

Foreword

The 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's Ninety-five Theses, whose publication in October 1517 marks the traditional starting point of "The Protestant Reformation," is leading many to ponder: "Who was this Luther? What trouble did he create? What impact, both negative and positive, has he had on our world? Does Luther still have anything to teach us today?" The Jubilee year of 2017 has become an occasion for people within and beyond Christendom to study his life and work with renewed intensity. What is the ecumenical significance of Luther's theology and reforms?

Although this book is not about Luther's famous theses or even about Luther himself, it does attend to themes that were central to him and received their classic articulation in the Augsburg Confession of 1530. To study these themes is to be taken to the heart and center of Christian teaching: the unconditional mercy and forgiveness of God that is given in and through Jesus Christ for all sinners.

Luther himself—a university professor and occasional preacher, it should be remembered—became convinced the scriptures teach that a person is "justified" or "right" before God through grace, solely as a gift, for Christ's sake, by faith alone (*sola fide*), apart from human "good works."

This Christian gospel or "good news" has a central importance, not merely for the justification of the individual sinner. It is also crucial for one's theological understanding of other issues: the proper distinction between God's demands and gifts, the nature of repentance and faith, the church and the means of grace, the freedom of the baptized, and the importance of good works. Included in this mix are the relation between scriptural teaching and church traditions, the nature and condition(s) for true unity in the church, the mission of the church, and authority in the church.

Of course Luther did not want people to focus on his life or to celebrate his achievements. He had a realistic sense of his own limitations and placed the focus elsewhere:

I ask that people make no reference to my name; let them call themselves Christians, not Lutherans. What is Luther? After all, the teaching is not mine. Neither was I crucified for anyone. St. Paul in First Corinthians 3 would not allow the Christians to call themselves Pauline or Petrine, but Christian. How then could I—poor stinking maggot-fodder that I am—come to have people call the children of Christ by my wretched name? Not so, my dear friends; let us abolish all party names and call ourselves Christians, after him whose teaching we hold. (*LW* 45:70–71, trans. slightly modified)

The Wittenberg professor likewise suggested an additional label, in place of the pejorative “Lutheran,” namely, “evangelical.” Luther understood that term to mean “oriented to the gospel” (“evangel” = “good message” or “good report”; cf. Mark 1:15-16, 1 Cor. 15:1ff.).¹ Already in the Ninety-five Theses Luther pointed in this direction: “The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God” (*LW* 31:31).

The conflict that ensued after October 1517 between the authorities (both political and ecclesial), on the one hand, and Luther and his supporters, on the other, developed into a far more significant disagreement. Eventually Luther would be excommunicated, in early 1521. As this conflict unfolded, Luther saw more clearly just how central the promise of the gospel really is. He gradually learned that this promise really was his sole concern as a professor of the Bible and that it was the true issue at stake in his theological disputes.

This gospel promise alone had brought comfort and peace to his own troubled soul, and it had given him the most profound solution to the most perplexing and vexing of spiritual trials and tribulations he had encountered. No longer would the biblical phrase, “the righteousness of God,” frighten him, as it had when he had pondered it as God’s just demand and the divine judgment against him, the sinner. Instead, Luther came to understand the gospel promise as the righteousness that God freely gives the sinner as a *gift*, as a *promise* that is received solely *by faith*. In the promise, God declares that our sins have been taken from us and transferred to the crucified Christ and that this Christ’s righteousness is now predicated to us sinners. What an amazing transfer!

1. The term “evangelical,” as it was used by Luther and his followers, meant something different from how that word is used today to describe a subset within American Protestantism (e.g., nondenominational American evangelicalism, the National Association of Evangelicals, conservative American politics, etc.). Since the sixteenth century, many Lutheran churches and some other Protestant churches have understood the word to be synonymous with “Protestant” or “Lutheran,” especially in Germany, and yet even then the earlier connection to a gospel-oriented theological perspective is not entirely absent.

When that gospel “sense” of that biblical phrase, “the righteousness of God,” entered Luther’s head and heart, it was as if he had been brought to the very “gates of paradise.” It was, to use Edward Schroeder’s catchy descriptor, Luther’s “Aha Moment” (or series of insightful epiphanies, since Luther seems to have come to this teaching rather slowly, with fits and starts, between 1514 and 1518).² Gift, promise, by faith alone—together these terms clarify what is truly “good” about the “good news.”

The author of the Augsburg Confession, Philip Melancthon (1497–1560), who was Luther’s friend and younger colleague, experienced his own “Aha Moment” when he crafted that confession’s twenty-eight articles and then responded to its critics in the Apology to the Augsburg Confession. Crucially, Melancthon came to see that the gospel promise is central to *all* of the articles of faith.³ Of the twenty-eight articles in the Augsburg Confession, the fourth—on justification—articulates the “chief article of faith” that informs and shapes all the others, including those on “abuses that have been corrected” (for example, distribution of only the Eucharistic host, forced celibacy of clergy, the mass as human work and sacrifice, satisfactions, monastic vows, and the exercise of ecclesial oversight). That gospel of justification by faith, apart from works of law, is the key that not only unlocks the scriptures—by identifying their one true purpose, to create and sustain faith in the triune God—but it also properly orients every church doctrine. This is the evangelical dogma that those Augsburg confessors proposed to the church catholic as the norm of orthodoxy and catholicity.

Robert Bertram (1921–2003), whose influence is evident throughout the following chapters, referred to Melancthon’s “Aha Moment” as his discovery of “the hermeneutical significance of Article IV.”⁴ According to Bertram, Melancthon’s “Aha” was his recognition of the deep and abiding connection between “reading the Bible” and “articulating the biblical teaching of salvation.” How one reads the Bible is inseparable from the question of how people get saved biblically, and how one understands biblical salvation is inseparable from how one reads the scriptures. This basic Bertramian-Melancthonian insight was later expanded and clarified by Bertram’s student, friend, and collaborator, Ed Schroeder (see the first three chapters below). Now some of their

2. See Edward Schroeder, “Some Thoughts on the Augsburg Aha! The Augsburg Confession Itself,” <http://www.crossings.org/some-thoughts-on-the-augsburg-aha-the-augsburg-confession-itself/>. Accessed 3/28/2016.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Robert W. Bertram, “The Hermeneutical Significance of Apology IV,” in *A Project in Biblical Hermeneutics*, ed. Richard Jungkuntz (St. Louis: Concordia, 1969), 124–26.

students have added their voices to that duet in order to “fess up” evangelical expansions and clarifications of their own.⁵

One needs to underscore that the authors of these chapters do not see the Augsburg Confession as a sectarian document. Its intended purpose is not to set forth “the Lutheran” faith over against “the Catholic” one. Nor is it to define “Lutheran Protestantism” over against some other ism. Rather, the Augsburg Confession’s own explicit and rather audacious claim is that it sets forth the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic faith, that it teaches the “evangelical faith,” which is also “the catholic faith.” The intent of the document and of those who sign(ed) it—as Luther himself did (despite his private protestations that his drinking buddy’s confession was too pacific in places)—is thus an ecumenical and catholic intention in the broadest and best sense of these terms.

Given its original ecumenical aim, the Augsburg Confession invites repeated examination and testing in inter-Christian and interreligious contexts as well as in both ecclesial and academic settings. Does the Augsburg Confession in fact set forth the catholic faith? Is its exhibition of doctrine “biblical,” that is, truly “evangelical”? Can one recognize within this confession a “catholic” consensus? Moreover, do this confession’s articulations of doctrine have an abiding significance for contemporary theology? Can this sixteenth-century “source” serve as a useful “re-source” for twenty-first-century theological teaching and preaching? To answer these questions, one has to return to the text itself (*Ad fontem!* Back to the source!), to engage its claims and to test them against what the scriptures themselves set forth in the context of our contemporary world.

Each of the ensuing chapters insists on an affirmative answer to the above questions. Each essay returns to the originating spring of that 1530 confession in order to discern in it “the evangelical pattern of doctrine” and to identify gospel clues for how to go about addressing contemporary theological problems and issues. A key question always is: “How is one to confess the one sufficient gospel at the present time?” The authors, each in his or her own

5. Both Bertram and Schroeder first taught at Valparaiso University and then later at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis (a seminary that went into “exile” in 1974). For Bertram’s use of “fessing up,” see Robert Bertram, “Confessional Movements and FC-10,” an address delivered in Munich in July 1977, <http://www.crossings.org/library/bertram/ConfessionalMovementsFC-10.pdf>. Accessed 3/28/2016. See also idem, *A Time for Confessing*, ed. Michael Hoy, Foreword by Edward H. Schroeder, Lutheran Quarterly Books (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). Dr. Bertram’s comments and suggestions to the editors and translators of the most recent scholarly edition of the Lutheran Confessions in English had a significant impact on the final draft of that book. See *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

way, demonstrate the difference that the “Augsburg Aha” makes for the central and traditional topics of the Christian faith and for professing that one gospel faithfully (often, like Luther, even over against the established authorities of one’s time and place). While the dogma of Augsburg is the jumping-off point for each of the following chapters, the overall goal is to allow that evangelical orientation to speak to a contemporary audience, whose questions and problems, issues and complexities may (or may not) be different from those in that earlier era.

Perhaps I can be permitted a personal word of gratitude as a conclusion to this Foreword. For a first-year student at a college of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, studying the published essays of Bertram, Schroeder, and their colleagues brought about an “Aha moment” that was not dissimilar from Luther’s own. Those essays came bundled together under the title, “The Promising Tradition: A Reader in Law-Gospel Reconstructionist Theology.”⁶ By the time I read them, their authors had long been “exiled” from the Missouri Synod—the church body that had nurtured them in the faith, the same church body that had nurtured me.

When I first read those essays, I had been wrestling with the nature of biblical authority and the challenge of understanding those parts of the Bible that cause the most problems and difficulties for many young university students—especially after they have sat through a few science, philosophy, and history courses. What a liberation it was to encounter confessional Lutheran theologians who employed historical-critical resources and methods in the most rigorous of ways, and yet did so entirely in service to the evangelical *promissio* and as a prophetic *confessio* against that which is anti-gospel, “another gospel,” or no gospel at all. What a blessing it was to discover the hermeneutical significance of article 4 of the Augsburg Confession and the corollary article 4 in Melancthon’s Apology, and to learn about the proper distinction between law and gospel.

I also discovered how making that distinction properly—for the sake of the solely sufficient “one gospel-and-sacraments”—leads away from all sorts of theological dead-ends. That “aha moment” included a recognition of how one’s theology could be both “faithful to its confessional legacy” and yet “responsible to its time.”⁷ That same

6. *The Promising Tradition: A Reader in Law-Gospel Reconstructionist Theology*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary in Exile, 1974). See also the June 1987 issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission*, which offers essays on the same theme by students of Bertram and Schroeder.

7. Jaroslav Pelikan, Foreword, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, vol. 1, by Werner Elert, trans. Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia, 1962), xi.

“promising tradition” comes forward to our time and place in the chapters of this book. The one who reads them should be prepared for his or her own “Augsburg Aha.”

Matthew Becker
Professor of Theology
Valparaiso University
The Resurrection of Our Lord 2016