

Introduction

Elizabeth Eaton, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), wants everyone to understand that what defines Lutherans is their theology. Bishop Eaton states that it is not Jello or “hot dishes” or any of the ethnic or cultural characteristics we may chuckle over when we listen to Garrison Keillor.

“We have a very particular way of understanding the Jesus story,” Eaton writes. “It’s the story of God redeeming us from sin, death and the devil, setting us free from our bondage to sin so that liberated and alive, we may serve God by serving the neighbor. And it’s not about our effort or goodness or hard work. It’s about God’s gracious will to be merciful.”¹ That “particular” theology, presented in the Augsburg Confession, is the subject of this book.

The premise of this book is that the theology expressed in the 1530s by Luther and the other Reformers in Saxony, Germany, is as relevant today—and as necessary today—as it has ever been. The current de facto theology of many (including even heirs of the Reformation) is a theology that assumes we have a transactional relationship with God—if I do this, then God will do that. The sad result is that the work of Christ—in particular his death and resurrection—is wasted and human beings are left with burdened consciences or with self-destructive pride. They are left with the realization that the good they do is never really all that good and never really good enough—and that the good they do does not undo the selfish and hurtful things they have done or said. Or they end up deceiving themselves into thinking they are better than they really are, setting themselves up for the critique of God who commands us to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind—and our neighbors as ourselves.

In contrast, the Augsburg Confession offers the promise that we are

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justified by faith in the crucified and risen Christ. This promise sets burdened consciences free and liberates us from sinful self-centeredness. In the midst of our existential dread and pervasive anxiety, the Augsburg Confession and the writers of this book invite us to find joy in the promise that God makes to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Dr. Edward Schroeder began to write this book forty years ago. But the controversy that had ruptured the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in the 1970s (and had cost him his job) resulted in his delaying its completion.

Now nine of Schroeder's students have finished what their teacher began. They, too, believe that the theology of the Augsburg Confession speaks to our time as it articulates the law and the promise that are at the heart of the scriptural Word of God.

The first three chapters are revisions of Schroeder's original work. They establish the core of the Augsburg Confession, articulated in article 4 of that confession. That core, of course, is the gospel itself. It is the good news that God has reconciled sinners to God's self through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and that those who trust this good news already have, by that very trust, what God offers them in Christ. The core, in short, is a promise—a promise we have as a gift.

That realization, Schroeder points out, came to Luther as an "Aha" (or perhaps as a series of "Ahas"). For Luther, the promise of the gospel had gotten lost in medieval theology and preaching. That promise is always in danger of being lost (even today), given the sinful nature of human beings. The writers hope this book helps keep that gospel "Aha" alive.

Schroeder demonstrates how Luther's "theology of the cross" stands in sharp contrast to the "theology of glory" that so agitated Luther—and why. The "theology of glory" that did not proclaim the gospel as a promise failed to make full use of Christ or his benefits. It wasted them. And the result was that troubled consciences remained troubled. The "theology of the cross" that informs the Augsburg Confession makes use of Christ's death and resurrection *and* brings consolation to troubled consciences.

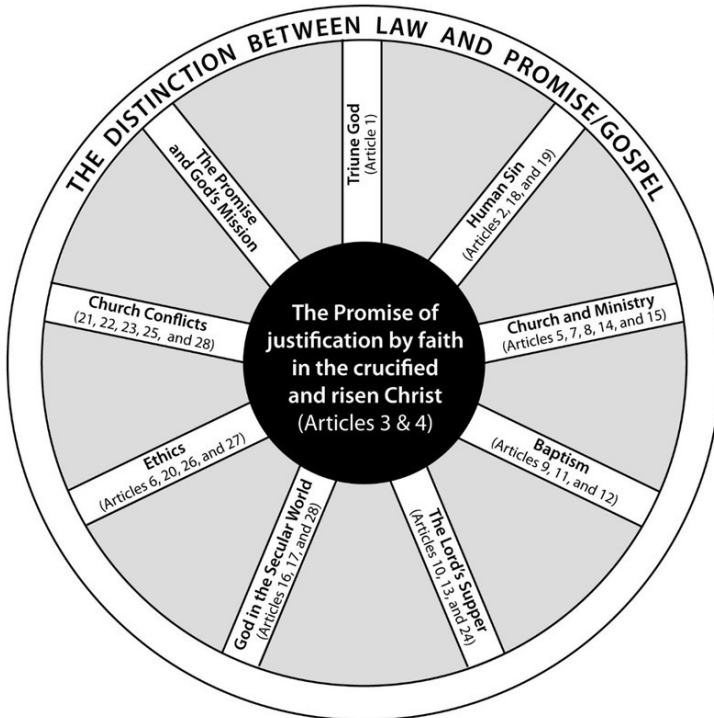
In the first three foundational chapters, Schroeder demonstrates how Luther's intense study of the scriptures informed his theology of the cross. Schroeder invents a new metaphor to illustrate the Augsburg Confession's way of evaluating theology to determine if it is "theology of the cross." The term is "double dipstick," sometimes also called the "two-sided measuring stick": (1) does the theology being presented make full use of Christ's benefits, and (2) do we receive maximum comfort and consolation "in the midst of earthly life"? Faith that trusts Christ's full

benefits—faith that “has Christ”—enables us to live with joy and hope in the face of the evil, sin, and death that are present in “earthly life.”

The nine chapters that follow Schroeder’s, written by his students, discuss the other “articles of faith” contained in the Augsburg Confession. They show how these articles “articulate” the one doctrine the church has—justification by faith alone.

Throughout this book, we use a visual illustration that Schroeder himself gave us, Illinois farm boy that he is. The Augsburg Confession is like a wagon wheel. The hub is justification by faith alone (articles 3 and 4). The spokes articulate that doctrinal hub in various contexts. The rim is the proper distinction between law and gospel that is necessary for the gospel to be heard and trusted.

Gift and Promise: the Theology of the Augsburg Confession



The Spokes: Articulations of the Promise, the one and only doctrine of the Gospel.

The Augsburg Confession, of course, has twenty-eight articles. We have grouped some of them together to end up with nine spokes.

The writers of this book have a variety of vocations and write in a variety of styles. Some are parish clergy; one is a bishop; one is an attorney; four are professors. In this book they write, not for the academy (although they could have, being scholars themselves), but for a broader readership. Our hope is that this book will help students, laypersons, and scholars alike to gain insight into the theology of the Augsburg Confession and its “up-to-date-ness” for our times.

You will find treasures in this book: Schroeder’s discussion of the radical difference between Luther’s and Anselm’s atonement models; Repp’s discussion of Trinity and science; Felde’s insight into marriage. You will also discover how timely the theology of the Augsburg Confession continues to be, especially as you read Kleinhans’s chapter on original sin or Failing’s treatment of the current debate about affirmative action. As an added bonus, Kääriäinen’s Augsburg perspective on mission is a significant contribution to current discussions in missiology.

We believe all our writers have contributed, not just to a clearer understanding of the theology of the Augsburg Confession, but also to a greater appreciation of its value and importance for today. In bringing this book to life, we wish to express our deep appreciation for the gift of Ed Schroeder. In the classroom, at conferences, and through hundreds of online postings as part of Sabbatheology and Thursday Theology (see www.crossings.org), he has patiently and persistently presented the gift of the gospel. As he (and his email messages) have traveled around the world, thousands have experienced Luther’s “Aha.” Our hope is that this book introduces many more to the promise that is at the heart of this theology.

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