instead of Jesus, are made the basis of certainty that God has forgiven all sins.

A more deceptive attempt to destroy the true Christ is made when sinners are urged to combine the work of Jesus with some human effort, so that by such a package deal God becomes gracious in His heart toward poor sinners. The false teachers who entered Paul's congregations in Galatia urged circumcision and keeping of Sabbath days upon the people as necessary to salvation. These works plus Christ's works would save the Galatians from God's curse of sin. They made Jesus into a savior who needed help from humans in order to pay for all sins. Thus Paul wrote in Galatians 1: "I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of CHRIST unto another gospel: which is not another;" (that is, which cannot save you) "but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ."

Three years before Luther's death, the synergist Melanchthon brought in this same false Christ by teaching that in conversion (and thus salvation) there is also "the human will assenting to and not resisting the Word of God" (qtd. in Bente 129, emph. rm). In 1548 he wrote, "The merciful God does not deal with man as with a block, but draws him in such a way that his will, too, cooperates" (qtd. in Bente 129, emph. rm). Again he wrote, "There must of necessity be a cause of difference in us why a Saul is rejected, a David received" (qtd. in Bente 130, emph. rm). Melanchthon thus taught that David added something which enabled Jesus to save him and Saul did not. That is a false-Christ doctrine. The true Christ needs no help from us humans to save us. Just as He created the world without our help, so He also saved the world without our help. The only name whereby we are saved is not "Jesus plus some human effort" but "Jesus" alone.

At Luther's time people heard very little about faith in Christ alone for salvation. Poor sinners were urged to their beads, pilgrimages, fasts, prayers to saints, indulgences, and the like as sources for certainty that their sins were forgiven. Luther, under God, preached that faith only in Christ Jesus saves and not faith in beads, pilgrimages, indulgences and the like. "What Luther thus saw was a church enmeshed in a type of activism that tortured rather than comforted the sensitive and distressed conscience and that found it more profitable to encourage endless doing than confident being" (Bachmann 6).

Against the crude, blunt preaching of works and human effort for salvation, Luther preached the grace of God and faith in JESUS. His books are full of the word "faith" and rightly so, for he learned from the Apostle Paul, whose letter to the Romans alone used the word "faith" at least thirty-four times. The motto of our Lutheran Church has become: "Salvation by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith."

Here it is important to state how the New Testament uses the word "to believe." According to Thayer's lexicon, the New Testament uses the intransitive form of "to believe" a few times in its universal or wide sense and many, many times in its specific or narrow sense. In its wide sense "believing" means a trusting or placing one's confidence in something. Examples from the New Testament of this universal meaning of the word are:

2 Thessalonians 2:11: "And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie."

James 2:19: "... the devils also believe, and tremble."

1 Corinthians 13:7: (Charity) "beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things."

Acts 9:26: "When Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him and believed not that he was a disciple."

1 Corinthians 11:18: "… I hear that there be divisions among you; and I partly believe it"

Matthew 24:23, 26: "Lo, here is Christ, ... believe it not."

If we use the word "to believe" in this wide or universal sense, then we can say that everyone in the world is a believer, because every person on earth has faith in something. Some put confidence in their reason, others in their strength, riches, friends, or possessions. Scripture warns, "Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm ..." (Jer. 17:5). "He that trusteth in his riches shall fall ..." (Prov. 11:28).

But the New Testament uses the word "to believe" in its specific or narrow sense at least 98% of the time. In this narrow sense the word "to believe" means a conviction full of joyful trust that Jesus is the Messiah, the divinely appointed Author of eternal salvation. In this narrow sense we must say that only Christians can be called believers. The miracle of Christian faith is not that Christians are given the ability to trust in some object, but that they are given the ability to turn from trusting vain works and instead to trust Christ and His work alone for their salvation. The act of trusting in something is not miraculous, but the act of trusting in Christ as the Savior is miraculous, because no man can say that Jesus is the Lord but by the Holy Ghost.

The human tendency to intermingle the universal and specific meanings of the word "to believe" as it is used in the New Testament is the basic reason why it is dangerous to emphasize faith at the expense of faith's object, Christ.

Therefore, one must be careful not to conclude that all who confess, "Faith alone saves," have the same true doctrine of salvation which Luther learned from Paul. These godly men used the phrase, "being justified by faith," in the narrow or specific sense only. A case in point is Luther's explanation of the Third Article in his catechism: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, nor come to Him; but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith; in like manner as He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctities the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith."

This one true faith of Paul and Luther meant the faith only in Christ. Faith in any other object would be a false faith. When Paul wrote in Romans 5:1, "Therefore being justified by faith ... ," he takes it for granted that his readers will understand that the sole object of such a justifying faith is Jesus. In verse 9 of the same chapter, the apostle just as easily wrote, "... being now justified by his blood." Paul did not have two saviors: one named "faith" and the other named "the blood of Christ." One was his Savior—even Christ. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote, "God was in CHRIST, reconciling the world unto himself."

Luther preached this same one Savior. In his writings against Latomus, Luther carefully points his readers away from the act of faith and toward the object: Christ. He writes:

> They do not consider it worthwhile to remember how often I have adduced what Paul says [Rom. 8:1] to the effect that, although there is sin—for he had previously said much about sin—still there is now no condemnation [for those in Christ Jesus]. The reason why there is no condemnation is not that men do not sin, as Latomus in lying fashion suggests, but because—as Paul says—they are in Jesus Christ; that is, they repose under the shadow of his righteousness as do chicks under a hen. Or as is said more clearly in Rom. 5 [:15], they have grace and the gift through his grace. So they do not walk in accordance with sin and sinful flesh; that is, they do not consent to the sin which they in fact have. God has provided them with two immensely strong and secure foundations so that the sin which is in them should not lead to their condemnation. First of all, Christ is himself the expiation (as in Rom. 3 [:25]). They are safe in his grace, not because they believe or possess faith and the gift, but because it is in Christ's grace that they have these things. No one's faith endures unless he relies upon Christ's own righteousness, and is preserved by his protection. For, as I have said, true faith is not what they invented, an absolute—nay, rather, obsolete—quality in the soul, but it is something which does not allow itself to be torn away from Christ, and relies only on the One whom it knows is in God's grace. Christ cannot be condemned, nor can anyone who throws himself upon him. This means that so grave a matter is the sin which remains, and so intolerable is God's judgment, that you will not be able to stand unless you shield yourself with him whom you know to be without any sin. This is what true faith does. (Luther 239)

By emphasizing the act of faith at the expense of faith's object, Christ, there is real danger that faith is made the savior instead of our dear Lord Jesus. This is an agonizing situation for poor, distressed sinners, but a most comfortable one for hypocritical work-saints. When poor sinners who have not been consistently directed to the object of true faith hear the words: "Thy faith hath saved thee," "He that believeth ... shall be saved," "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved," they are tempted to turn away from the sin-atoning cross of Jesus and look instead into their own hearts to see whether or not they have such a saving faith. They search for the basis of certainty of God's friendship in their own feelings and emotions rather than looking unto CHRIST, the Author and Finisher of our faith. God receives us not because of our faith, but because of Christ.

The proud sinner who wants to be accepted in Christian circles knows that it is unpopular to claim any works as the reason for his salvation; but he has found that "faith" is not classified as a work, and he therefore makes a secret work out of his act of believing and credits his salvation to the fact that he believes in Jesus.

Pastors, perhaps unconsciously, urge this false faith-christ on their people because it "gets results." The uncertainty of salvation for poor sinners and the sating of the hardened sinner's pride sparks a congregation into a group of seemingly active Christian workers. In reality it is only a mixed group, part of which is made up of poor, tortured souls ever seeking the proffered but never quite given true Savior, and the other of proud sinners who are satisfied to support a church which will permit them to rely on their own efforts at believing as a ticket into heaven. Thus like Luther we see a church enmeshed in a type of activism that tortures rather than comforts the sensitive and distressed conscience and that finds it more profitable to encourage endless doing rather than confident being.

Poorly indoctrinated persons have said, "It does not matter what you believe, just so that you are sincere in your faith. Believing will save you." That is like saying, "Going, yes, going will cure a toothache." Going where? To a movie? Or to a candy store? Of course not! Going to the dentist cures the toothache. So also "believing justifies," not as an act in itself, but because of the object it takes hold of, namely, Christ. Luther writes: "To free myself from regarding the Law and works ... I make it my habit so to conceive of the thing as though there were in my heart no such quality called faith or love, but in its place I put Christ Himself and say: This is my righteousness" (qtd. in Pieper/Albrecht 258).[1] Unless the object rather than the act of faith is emphasized, the poor sinner's gaze will be directly away from Christ and toward himself. Faith will have been made into a false Christ. This is the danger which exists when faith is emphasized at the expense of the object of faith: Christ.

II. Nor is this danger of which we are here speaking an imaginary one. It actually exists and has existed for many years. Nearly sixty years ago the Ohio (Lutheran) Synod flatly rejected the truth that God already declared the whole world justified from all sins in the death and resurrection of Christ. They called this correct teaching "a sin against holiness," "insanity," "night of error," a "miserable figment of man's own invention." Ohio defined its wrong position this way: "Through the reconciliation of Christ the holy and gracious God has made advances to us, so that forgiveness of sin and justification have been made possible on His part; justification itself, however, does not occur until through God's grace the spark of faith has been kindled in the heart of the poor sinner" (qtd. in Wendland 23, emph. rm).

As the years went by, this wrong position has not changed in the American Lutheran Church (now a member of TALC). In 1938 the ALC declared, "(God) purposes to justify those who have come to faith." The heretical teaching of their Dr. R. C. Lenski on Romans 4:5 is: "God declares the ungodly righteous by reckoning his faith for righteousness. ... But for faith there would be no justification. I must ever say: I believe, therefore am I justified. The strength of my faith is the degree of my certainty" (qtd. in Wendland 23).[2]

Compare such horrible doctrine with the true teaching as presented long ago by Dr. Stoeckhardt of Missouri Synod. He wrote:

> God has in Christ already forgiven the sins of the whole world. The entire Pauline doctrine of justification, and also all comfort derived from this doctrine, stands and falls with this special article of objective justification. For thus alone does it become unmistakably clear that justification is in no way dependent upon man's conduct. And thus alone can the individual become certain of his own justification. For it is a compelling conclusion: if God has already in Christ justified all men and forgiven them their sins, so I also must have a gracious God and the forgiveness of all my sins. (qtd. in Wendland 22)

And [Stoeckhardt] again:

> Never in this sense do we hear it presented: I believe; I am conscious of the fact that I believe on my Savior. Therefore I am justified in the sight of God. A believing Christian does not make the pulse of his faith-life the criterion of his state of grace. ... The believer rather makes this conclusion: Oh, how godless I still am! Out of my heart godless thoughts continue to arise. There is no doubt but that I am a poor, unworthy sinner. My sin is ever before me. But now God's Word tells me that God has already declared godless sinners righteous. Thus I belong without any doubt whatsoever in the number of those whom God justifies. (qtd. in Wendland 22-23)

In spite of this wonderfully clear, correct teaching, Missouri Synod in 1950 declared that the "Common Confession" was a settlement of such past differences with the American Lutheran Church. Since the ALC did not retract its false doctrine concerning faith, it is little wonder that many pastors in the Missouri Synod have left the true position and with TALC are now emphasizing faith at the expense of the object of faith, Christ.

Certainly such a history should put all faithful pastors on guard so that they realize that the danger we speak of in this paper really exists and that they will strive to keep this error from creeping back still further into groups having the true doctrine.

III. Fortunately, there are warning signs which indicate the presence of this danger. When the words "faith," "believing," and "accepting" are used over and over again without synonyms, then it is possible that the act of faith is being given too great a position of importance. The use of these words tends to become a magical formula, a mysterious incantation which must be expressed in certain special, never-changing syllables, or else the magic spell of being saved will be broken. These phrases become an amulet which aged and dying cling to for comfort. All their lives they have been told, "Don't worry when you die. Just believe in Jesus." They may not understand what the phrase means, but somehow one can enter heaven's bliss by mumbling the open sesame formula, "I believe in Jesus." Compare such hesitancy to use synonyms and other expressions for "faith" and "believing" with the way Luther speaks of the matter. He speaks of "certainty," "sure confidence," "firm reliance," "refusing to be torn away from," "casting one's entire self on," just as easily as he uses the words "faith" and "believing."

Another indication of this tendency to treat the word "faith" as though it were a magical formula to insure the correctness of a given statement appears when this word is paired with some synonym, when it is quite obvious that no such pairing is needed. Our current Lutheran literature is full of such examples, supplied quite unconsciously and no doubt unintentionally by the respective authors. But when we speak of one "who by faith accepts Christ as his personal Savior," we have weakened the statement rather than strengthened it. Let it stand in all its strong simplicity: "one who accepts Christ as his personal Savior." The same thing happens when we automatically (and therefore thoughtlessly) pair "believing" with "children of God," or "unbelieving" with rejecters of Christ"—as though there could be unbelieving children of God, or believing rejecters of Christ. There are indeed times when emphasis on the thought of belief or unbelief is needed. And such synonyms can supply it, and should be given when it is in order. But let us use this device intelligently, always remembering that thoughtless use weakens a statement, and the constant repetition can create an unscriptural emphasis on the act of faith rather than on its object—Christ.

An easily recognized indication of the presence of this over-emphasis-of-faith danger is to note which words we emphasize when we read Scripture passages which contain both the act of faith and its object, Christ. The verse John 3:16 is a good example. Test yourself with it. Read the verse aloud and note carefully which words of the verse you emphasize. The dangerous emphasis is: "whosoever <u>believeth</u> in him should not perish. ..." The correct emphasis is: "whosoever believeth in <u>Him</u> should not perish. ..." In a similar manner the passage from Acts 16:31 is frequently abused. The dangerous emphasis is made: "<u>Believe</u> on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." The correct emphasis is: "Believe on the <u>Lord</u> <u>Jesus</u> <u>Christ</u>, and thou shalt be saved." From this one can see how incorrect it is to say that mere Bible reading without any comment in the public schools would not teach false or sectarian doctrines. By emphasizing faith rather than the object of faith, Christ, even a mere reading of the Bible could lead one to make a false savior out of faith.[3]

One of the most serious warning signs that a pastor can receive in this matter is when he finds that one of his members has been asking himself whether, if he should die right at this instant, he would be positively sure of his going to heaven and then tells himself, "1 guess so; I hope so; I surely want to." Such a poor person is uncertain about his salvation probably because he is looking at the weakness of his <u>act</u> of believing rather than fixing his gaze on the certain <u>object</u> of his faith: Christ Jesus, the same yesterday, today, and forever. Such a situation calls for the highest degree of pastoral wisdom and counseling.

Another warning sign in this matter shows itself when members of a congregation hear a Christ-centered sermon and react to the doctrine of universal justification by asking, "If our salvation is <u>so</u> certain, then why do we need the Lord's Supper?" By probing deeper, one finds that such members have been under the impression that each time they go to the sacrament, they receive another portion of forgiveness to cover their sins for the period of time since they last had the Lord's Supper. God does not forgive sins by the month like a mortgage payment. The complete payment was made for all sins of all people, past, present, and future, over 1900 years ago when Christ cried from the cross, "It is finished." The Lord's Supper is one of the ways God has chosen to underline and emphasize His words: "Because of Christ, I love you. I accept you. You are my dear child." The sinner who is under the impression that some personal conduct, such as sorrow for sin, belief in Jesus, willingness to amend, has punched the right button and God like a vending machine will now issue another monthly ration of forgiveness is in grave danger of being a *faithian* instead of a Christian.

The closing part of this paper is made up [entirely] of several quotations from Dr. C. F. W. Walther's book, *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*.

> A preacher must be able to preach a sermon on faith without ever using the term *faith*. It is not important that he din the word *faith* into the ears of his audience, but it is necessary to frame his address so as to arouse in every poor sinner the desire to lay the burden of his sins at the feet of the Lord Jesus Christ and say to Him: "Thou art mine, and I am Thine."

Here is where Luther reveals his true greatness. He rarely appeals to his hearers to believe, but he preaches concerning the work of Christ, salvation by grace, and the riches of God's mercy in Jesus Christ in such a manner that the hearers get the impression that all they have to do is take what is being offered them and find a resting place in the lap of divine grace. That is the great act which you must seek to learn—to make your hearers reason that, if what you preach is true, they are blessed men; all their anguish and unrest has been useless; they have been redeemed perfectly, reconciled with God, and are numbered with the saved and those on whom God has made His gracious countenance to shine. The moment a person thinks these thoughts, he attains to faith. (Walther 260)

On the other hand, you may spend a lot of time telling men that they must believe if they wish to be saved, and your hearers may get the impression that something is required of them which they must do. They will begin to worry whether they will be able to do it, and when they have tried to do it, whether it is exactly the thing that is required of them. Thus you may have preached a great deal about faith without delivering a real sermon on faith. ...

I do not mean to say that you must not preach about faith. Our time particularly lacks a proper understanding of this matter. The best preachers imagine they have accomplished a great deal when they have rammed into their hearers the axiom: "Faith alone saves." But by their preaching they have merely made their hearers sigh: "Oh, that I had faith! Faith must be something very difficult; for I have not obtained it." These unfortunate hearers will go home from church with a sad heart. The word *faith* is echoing in their ears, but gives them no comfort. Even Luther complained that many in his day were preaching about faith without showing their hearers what faith really signifies and how to attain it. A preacher of this sort may labor for years and preach to a dead congregation. That explains why people talk in uncertain strains about their salvation. You can tell that they are driven to and fro with doubts and become awfully frightened and distressed when they are told that they are at death's door. Whose fault is it? The preacher's, because he preached wrong about faith. (Walther 261)

[Next is Walther's stating and explaining of Thesis XIV]: "*The Word of God is not rightly divided when faith is required as a condition of justification and salvation, as if a person were righteous in the sight of God and saved, not only by faith, but also on account of his faith, for the sake of his faith, and in view of his faith*" (268 ital. orig.).

There are not a few people who imagine that a minister who constantly preaches that man is made righteous in the sight of God and saved by faith is manifestly a genuine evangelical preacher. For what else is to be required of him when everybody knows that salvation by faith is the marrow and essence of the Gospel and the entire Word of God? That is true. A minister who preaches that doctrine is certainly a genuine evangelical preacher. But that fact is not established merely from his use of these words: "Man is made righteous in the sight of God and saved by faith alone," but from the proper sense that must be connected with these words. The preacher must mean by faith what Scripture means when it employs that term. But here is where many preachers are at fault. By faith they understand something different from what the prophets, the apostles, and our Lord and Savior understood by faith. I pass by the rationalists, who used to preach that man is indeed saved by faith; but by faith in Jesus Christ they understand nothing else than the acceptance of the excellent moral teachings which Christ proclaimed. By accepting these moral teachings, they held, a person becomes a true disciple of the Lord and is made righteous and saved. Take up any rationalistic book of the radical type that was published in the age of Rationalism, and you will see that such was the preaching of vulgar Rationalism.

Nor are the papists averse to saying that faith makes a person righteous in the sight of God and saves him. ... But by faith they understand *fides formata*, faith that is joined with love. Accordingly, they manage to say many excellent things about faith; but by faith they always mean something different from what Scripture teaches concerning faith.

Moreover, in the postils and devotional writings of all modern theologians you may find the doctrine that man is made righteous in the sight of God and saved by faith. But by faith they understand nothing but what man himself achieves and produces. Their faith is a product of human energy and resolution. Such teaching, however, subverts the entire Gospel.

What God's Word really means when it says that man is justified and saved by faith alone is nothing else than this: Man is *not saved by his own acts*, but *solely* by the doing and dying of his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of the whole world. Over against this teaching modern theologians assert that in the salvation of man two kinds of activity must be noted: in the first place, there is something that God must do. His part is the most difficult, for He must accomplish the task of redeeming men. But in the second place, something is required that man must do. For it will not do to admit persons to heaven, after they have been redeemed, without further parley. Man must do something really great—he has to believe. This teaching overthrows the Gospel completely. It is a pity that many beautiful sermons of modern theologians ultimately reveal the fact that they mean something entirely different from the plain and clear teaching of Scripture that man is saved, not by what he himself does or achieves, but by what God does and achieves. (Walther 268-69 ital. orig.)

Therein lies the danger of emphasizing faith at the expense of the object of faith: CHRIST.

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Endnotes

[1] Volume 2 of *Christian Dogmatics* as published by Concordia, St. Louis (1951), offers this translation of the Luther quotation in question on pages 440-441:

> "I am accustomed, for the better understanding of this point, to divest myself of the idea that there is a quality in my heart at all, call it either faith or love, but in their place I put Christ and say: 'He is my Righteousness' (St. L. XXIa: 1669)."

[2] The information in these two paragraphs and also the next paragraph was taken from a doctrinal essay presented to the Synodical Conference assembled August 10-13, 1954, at Detroit, MI. Entitled "The Inadequacy of the 'Common Confession' as a Settlement of Past Differences," this essay was written by E. H. Wendland, then of Benton Harbor, MI.

[3] Generally speaking, Bible readers can get a much clearer understanding of Scripture by emphasizing the words "God" and "Lord" and the pronouns referring to Him. This is especially helpful in the Psalms.

ANTINOMIANISM:
The Danger to the Gospel in Luther's Day and Today

Vance Fossum

* The writer's 2011 pastoral conference essay is here offered to readers of the *Journal* in two installments. Parts I and II below trace the impact of Antinomianism on the opposing confessional stance taken by Luther and the *Book of Concord*. Most of part III, the danger of Antinomianism to the Gospel today, will appear in the upcoming September issue. Documentation of quoted material is given parenthetically per MLA guidelines. For publishing information see Works Cited on page 49.

Martin Luther knew that while the Reformation was advancing, the wiles of the devil were worming their way into the hearts and minds of the learned men who surrounded him, as we can hear from the last sermon he preached in Wittenberg. On the basis of Romans 12:3-16 he said the following on January 17, 1546:

> Heretics are forever seeking tricks to trap us into yielding and making concessions to them; but, with the help of God, we will not do so. Then they say: You are proud, sorry fellows. I will gladly suffer all sorts of bad names, but I will not budge a fingerbreadth from the directions from the mouth of Him who says: "*Hear ye Him"* (Matt. 17:5). I clearly see that if God will not grant us faithful preachers and servants of the church, the devil will tear our church asunder through sectarian spirits and will not stop or cease until he has completed the job. ... If he cannot carry out his plan through the pope and the emperor, he will do it through those who still agree with us in doctrine ... .Now we feel secure and do not see what terrible designs the devil has on us through the pope, the emperor, and even our own learned men here, who say: What harm is done by surrendering this? No! We are not to yield a hairbreadth. ... I have not received my doctrine from them, but by divine grace from God. ... Therefore earnestly pray God to let us keep the Word, for matters will take a terrible turn in the future. (qtd. in Plass 869)

To Luther there was nothing weak about the doctrine he had received by the grace of God. The Law and the Gospel were spiritual—of God. Both doctrines were given by God, the one to tear down and kill and the other to lift up and make alive! But they must be used as God intended for the salvation of sinners. Early on, Luther had to deal with Carlstadt and the Iconoclasts, who preferred to destroy the external icons of the church in heartless, legalistic fashion rather than instruct and build up the people through the Gospel. On the other hand, Luther found it necessary to rebuke the people who, freed by the Gospel, treated their faithful pastors worse than they had under the yoke of the Romanists.

The winds of false doctrine were threatening the pure Gospel from every direction. The Münzerites, the Sacramentarians, the Anabaptists, and others had required his attention in the early years (c. 1522-27). How disappointing it was when even Philip Melancthon, Luther's right arm in the formulation of the Augustana, suggested that no harm was done to the doctrine of the real presence by allowing a spiritual understanding of these words. What began as the breeze of compromise would increase to hurricane level and threaten the Lutheran doctrine of the Reformation in the years after Luther's death.

From 1527 onward, however, strong winds of error were not so much in the Reformer's face as at the back of his head. An evangelical Luther had been pushing hard from within the Lutheran camp against the winds of Roman and pietistic legalism. But Johann Agricola (c. 1494–1566), who appeared at first to stand with Luther's "salvation by grace alone apart from the works of the Law," was really blowing against Luther's doctrine at his back! For while Luther had consistently taught that both the Law and the Gospel were to be preached in the church, Agricola held that there was no need whatever for the preaching of the Law.

As Luther then turned around to deal with this contrary wind, he stood between two great errors—not on the man-made fence of compromise, but on the firm ground of God's Word. Thus anchored, his testimony against the Antinomians, refined and set forth in the Formula of Concord and its Apology, continues to serve us well. We too must maintain our balance against the winds of error

(Eph. 4:14). Otherwise, while we push back against the winds of legalism in our faces today, we ourselves are blown down from the back side by Antinomianism.

Many in our day are foolishly concerned about dramatic, worldwide climate change, while those who have been given wisdom and the "mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 1:30-2:16) know that the real danger is the change in the religious climate of these last days. Genesis 8:22 forbids the former from happening,[1] while 2 Timothy 4:3 forecasts the latter as a warning Paul wrote to Timothy:

> *For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.*

While the "sound doctrine" of which Paul speaks may be summarily stated as the outcome of "rightly dividing the word of truth," which the apostle encouraged Timothy to do (2 Tim. 2:15), the "itching ears" syndrome has drastically changed the religious climate, particularly since the pure Gospel had been restored by the Lutheran Reformation. We suggest that both <u>legalism</u> and <u>antinomianism</u> continue their devilish tickling of the "itching ears" in modern Christianity.

We know that there are ears still longing for the *legalism* Luther fought against at the beginning of the Reformation. The *opinio legis* that fills the hearts of unconverted men and remains with the flesh of the converted will always relate to the emphasis on the "do's" and "don'ts" of Papists, Romanists, Calvinists, Arminians, and the like. However, the civilized, Christianized nations of the world have been overtaken by the prevailing wind currents of rationalism, atheistic humanism, and materialism, which all proclaim the freedom of man from the God of the Bible to pursue whatever pleases one's human nature. Given this religious climate in which we are told that there "are no absolute religious or moral truths," and that there is "good in every human," is it not possible that the itching ears may have a growing preference for the preaching of the Antinomians in our day?

I. The theological definition of Antinomianism

In order to give a proper definition of *Antinomianism* as this term has been used since the Reformation, we begin with a definition of the *Law* and the *Gospel*.

The student of Scripture recognizes that the term *Law* is often used in a wide sense to speak of the whole revelation or *word* of God (e.g., Ps. 1, 19, 119, Isa. 2:3, John 10:34, 1 Cor. 14:21). The Gospel is also understood in a wider sense for all the teachings of Christ and the Apostles in the New Testament. For example, Mark 1:14-15 tell us that Jesus was "preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.'" So also Mark 16:15, where our Lord told the eleven: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature." However, as Franz Pieper points out, "the term 'Gospel' is never used to designate the Law in the proper sense" (III:223). In fact, Pieper along with the Formula of Concord cites Mark 1:15 as expressing the proper sense of *Gospel* as "only the preaching of the grace of God, ... where Christ says: 'Repent, <u>and</u> believe the Gospel'" (III:224 emph. vf).

We have known from our youth that both the Law and the Gospel are the Word of God, the two great doctrines of Holy Scripture. However, the Law "was given through Moses," while "grace and truth came through Jesus Christ," as John celebrates in the first chapter of his Gospel (John 1:17). Thus the apostle makes it clear that the Law is not of grace, but only the Gospel is. And "truth," that is, the truth of salvation comes not through the Law, but through the Gospel of Christ, which declares and reveals God's grace to man so that man may "know the truth" which makes the sinner "free" (John 8). This is the same "truth" that Abraham heard and in which he rejoiced (John 8:56; Gal. 3:6ff.).

Thus the Law and the Gospel, in the proper sense of these terms, are as distinct in their purpose and function as darkness and light, as the heavens and the earth, even though both were given by God and both are made to serve Him. The Law terrifies man, but the Gospel brings comfort and peace of conscience before God. The Law, like a fist to the head and heart, knocks us down, while the Gospel is the open hand extended to lift us up. The Law kills, but the Gospel gives life.

In answering the Antinomian error, the authors of the Formula of Concord acknowledge the

wider use of these terms in Scripture, while also defining the proper use of each. From the Epitome we read in Article V:

> ... [W]e believe, teach, and confess that if by the term *Gospel* is understood the entire doctrine of Christ which He proposed in His ministry, as also did His apostles (in which sense it is employed, Mark 1, 15; Acts 20, 21), it is correctly said and written that the Gospel is a preaching of repentance and of the forgiveness of sins.
>
> 6. But if the Law and the Gospel, likewise also Moses himself [as] a teacher of the Law and Christ as a preacher of the Gospel are contrasted with one another, we believe, teach, and confess that the Gospel is not a preaching of repentance or reproof, but properly nothing else than a preaching of consolation, and a joyful message which does not reprove or terrify, but comforts consciences against the terrors of the Law, points alone to the merit of Christ, and raises them up again by the lovely preaching of the grace and favor of God, obtained through Christ's merit. (*Concordia* 803:5-6)[2]

The Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, Article V, also quotes these clear words of Luther: "Anything that preaches concerning our sins and God's wrath, let it be done how or when it will, that is all a preaching of the Law. Again, the Gospel is such a preaching as shows and gives nothing else than grace and forgiveness in Christ, although it is true and right that the apostles and preachers of the Gospel (as Christ Himself also did) confirm the preaching of the Law, and begin it with those who do not yet acknowledge their sins nor are terrified at [by the sense of] God's wrath ..." (*Concordia* 955:12).

Again in the words of the Epitome, Article V:

> … [T]he LAW is properly a divine doctrine, which teaches what is right and pleasing to God, and reproves everything that is sin and contrary to God's will. 3. For this reason, then, everything that reproves sin is, and belongs to, the preaching of the Law. 4. But the GOSPEL is properly such a doctrine as teaches what man who has not observed the Law, and therefore is condemned by it, is to believe, namely, that Christ has expiated and made satisfaction for all sins, and has obtained and acquired for him, without any merit of his [no merit of the sinner intervening], forgiveness of sins, righteousness that avails before God, and eternal life. (*Concordia* 801, 803:2-4 emph. vf).

Although the term *Antinomianism* may appear etymologically to relate only to the Law, it also relates to and has a bearing on the Gospel. This is made clear at the beginning of Article V of the Formula of Concord, in which the *status controversiae* ("The Principal Question in This Controversy") is stated thus:

> Whether the preaching of the Holy Gospel is properly not only a preaching of grace, which announces the forgiveness of sins, but also a preaching of repentance and reproof, rebuking unbelief, which, they say, is rebuked not in the Law, but alone through the Gospel. (*Concordia* 801)

ANTINOMIANISM (Gk. *anti*, "against" + *nomos*, "law"), simply put, is the teaching that the Law has no place in the preaching of the church, that the Gospel is to accomplish what the Law was intended to do, namely, to reveal and rebuke sin, so as to replace the Law of God in evangelical preaching.

II. The danger of Antinomianism to the Gospel in Luther's day

The testimony of the Formula of Concord, Article V

Article V of the Formula of Concord warns against the danger of Antinomianism to the Gospel when it is taught that "the Gospel is properly not only a preaching of grace, but at the same time also a preaching of repentance, which rebukes the greatest sin, namely, unbelief." We cite the following at length:

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 and 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 in its purity, and by which they can support themselves in their most grievous trials against the terrors of the Law.

Now, here likewise there has occurred a dissent among some theologians of the Augsburg Confession; **for the one side asserted that the Gospel is properly not only a preaching of grace, but at the same time also a preaching of repentance, which rebukes the greatest sin, namely, unbelief**. But the other side held and contended that the Gospel is not properly a preaching of repentance or of reproof [preaching of repentance, convicting of sin], as that properly belongs to God's Law, which reproves all sins, and therefore unbelief also; **but that the Gospel is properly a preaching of the grace and favor of God for Christ's sake, through which the unbelief of the converted, which perilously inhered in them, and which the Law of God reproved, is pardoned and forgiven**. (*Concordia* 951, 953:1-2 emph. vf)

Now, in order that both doctrines, that of the Law and that of the Gospel, be not mingled and confounded with one another, and what belongs to the one may not be ascribed to the other, whereby the merit and benefits of Christ are easily obscured and the Gospel is again turned into a doctrine of the Law, as has occurred in the Papacy, and thus Christians are deprived of the true comfort which they have in the Gospel against the terrors of the Law, ... therefore the true and proper distinction between the Law and the Gospel must with all diligence be inculcated and preserved, and whatever gives occasion for confusion *inter legem et evangelium* (between the Law and the Gospel), that is, whereby the two doctrines, Law and Gospel, may be confounded and mingled into one doctrine, should be diligently prevented. **It is, therefore, dangerous and wrong to convert the Gospel, properly so called, as distinguished from the Law, into a preaching of repentance or reproof**. ... (*Concordia* 961:27 emph. vf)

The formulators of the Lutheran *Book of Concord* saw that without the proper distinction between Law and Gospel or if the Law were to be removed from evangelical preaching, great harm would come to Christians and to the pure teaching of the Gospel itself. The Gospel would be made into a friendly new law. God's grace and the merits of Christ would not be seen as the great and complete treasure God intended for the comfort of sinners.

The testimony of Luther against Agricola

By the time the Formula of Concord was adopted in 1580, Antinomianism had been a festering sore within Lutheranism for nearly sixty years. In fact, by all accounts Luther was more frustrated and worn by the arrogance, dishonesty, and dogged determination of Johann Agricola and his fellow Antinomians than by any other enemies of the Gospel within the Lutheran camp! This, of course, is no surprise, given the wiles of the devil in attempting to make a mockery of salvation by grace alone and the Church's rediscovered freedom from the rigors of papistic legalism and work-righteousness.

The spirit of Antinomianism was breathed out by Agricola already in 1525, when he wrote in his notes on the Gospel of Luke: "'The Decalog belongs in the courthouse, not in the pulpit. All those who are occupied with Moses are bound to go to the devil. To the gallows with Moses!'" (qtd. in Bente 163:185).[3] Perhaps one could explain such a statement, given the personality of the man, in the context of Rome's error regarding justification by works of the Law. Agricola appears to have thought he was defending the Gospel, or as some suggest, he might also have been picking a fight with Melanchthon.

However, in 1527 Philip Melanchthon wrote his "Instructions to the Visitors of the Churches of Saxony" in which he expressed the concern that a "certain carnal security" was being fostered by pastors unless they first preached "the Law to their spiritually callous people in order to produce repentance (contrition), and thus to prepare them for saving faith in the Gospel, the only source of truly

good works." Reacting to what he considered to be Romanizing and a corruption of evangelical doctrine, Agricola publicly taught that "genuine repentance (contrition) is wrought not by the Law," but is the work of "the Gospel only" (Bente 163:185).

The danger to the Gospel set forth by Agricola and other pastors at the time is evident in the concern expressed by Melanchthon as stated in his previous instructions to pastors: "'At present it is common to vociferate concerning faith, and yet one cannot understand what faith is, unless repentance is preached'" (qtd. in Bente 163:185 emph. vf). Melanchthon thereby has implied that without the preaching of the Law, the sinner cannot understand and know that faith is a despairing of one's own works and a child-like clinging to the Gospel alone.

Luther became involved at Torgau in November of 1527. At issue was the question: Does faith presuppose contrition? Melanchthon said Yes; Agricola said No. Luther explained that repentance (contrition), indeed, presupposes a general faith in God, but that justifying faith presupposes the terrors of conscience (contrition) worked by the Law. This, he hoped, would put an end to the controversy. But ten years later Agricola began again, "secretly and anonymously," to circulate propositions against Luther and Melanchthon, whom he called "'contortors [sic] of the words of Christ'" (qtd. in Bente 163:186). In response Luther wrote the first of his "Six Disputations against the Antinomians," beginning in December of 1537 and continuing through 1540.

We cannot present all of Luther's concerns as he powerfully countered Antinomianism in great detail in these disputations. However, we do want to group them into two categories as best as we are able, given the concern for brevity. These categories are:

1) A summary of Luther's answer to the question, "*Why is the Law to be taught?*" as presented in his second disputation.
2) A summary of Luther's remarks that show his concern that Antinomian error threatens the presentation and understanding of the Gospel. This we propose below under an unlikely heading: "*No Law, No Christ.*"

1. Why is the Law to be taught?

Bente conveys Luther's answer to the question above as a summation of his second disputation against the Antinomians. We have taken the liberty of adding the bullets below:

- "The Law is to be taught on account of discipline, according to the word of Paul, 1 Tim. 1, 9: 'The Law is made for the lawless,' and that by this pedagogy men might come to Christ as Paul says to the Galatians (3, 24): 'The Law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ.'
- "In the second place, the Law is to be taught to reveal sin, to accuse, terrify, and damn the consciences, Rom. 3, 20: 'By the Law is the knowledge of sin'; again, chapter 4, 15: 'The Law worketh wrath.'
- "In the third place, the Law is to be retained that the saints may know what kind of works God requires in which they may exercise their obedience toward God" (Drews, 418; *Herzog R.* 1, 588). (qtd. in Bente 164-65:187)

2. No Law, No Christ!

Under this heading we group the following theses from Luther's second disputation as they are recorded by Bente:

20. Law and revelation of sin or of wrath are convertible terms.

24. So that it is impossible for sin to be, or to be known, without the Law, written or inscribed [in the heart].

27. And since the Law of God requires our obedience toward God, these Antinomians (*nomomachi*) abolish also obedience toward God.

28. From this it is manifest that Satan through these his instruments teaches about sin, repentance, and Christ in words only (*verbaliter tantum*).

29. But in reality he takes away Christ, repentance, sin, and the entire Scripture, together with God, its Author.
45. For the Law, as it was before Christ, did indeed accuse us; but under Christ it is appeased through the forgiveness of sins, and thereafter it is to be fulfilled through the Spirit.
47. Therefore the Law will never, in all eternity, be abolished, but will remain, either to be fulfilled by the damned, or already fulfilled by the blessed.
48. These pupils of the devil, however, seem to think that the Law is temporary only, which ceased under Christ even as circumcision did. (qtd. in Bente 164:187)

In the above we note Luther's emphasis along two lines:
- Since sin may be truly known only by the Law and the Antinomians will not preach the Law, they abolish the obedience toward God required by the Law.
- Also, since Christ came to fulfill the Law that accused us, and the Law is appeased through the forgiveness of sins that He won, and the Christian is to fulfill it "through the Spirit," the Antinomians serve as Satan's instruments to take away Christ, repentance, sin, and the entire Scripture, together with God! No Law, no Christ!

When Agricola declared his initial agreement with Luther's second disputation, Luther did not follow through with a discussion of a third and fourth series of theses that he had prepared. From the "fourth series of 41 theses" we note the following:
22. Although the Law helps nothing toward justification, it does not follow therefrom that it ought to be abolished and not to be taught.
26. Everywhere in Paul [the phrase] "without the Law" must be understood (as Augustine correctly explains) "without the assistance of the Law," as we have always done.
27. For the Law demands fulfilment, but helps nothing toward its own fulfilment.
35. But faith in Christ alone justifies, alone fulfils the Law, alone does good works, without the Law.
37. It is true that after justification good works follow spontaneously, without the Law, *i.e.*, without the help or coercion of the Law.
38. In brief, the Law is neither useful nor necessary for justification, nor for any good works, much less for salvation.
39. On the contrary, justification, good works, and salvation are necessary for the fulfilment of the Law.
40. For Christ came to save that which was lost [Luke 19, 10], and for the restitution of all things, as St. Peter says [Acts 3, 21].
41. Therefore the Law is not destroyed by Christ, but established, in order that Adam may become such as he was, and even better. (qtd. in Bente 165:188)

We may summarize Luther's argument along these lines. Although the Law and the preaching of it does nothing whatever to bring about the obedience it demands, nor is it necessary for good works, justification, and salvation, *Christ came to fulfill the Law for the salvation of the "lost"—those condemned by the Law.* Thereby He did not destroy the Law, but established it. To understand and appreciate what Christ did for our salvation, the Law that He fulfilled to the letter in our places must be taught. No Law, no Christ!

After it became evident that Agricola had returned to his errors, Luther denounced the Antinomians as "deceivers" in his third public disputation (fifth series of theses). We give the following theses quoted by Bente to show the danger of this heresy to Christ and His Gospel.
40. Now, in as far as Christ is raised in us, in so far we are without Law, sin, and death.
41. But in as far as He is not yet raised in us, in so far we are under the Law, sin, and death.
42. Therefore the Law (as also the Gospel) must be preached, without discrimination, to the righteous as well as to the wicked.
44. To the pious, that they may thereby be reminded to crucify their flesh with its affections and lusts,

lest they become secure. [Gal. 5, 24.]
45. For security abolishes faith and the fear of God, and renders the latter end worse than the beginning. [2 Pet. 2, 20.]
46. It appears very clearly that the Antinomians imagine sin to have been removed through Christ essentially and philosophically or juridically (*formaliter et philosophice seu iuridice*).
47. And that they do not at all know that sin is removed only inasmuch as the merciful God does not impute it [Ps. 32, 2], and forgives it (*solum reputatione et ignoscentia Dei miserentis*).
61. For if the Law is removed, no one knows what Christ is, or what He did when He fulfilled the Law for us.
66. The doctrine of the Law, therefore, is necessary in the churches, and by all means is to be retained, as without it Christ cannot be retained.
67. For what will you retain of Christ when (the Law having been removed which He fulfilled) you do not know what He has fulfilled?
69. In brief, to remove the Law and to let sin and death remain, is to hide the disease of sin and death to men unto their perdition.
70. When death and sin are abolished (as was done by Christ), then the Law would be removed happily; moreover, it would be established, Rom. 3, 31. (qtd. in Bente 166:189)

Again, we summarize Luther's argument. It is a great deception to "hide the disease of sin and death" by refusing to preach the Law to the righteous as well as to the wicked, for thus the remedy that is Christ, who fulfilled the Law for us, is also hidden! No Law, no Christ!

Fearing that his position at the University of Wittenberg was in jeopardy, Agricola once again submitted. When a public retraction of his error was demanded, he asked Luther to write it for him. In January of 1539 Luther sent a public letter to his friend Caspar Guettel, pastor in Eisleben, which had the title "*Wider die Antinomer*." An English translation of this powerful indictment of the Antinomians comes in Volume 47 of *Luther's Works* (*The Christian in Society IV*), a portion of which follows below.

> When Isaiah 53 [:8] declares that God has "stricken him for the transgression of my people," tell me, my dear fellow, does this proclamation of Christ's suffering and of his being stricken for our sin imply that the law is cast away? What does this expression, "for the transgression of my people," mean? Does it not mean "because my people sinned against my law and did not keep my law"? Or does anyone imagine that there can be sin where there is no law? Whoever abolishes the law must simultaneously abolish sin. If he permits sin to stand, he must most certainly permit the law to stand; for according to Romans 5 [:13], where there is no law there is no sin. And if there is no sin, then Christ is nothing. Why should he die if there were no sin or law for which he must die? It is apparent from this that the devil's purpose in this fanaticism is not to remove the law but to remove Christ, the fulfiller of the law.
>
> For he is well aware that Christ can quickly and readily be removed, but that the law is written in the depth of the heart and cannot be erased. This is clearly seen in the psalms of lamentation. For here the dear saints are unable to bear the wrath of God. This is nothing but the law's perceptible preaching in man's conscience. The devil knows very well too that it is impossible to remove the law from the heart. In Romans 2 [:14–15] St. Paul testifies that the Gentiles who did not receive the law from Moses and thus have no law are nevertheless a law to themselves, being obliged to witness that what the law requires is written in their hearts, etc. But the devil devotes himself to making men secure, teaching them to heed neither law nor sin, so that if sometime they are suddenly overtaken by death or by a bad conscience, they have grown so accustomed to nothing but sweet security that they sink helplessly into hell. For they have learned to perceive nothing in Christ but sweet security. Therefore such terror must be a sure sign that Christ (whom they understand as sheer sweetness) has rejected and forsaken them. That is what the devil strives for, and that is what he would like to see. (Luther 110-11)

In summation we note what Luther argues in the main, that the purpose of the devil, who cannot

succeed in removing the Law from the heart, is to remove Christ by means of the *Antinomian* error. For if the devil is permitted to teach that the Law has been entirely removed, and sin is of no consequence, then Christ is nothing but "sweet" (fleshly) security." Then, when a bad conscience terrorizes them, Christ, who truly died as as total payment for their sins, becomes nothing to them. Pieper writes: "Luther therefore rightly asserts that by their demand that the preaching of the Law be banished from the Church the Antinomians are doing all they can to rob the Church also of the Gospel and Christ" (III:236). *No Law, no Christ*!

The testimony of the Formula of Concord in Article VI regarding the later Antinomianism

After the struggle between Agricola and Luther and also Luther's death in 1546, Antinomianism morphed, but only slightly. We recall from the above that Agricola had no time for the Law, which, he said, "'merely rebukes sin, and that, too, without the Holy Spirit'" and only "'to damnation.'" He wanted to proclaim only the Gospel, "'which does not only condemn with great efficacy, but which saves at the same time'" (qtd. in Bente 169:193). Thus Agricola denied that the Law was necessary to bring about contrition and prepare hearts for the Gospel, and therefore it should not be preached in the church. The Philippists in Wittenberg also taught that the sin of unbelief is condemned by the Gospel, not the Law. As we shall see, Luther did not succeed in wiping out the threat of Antinomianism to the Gospel.

In the early years Luther had trouble reconciling the Epistles of Paul and the Epistle of James, calling the latter an "epistle of straw" because it seemed to contradict Paul's words regarding justification "by faith apart from the works of the Law." So also, in the heat of his debate with the Romanists, Luther had maintained that good works are a hindrance to justification. We know from his writings, notably his catechisms and his commentary on Galatians, that Luther understood the relationship between faith and the works that flow from faith.

However, when the newfound Gospel freedom in Christ became a license to sin (as the Romanists had falsely accused Luther's doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone), Melanchthon and George Major (1552) declared that good works are "necessary for salvation." Neither of them were espousing the Romanist view or speaking against Luther. They sought only to establish the scriptural relationship between faith and works, even as Paul and James do when taken together: *Faith alone saves, but saving faith is never alone.* In 1556 at the Synod of Eisenach, Nicholas Amsdorf (Flacius too at first) took exception. Amsdorf, thinking that he was defending Luther's doctrine, went beyond Luther to say that "'good works are injurious to salvation'" and "'God does not care for good works.'" He proposed the following thesis: "'Good works are, even in the forum of the law and in the abstract (*de idea*), not necessary to salvation'" (qtd. in Seeberg II:365).

Andreas Poach added his support of these statements, maintaining that "it is the office of the law only to accuse and condemn, and that the gospel alone leads to the doing of good: 'After grace has been obtained and remission of sins and salvation accepted, we cease to do evil and begin to obey God'" (qtd. in Seeberg II:365). In completing his summary of "The Antinomistic Controversy," Reinhold Seeberg writes: "ANTON OTTO advanced to crass Antinomianism, affirming that there is no 'third use of the law;' that the new obedience belongs not to the kingdom of Christ, but to the world, as to Moses and the supremacy of the pope; that the Christian is 'above all obedience.' We should pray God that we may remain steadfast to our end in faith without any works (cf. PLANCK, V. I. 62 f.). It was the old ideas of Agricola which were thus continually reappearing, although Luther had refused to countenance them" (366).

Thus the later and particular form of Antinomianism addressed in Article VI of the Formula of Concord was not a rejection of the Law to prepare for the Gospel, but a rejection of the third use of the Law, as it pertains to the function of the Law with regard to the good works of the Christian. The later Antinomians maintained that the Law is not intended for the regenerate Christian and is not necessary in any way with respect to the good works of the Christian, since the Holy Spirit in the believer knows

nothing of the Law. Men like Andrew Poach, Anton Otto, and others sought also to justify their error by quoting from Luther's arguments against the Romanists. Their zeal for the Gospel, however, was misguided because it was not held in check by Scripture. Paying no heed to the Law-Gospel paradox set forth in Scripture, they were thrust into the Antinomian ditch along with Agricola—surely a timeless warning for us all!

We quote at length a portion of Article VI dealing with the Christian's need of the Law because he is not completely renewed in this life:

> ... [W]e unanimously believe, teach, and confess that although the truly believing and truly converted to God and justified Christians are liberated and made free from the *curse of the Law*, yet they should daily exercise themselves in the Law of the Lord, as it is written, Ps. 1, 2; 119, 1: *Blessed is the man whose delight is in the Law of the Lord, and in His Law doth he meditate day and night.* For the Law is a mirror in which the will of God, and what pleases Him, are exactly portrayed, and which should [therefore] be constantly held up to the believers and be diligently urged upon them without ceasing.
>
> For although *the Law is not made for a righteous man*, as the apostle testifies 1 Tim. 1, 9, but for the unrighteous, yet this is not to be understood in the bare meaning, that the justified are to live without law. ... But the meaning of St. Paul is that the Law cannot burden with its curse those who have been reconciled to God through Christ; nor must it vex the regenerate with its coercion, because they have pleasure in God's Law after the inner man.
>
> And, indeed, if the believing and elect children of God were completely renewed in this life by the indwelling Spirit, so that in their nature and all its powers they were entirely free from sin, they would need no law, and hence no one to drive them either, but they would do of themselves, and altogether voluntarily, without any instruction, admonition, urging or driving of the Law, what they are in duty bound to do according to God's will; just as the sun, the moon, and all the constellations of heaven have their regular course of themselves, unobstructed, without admonition, urging, driving force, or compulsion, according to the order of God which God once appointed for them, yea, just as the holy angels render an entirely voluntary obedience.
>
> However, believers are not renewed in this life perfectly or completely, ... for although their sin is covered by the perfect obedience of Christ, so that it is not imputed to believers for condemnation, and also the mortification of the old Adam and the renewal in the spirit of their mind is begun through the Holy Ghost, nevertheless the old Adam clings to them still in their nature and all its internal and external powers. ...
>
> Therefore, because of these lusts of the flesh the truly believing, elect, and regenerate children of God need in this life not only the daily instruction and admonition, warning, and threatening of the Law, but also frequently punishments, that they may be roused [the old man driven out of them] and follow the Spirit of God. ... (*Concordia* 963, 965:4-9 ital. orig.)

Article VI of the Formula of Concord also speaks as follows concerning the Holy Spirit's use of the Gospel and the Law with respect to the good works of the Christian.

> But we must also explain distinctively what the Gospel does, produces, and works towards the new obedience of believers, and what is the office of the Law in this matter, as regards the good works of believers.
>
> For the Law says indeed that it is God's will and command that we should walk in a new life, but it does not give the power and ability to begin and do it; but the Holy Ghost, who is given and received, not through the Law, but through the preaching of the Gospel, Gal. 3, 14, renews the heart. Thereafter the Holy Ghost employs the Law so as to teach the regenerate from it, and to point out and show them in the Ten Commandments what is the [*good and*] *acceptable will of God*, Rom. 12, 2, in what *good works God hath before ordained that they should walk*, Eph. 2, 10. He exhorts them thereto, and when they are idle, negligent, and rebellious in this matter because of the flesh, He reproves them on that account through the Law, so that He carries on both offices together: He slays and makes alive; He leads into hell and brings up again. ... Therefore, as often as believers stumble, they are

reproved by the Holy Spirit from the Law, and by the same Spirit are raised up and comforted again with the preaching of the Holy Gospel. (*Concordia* 965, 967:11-14 ital. orig.)

Luther and the Confessions recognized that the first and most insidious characteristic of historic Antinomianism is that while both in theory and application it purports to establish and exalt the Gospel, *by removing the Law, it actually diminishes the Gospel*.

Theoretically, to argue that the preaching of the Law is not necessary to effect contrition (Agricola) or to teach good works (Poach, Otto)—since the Gospel alone is sufficient in both cases and the Church is commissioned to preach the Evangel—rejects the testimony of Holy Scripture, the ministries of the prophets and the apostles, and even Christ Himself, who commissioned His Church to "make disciples of all nations ... , teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:18-20).

The theory of the Antinomianists severely diminishes the effect of the Gospel, much in the same way that a farmer would greatly reduce or prevent the seed he plants from bringing forth fruit if he decided to prove the power of the seed by leaving the soil hard and uncultivated. When the seed that is powerful and contains life within itself is not permitted to enter the soil, it is rendered ineffective. Birds come and take the seed away, and it is prevented from doing what it was empowered by God to do! When the Antinomians apply their false theory to the hard ground of the sinner's heart, refusing to break it up by the preaching of the Law, the Gospel is not permitted to work its life-giving, transforming power in man, because it is not welcomed and received by a heart that is broken and contrite.

Our Confession remains unchanged

Regarding the Antinomian errors that 1) the Law is deficient and ought to be replaced by the Gospel, as Agricola taught, or that 2) the Law is not necessary for the regenerate Christian, as Poach and Otto taught, we still believe as the Scripture teaches:

> First, that the Law is "good"; and second, that the flesh, also in the Christian, is not and never will be good, even as Paul states, "*Therefore the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good. ... For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin*" (Rom. 7:12, 14).

Regarding the need to preach the Law as distinct from the Gospel, both to the unconverted and the converted, we still believe what the Scriptures, Luther, and the Lutheran Confessions declare in the points below:

- The Law and the Gospel are both the Word of God; but they are always to be clearly distinguished in theory and application. The purpose and function of the Law is to reveal, magnify, and condemn sin as worthy of God's temporal and eternal punishments in every person. The purpose of the Gospel is to bring comfort and peace to every repentant sinner through the working of faith in Jesus Christ.
- True Christians are entirely free from the curse and punishment of the Law, as Paul says (Gal. 3:13; 4:1-7); and
- They are indeed the temples of the Holy Spirit. God has put His Law in their hearts by means of the Gospel of forgiveness (Jer. 31:31-34), and they "delight in the law of God according to the inward man" (Rom. 7:22);
- But the Law, which is not intended for the "righteous, but for the unrighteous," must be preached also to Christians because they are not fully renewed in this life; they retain the sinful flesh.
- Since in this life the Christians retain the sinful flesh, which unceasingly tempts them to sin against God (Rom. 7:14-25), the Ten Commandments, a summary of God's holy Law, are needed to threaten and condemn the flesh and to serve as a guide so that the believer is not led astray by the flesh to devise his own works, but is taught by the Spirit according to the will of his Savior God (Rom. 7:7).
- Therefore the Law is used by the Holy Spirit and is necessary to mirror and magnify the sins of the unbeliever as well as the believer and to drive both to despair of self so that they may only be led by

the Gospel alone to find forgiveness and righteousness in Christ alone (Rom. 7:9-11, 24-25).

III. The danger of Antinomianism to the Gospel in our day

During the past 500 years Antinomianism has metastasized in the body of Christianity. The spidery legs of this cancer are insidious and nearly invisible to the naked eye and must be identified under the microscope of God's Word, which defines the proper function of Law and Gospel so that the Gospel is proclaimed as the *free and unmerited grace of God for the salvation of sinners*, as God has revealed it.

Our concern for the Gospel: Because of the Gospel we preach the Law

We begin with what this writer believes should be our underlying purpose in preaching the Law from start to finish. In order to avoid the danger of Antinomianism to the Gospel, we must be careful in our ministry to preach the Law because of the Gospel—in the same way that Christian parents should exercise care in the way they discipline their children, that is, because they have a higher, more worthy goal than merely controlling their behavior or helping them to be good, responsible, productive citizens in life. They want their children to know just how much they are forgiven by God's grace so that they may cling to their Savior alone and live eternally before God in heaven.

For example, suppose a father learns that his son has shoplifted. The Christian father must not be satisfied to remind his son of the shame he has caused his family and the punishment that he must suffer for his thievery. This may be sufficient for the father whose chief desire is that his son grow up to be a respectable, law-abiding citizen. And the son may go away thinking that he has weathered his father's sermon and made satisfaction for his wrong-doing. He may think, "I must try harder to be the son my father wants me to be," or he may even think to himself, "I will be more careful not to get caught next time!"

But the Christian father desires much more, not from his son, but for his son. He wants him to inherit eternal life through faith in his only Savior from sin. Because of the Gospel such a father will want to sound a clear trumpet warning for his son's eternal well-being before God. He will remind his son that his sin is first and foremost against God (Ps. 51:4), a sin against the Seventh Commandment that began in a covetous heart, which God also forbids in the Ninth and Tenth Commandments.

"My son," he will say, "You deserve far more punishment than you could ever receive from me; you deserve eternal punishment for your sins!" The father's hope and the goal of his Law-speech is that the Holy Spirit will strike his son with the heart-felt conviction that he has offended God and deserves His eternal wrath and punishment. But as soon as the father senses that the Law has struck its blow and convicted his son's conscience before God, the father rejoices to assure his son of total forgiveness through the shed blood of His Savior, Jesus Christ! In this way, by a proper use of the Law because of the Gospel, "godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted ..." (2 Cor. 7:10). The Christian pastor's goal for his people ought to be the same as the Christian father's goal for his children.

Walther touches on this subject in connection with his Twenty-second and Twenty-third Evening Lectures regarding godly sorrow and effective preaching:

> In his *Vindiciae Sacrae Scripturae*, ¶79, p. 125, *Huelsemann*, commenting on 2 Cor. 7, 10, writes: "Paul does not say: You have roused sorrow in yourselves from love of God, but you have been given by me a godly sorrow, that is, a sorrow which is in accord with the will or commandment of God. ... Accordingly, Paul interprets godly sorrow to signify a sorrow which had been roused in the Corinthians by the power and the command of God. ..."
>
> This passage, then, refers to a sorrow in the presence of God on the part of the person who has become alarmed because of his sins. When I am terrified by the thought of my sins, hell, death, and damnation and perceive that God is angry with me and that, being under His wrath, I am damned on account of my sins, —that is godly sorrow, even though I may be in the same condition in which

> Luther was before he got the right knowledge of the Gospel. Such sorrow comes from God. On the other hand, ... [w]hen a vain person is thrown into sorrow over his sins because he has lost somewhat of his prestige; when a thief sorrows over his thieving because it has landed him in jail; — that is worldly sorrow. However, when a person grieves over his sins because he sees hell before him, where he will be punished for having insulted the most holy God, that is godly sorrow, provided that it has not been produced by imagination through a person's own effort. Genuine godly sorrow can be produced by God alone. May God grant us all such sorrow! (Walther 246)
>
> What is to be effected by preaching? Bear in mind that the preacher is to arouse secure souls from their sleep in sin; next, to lead those who have been aroused to faith; next, to give believers assurance of their state of grace and salvation; next, to lead those who have become assured of this to sanctification of their lives; and lastly, to confirm the sanctified and to keep them in their holy and blessed state unto the end. What a task!
>
> A preeminent point that we must not forget is this: To achieve this task, it is especially necessary rightly to divide the truth, as the apostle says, or properly to divide the Law and the Gospel from each other. When a person does not understand how to do this and always mingles either doctrine into the other, his preaching is utterly futile, in vain. More than this, a preacher of this kind does harm and leads the souls of men astray; he leads them to a false faith, a false hope, a false contrition, makes them mere hypocrites, and frequently hurls them into despair. To divide Law and Gospel properly is a very, very difficult task. As Luther says, all preachers cannot but remain mere apprentices in this art until death. Nevertheless, a young theologian must be able to recite at least the first lesson in this curriculum. <u>He must know the goal that he is to reach, and he must have made a start in reaching the goal.</u> (Walther 248-49 emph. vf)

We realize that the underlined words of Walther in their context mean that a young preacher's goal must be the proper division of Law and Gospel, toward which he must have made a start in his preaching. Perhaps, then, we may be forgiven for applying Walther's words in these lectures to our discussion of the dangers of Antinomianism to the Gospel, specifically to assert that we must preach the Law *because* of the Gospel. That is, in order to reach the blessed goal of bringing the Gospel's peace and comfort to the sinner's heart, he must be crushed by the Law.

When Paul says that the Law "was added because of transgressions" (Gal. 3:19), he does not mean to suggest that God gave the Law to Israel in order that they might rid themselves of their sins by their obedience to it. There was no "law given which could have given life" (Gal. 3:21). On the contrary, they were given the Law so that their sins might become magnified in their consciences and their own righteousness blasted. It was because of the Gospel that the Law was added, for the goal of their Savior God was that they be led to despair of any righteousness by the Law and seek it only in the Gospel promises concerning Christ and "given to those who believe" (Gal. 3:22-24).

We believe that the following words of Paul to Timothy also have application in our day to the danger of Antinomianism to the Gospel:

> *But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: for men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such turn away. For of this sort are those who creep into households and make captives of gullible women loaded down with sins, led away by various lusts, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. Now as Jannes and Jambres resisted Moses, so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, disapproved concerning the faith.* (2 Tim. 3:1-8)

We note above especially these words: "in the last days ... having a form of godliness, but denying its power." The "power" that actually works true "godliness," rather than the mere "form" of it, is not the Law, but the Gospel. Those who fit Paul's description in Luther's day were chiefly the Romanists, of course. But we must include also those religious sects that chose their own forms to convey to the post-Reformation world that they knew God better than others because they baptized again, or because they were more enthusiastic, or because they had given up everything that might be connected to

Catholicism (e.g., the Iconoclasts under Carlstadt).

In many cases those who had a "form of godliness" but were "denying its power" were those who claimed to know and worship God in one way or another, but who lived their lives as if the Gospel of forgiveness, uncovered by Luther, was a license to live as they pleased. Having been released from church law, they had little regard for any law, including God's! They were "always learning" but "never able to come to the knowledge of the truth"; that is, no matter how much they heard and learned about "godliness," they were never able to come to the knowledge of "the truth" as proclaimed in the Gospel of grace that "came by Jesus Christ" (John 1:17) and by which God desires all "to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4).

We have been "in the last days" since Pentecost (Joel 2:28-32, Acts 2:16ff.). We know that Paul's warning to young Timothy applies until the end of time. But Paul speaks similarly in his exhortation to Titus that a "bishop" is to "hold fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict. For there are many insubordinate, both idle talkers and deceivers, especially of the circumcision." Paul says that their "mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole households, teaching things which they ought not, for the sake of dishonest gain." Paul commands Titus to "rebuke sharply" those who teach "Jewish fables and commandments of men who turn from the truth" (Titus 1:9-14).

In sum, Paul says to Titus, "They profess to know God, but in works they deny Him. ... But as for you, speak the things that are proper for sound doctrine" (Titus 1:16-2:1). In combining Paul's words to Timothy and to Titus, do we not see the application to our own day? Why is it that so many profess a "form of godliness" and yet "deny the power" of it? Is it not because while the deceivers are telling them what "godliness" is, they are not preaching the Law to reveal true godliness and especially to convict of sin in need of repentance, and are thus denying the power of the Gospel to convert and bring about true godliness in heart and life? Are these not also, like Jannes and Jambres, men who resist the truth, men of corrupt minds, disapproved concerning the faith" (i.e., not subjective faith, but the doctrine of Christ)?

"The faith" is the doctrine of God—Law and Gospel. Surely all those who "resist the truth" of the Gospel of grace are "disapproved" because they do not preach the "sound doctrine" of Law and Gospel; they do not "rightly divide (distinguish) the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15)! Does this not apply to all who refuse to preach the negative of the Law so as to lay waste the pride of the self-made man (whatever "form of godliness" he may espouse), and thus they deny the power of the Gospel of grace and forgiveness to do its life-creating work? May we receive grace and courage in these last days to preach the Law because of the Gospel, for without the help of God we shall all utterly fail to have and maintain a truly evangelical ministry.

(To be continued)

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Endnotes

[1] Genesis 8:22: "*While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, and day and night shall not cease.*"

[2] The number preceding the colon indicates the page number in *Concordia Triglotta.* The number(s) after the colon indicates the paragraph number(s).

[3] For all Bente quotations the second number indicates the section number(s) in his "Historical Introductions to the Symbolical Books."

BOOK REVIEW

Martin Luther: *Luther's Works*: *Prefaces II* (Vol. 60), edited by Christopher Boyd Brown. Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Mo., 2011, hardcover, 385 pages.

Prefaces II is the third volume to be published in Concordia's project to add twenty more volumes to the American Edition of *Luther's Works*. Besides writing many books of his own, Luther wrote brief prefaces to books and pamphlets written by his friends and associates, men such as Johann Brenz, Lazarus Spengler, Urbanus Rhegius, Justus Menius, Robert Barnes, George Spalatin, and of course, Philip Melanchthon. The printers of these books loved to have Luther write the prefaces because they tended to increase the sales of the books. Similar requests are made of popular authors in our time for the very same reason.

In order to have the readers better understand these prefaces, the editors have provided helpful introductions that supply the context to what Luther wrote. In many cases the editorial introductions are longer than the prefaces themselves and indicate the general content of the writing for which Luther had written a preface.

Prefaces II covers the last years of Luther's life (1532-1545), and so the content indicates his concern for the future of Germany and the Christian congregations in his part of the world. Just three years after the reading of the Augsburg Confession in 1530, Luther wrote: "[N]early the entire crowd has lost God's Word in its heart and holds it in utter disregard. ... But when the pulpit no longer gives any light, then the world will have what it deserves and has earned, namely, that it be forsaken and cast away by God and given over into the power of the devil ... , who will lead them from one error to the next and fill them with all sorts of lies, idolatry, and heresy; after that he will drive and chase them to rebellion, war, murder, greed—in sum, to all immorality and vices" (p. 14). Could we not say the same today about our own country and its churches?

Sometimes Luther is depicted in his later years as being stubborn, ornery, and unyielding on nearly everything. Well, on a more positive note we read what he had to say about the followers of John Hus in Bohemia: "I know ... that one ought not to dispute about words and expressions where there is no conflict otherwise in their sense and intention. ... I would like to see all the world living in concord with us and us with the world in the same faith in Christ. ... I will not ... pressure them or force them to speak exactly the way I do, as long as we otherwise come to and remain in agreement concerning the substance. ... I ask that they, together with us, would pray to God our Father for unanimity of doctrine and faith. ... [I]t is only fair that they should be acknowledged as the broken reed and smoldering wick [Isa. 42:3], for we ourselves are not yet entirely complete and perfect either" (pp. 21-23).

To be sure, Luther did remain unyielding with regard to doctrine, for in one brief preface he says: "But conscience and the truth itself cannot tolerate this plan for peace. For the unity of faith is one thing, and love is another. So far as love is concerned, nothing has ever been omitted on our part or failed to be offered with the greatest goodwill in order either to maintain peace and harmony or to mend them. We always have been fully ready to do, to suffer, and to retain everything the opponents might command, enjoin, and inflict upon us, provided that there was no injury to the faith" (p. 61). "But it is also because

we ourselves are unable to approve things that manifestly conflict with the divine Scriptures and which, as it is said, 'allow no middle ground'" (p. 62).

For the cause of God's truth Luther wrote strong words against the papists, the enthusiasts (radical Anabaptists), and the followers of Mohammed. For this reason Luther was the target for much criticism. In one preface Luther had this to say about the radicals: "For this is what they write: that there are two false prophets, the pope and Luther, but Luther is worse than the pope. ... Truly, I am the target that God has set up, at which everyone must take his shot" (p. 87).

There is no doubt that to the end of his life Luther was convinced that the papacy was the foretold Antichrist. And thus he wrote: "For next to the lies of Satan himself, the father of lies ... , no lie has been put forth under the sun more shameless and vile than the claim that the Roman bishop is the shepherd of the entire Church" (p. 142). "But to accept these things [decrees of the pope] as articles of faith necessary to salvation and to trust and to die in them as if such obedience were salutary unto life—this is the ultimate evil of the last times ..." (p. 143).

Luther lived in a time of religious turmoil. There were many that were claiming to speak the truth. In that time of such great confusion Luther gave this advice that we can certainly make use of today: "There is no counsel or help in such matters apart from looking ... to God's Word, relying on it, and disposing everything in accordance with it." God "does not want people to look to human beings or human affairs, but rather to His Word, and to honor and esteem it below, above, and beyond everything. For when a person is dying or is in some other extremity, he must forget heaven and earth, sun and moon, father and mother, money and property, honor and power, and must cling solely to God's Word, stake his life on it alone, and so depart." "[D]o not look to whether there are many or few of them, whether it is the Turk or the pope, but rather to where God's Word is and with whom. Cling to that Word and be certain that there ... God's children—the holy Church—are present. ... For it is written: 'God's Word remains for eternity' [Ps. 119:89]. 'Heaven and earth pass away, but My Word does not pass away' [Matt. 24:35]. Amen. That is true" (pp. 212-213).

I am convinced that these writings of the mature Luther are worth reading. We are happy that Concordia Publishing House has undertaken this project, and we hope that our pastors and teachers and others as well can read these books previously unavailable in English. Most of the prefaces in *Prefaces II* were written for the common man, and the editorial introductions are helpful in providing the historical context. The price of the volumes per book is much less if one subscribes to the whole set in advance.

- David Lau