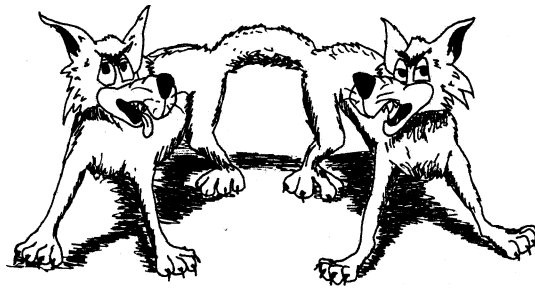
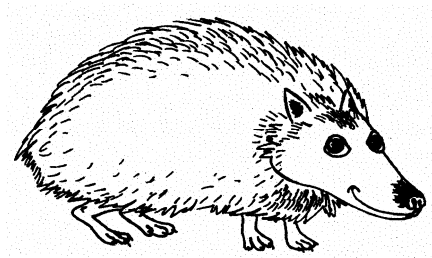


Christ . . . Our Only Righteousness



“The papists do not stop urging works and the worthiness of persons even today in opposition to grace, giving powerful help, at least in words, to their brethren, the Anabaptists. **These wolves are joined at the tail, even though they have different heads.** They pretend to be fierce enemies publicly; but inwardly they actually believe, teach, and defend the same doctrine, in opposition to **Christ, the only Savior, who is our only righteousness**” (*LW 27:149*).



“The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.”

“The **cross alone** is our theology.” *Luther*

1. Faith



Roman Catholic: There is something in us that can and does respond to God. They insist on *habitus*, a “bent,” most commonly known through Augustine’s dictum: “My heart is restless ‘til it finds its rest in thee.” (In contrast, note the Luther section in #2 below on sin as rebellion.)

Conservative Evangelical: Believers can and do decide for Christ *sincerely, earnestly*. Faith is choice and commitment. Believers need to make the choice to live for God. Faith is our inward commitment. It’s our doing.



Luther: Faith is God’s doing and it doesn’t depend on us. “God creates faith when and where he pleases in those who hear the gospel” (*Augsburg Confession 5*). “I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him... but the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, sanctifies...” (*Small Catechism II:6; Tappert 345*). “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (John 15:16). Therefore infant baptism. It’s all God’s doing.

Romans 14:23b: “Whatever is not of faith is sin” is a corollary of “All our righteous deeds are filthy rags (Isa. 64:6). Faith is God’s doing; all our doings are caught in sin. We cannot choose rightly. In our heart of hearts we want to be God. We are rebels. He makes us his own in baptism. Faith is not dependent on my thinking or feeling it rightly or strongly enough. When Paul writes in 1 Cor 13:13: “So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love,” he is speaking of “faith” as a virtue, something different from “faith” as God’s gift of salvation, which is outside of us, in spite of us.

2. Sin

Original sin was only defined in the Western Church at the Second Council of Orange (529), but then largely overlooked until Scholasticism. The Eastern Orthodox have not held to what we think of as original sin.



Roman Catholic: For Roman Catholics, as one sees in our section on “faith” (#1 above), there is the problem that original sin is not total because of the individual’s bent toward God (*habitus*). After baptism original sin is eliminated and all that remains is weakness (*fomes*), so that the baptized Christian is able to choose between good and evil.

Conservative Evangelical: Sin is defined by biblical material both with regard to the totality of sin (original sin) and specific acts which are sin. The individual is not only able to choose salvation but is able to choose to sin or not to sin. (To be precise, some conservative evangelicals actually hold to a strong doctrine of election. For example, even some Baptists in England hold to such a strong doctrine.)



Luther: Lutherans are accused of being too pessimistic about human potential (Manichean and fatalistic) because they take a serious view of original sin. The Apostle Paul most of the time speaks of sin in the singular because sin is a power (the flesh) that controls us.

We are freed from the power of sin, death, and the devil at baptism. At the same time we remain in this world where sin, death, and the devil work. Our Lutheran description of this is that we are simultaneously saint and sinner (*simul justus et peccator*). We are simultaneously totally saved in him and totally lost by ourselves. This is why Luther talks about returning every day to your baptism (*Large Catechism IV:83; Tappert 446*). The ultimate temptation is to be caught by the idea that I know what sin is, and I know out to handle it; this spiritual pride is the basis of all sin. (1 Cor 4:3-5: “I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.”)

Two important consequences for our Christian life: 1) Because it is totally saved/totally sinful, we are not visibly transformed. 2) The Christian life is hidden (by faith alone), and there is no third use of the law.

3. Transformation



Roman Catholic & Conservative Evangelical: Both hold that transformation is partial and gradual. Both look for “evidence” and are able to judge “evidence” as a sign of God’s working. For Roman Catholics the “grace” of the sacramental system gives power for works. For conservative evangelicals prayer and the Holy Spirit give power for works. Prayer can increase the voltage of spiritual power.



Luther: Transformation is total. We are totally sinful yet covered in Christ’s perfect righteousness. “All our righteous deeds are filthy rags” (Isa 64:6). All works are only human, sinful, broken. Faith gives freedom for works. We are free from weighing and judging our works. Free, as Bonhoeffer said, to live fully in this world.

4. Experience



Roman Catholic: You have to experience the Eucharist Sundays and Holy Days and Confession at least once a year, according to canon law, and the other sacraments when applicable. (According to canon law, Sunday begins at 4:00 p.m. Saturday.)

Conservative Evangelical: Worship aims to foster an “uplifting experience” – a spiritual state induced by praise songs and gestures. There are well-known techniques for inducing “uplifting experiences.” New paradigm churches often develop into charismatic/Pentecostal churches.

“Experience” verifies one’s status as “Christian,” rather than that baptism establishes one’s status. “Experience” triggers the constant need for new “experiences” to keep one uplifted. The “experience” of being uplifted becomes what it’s all about. Other spirits/religions can easily take over a community based on “religious experience.” Experience-based Christianity leads to spiritual pride and/or despair.



Luther: We all have “experiences,” but experiences are always ambiguous. (2 Cor 11:14: “Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.”) Our salvation is certain not because we’ve had an emotionally intense religious experience, but because God is the author of salvation. In baptism he snatches us from the Evil One. The Spirit works through the external Word (*Augsburg Confession* 4), not ecstatic experiences and feelings.

5. The Christian life



Roman Catholic & Conservative Evangelical: The Christian life is visible in works and experiences. We can and must produce a Christian life. Christ provides the potential for our obedience. We must make it actual; we must choose to obey God in faith. There must be ongoing obedience. Obedience is the condition for closeness to God.



Luther: The Christian life is hidden (not visible). God is at work in us but we cannot measure, weigh, judge another’s salvation or our own (Matt 7:1; 1 Cor 4:3-5). Baptism is God’s doing – snatching us, claiming us in spite of ourselves. “Yes” to “discipleship” but not to a new legalism or set pattern; it’s all his doing. We do what’s needed to care for the neighbor and restrain evil. We are free to use our heads. Christian life is about “certainty” in Christ and freedom in Christ.

6. Ethics



Roman Catholic: Roman Catholics hold to reason and natural law, and when these are not clear, the Pope has the teaching authority to sort it out. He can make infallible decisions on faith and morals.

Conservative Evangelical: For conservative evangelicals the Bible reveals divine rules for life, although there is no consensus among evangelicals about which “rules” are divine and which are not. You have to show by your life that you are a disciple. You have to make a difference.



Luther: Two kingdoms: God’s perfect kingdom is his gift. In this fallen world, his left-hand kingdom, common reason and the sword are the proper tools for sorting out problems. We are free to use our brains in the battle. The church does not rule over the world, and the world does not rule over the church. One cannot leap from the Bible to foreign policy. The church, as church, has no special wisdom in politics, economics, etc. Christians, as individuals, are involved in the political parties of their choice. They will differ on politics. All are called to restrain evil so that life may endure. Think Paul in Romans 13:10: “Love does no harm....” The Christian always asks: What’s needed to restrain evil, reduce damages?

7. How the Holy Spirit works



Roman Catholic: Grace comes in quantities. The Holy Spirit is given in baptism but a boost comes in confirmation and communion. The ordained Deacon receives some grace, the Priest more, and the Bishop the fullness of grace for ordained ministry. Thus the Holy Spirit works through special mediators, namely, through its sacramental priesthood. Therefore the Roman Catholic Church itself is a sacrament (Vatican II), and, in Catholic thinking, is not truly sinful in itself. Martyrs for the faith have the fullness of grace.

Conservative Evangelical: Believers, though sinful, are able to make a decision for Christ and grow in holiness. In baptism one receives the “pilot light” of the Holy Spirit. But the fullness of the Spirit comes when one is able, after conversion, to experience the Spirit and grow in holiness through one’s visible discipleship.



Luther: The Holy Spirit “calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies” (*Small Catechism*, 11:6; Tappert 345). He is one of the three persons of the Trinity, but there is only one God; thus he too is true God. The Holy Spirit does the same work as the Father and Son. He, too, is the Lord and Giver of life, and the one who saves. The Holy Spirit re-presents what Christ has done: “...the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me” (John 15:26); “He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (John 16:14). (Thus the Holy Spirit does not bring something new, something other than Christ himself, as some try to make out of John 16:13 when they omit the context.) The Holy Spirit works through “means” (Word and sacraments) to create faith (*Augsburg Confession* 5). Because Christ himself is the only Mediator, the Holy Spirit is with the Word, that is, he is not tied to special channels such as sacramental clergy and experiences. Grace is what God does; it is not an abstract quality.

8. Prayer

Prayer occurs in all religions. In general, it is not only a way of praising God but also a way of trying to influence the Lord so that “my will be done.”



Roman Catholic: It is the task of the local bishop to control excesses and abuses. All kinds of prayer and “spiritual activities” (rosary, retreats, silence) proliferate. The difficulty is that these

“work,” that is, they give satisfaction to participants and thus not only become established but increase. A good example is Our Lady of Guadalupe, for whose origin there is really no historical basis, but because she is the patron saint for Mexico and has a continuing following, the cult of Mary is fostered.

Conservative Evangelical: The Bible gives us commands and instructions about prayer, and these are to be followed. The Christian has a relationship with God founded on prayer and doing what the Christian life requires.

Luther: The key to understanding prayer is Romans 8:26-27:



“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”

Prayer is like the babbling of infants saying Mama and Dada. The Holy Spirit takes our babbling and translates it for us to the Father. Parents rejoice in the babblings of their children. So too does God the Father rejoice in our babbling.

There are great promises about prayer as well as commands (Matt 6:5-15; 7:7-10). We are even told to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). What does this all mean? Luther points out that all prayer is summed up saying, “Thy Kingdom Come” (*Large Catechism*: 111:58; Tappert 428). Even though we are told to bring everything to God in prayer, and great promises stand behind that, prayer is not manipulating God.

“Prayer for the dead has not been frequent in Lutheran piety; funeral liturgies may include prayers that commend the deceased to God. But there is no biblical promise that our intercessions can affect the situation of those already dead. Even if infrequent, such intercessions must be only by faith in Christ. Further, Lutherans should examine intercession by “living saints” to see if this is thought to be efficacious because it is intensive, because many intercessors are involved, or more “spiritual” Christians take part, rather than only because of faith in Christ.” (*The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary*. Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue 8 [1992] p.129.)

We, as created beings, do not have “a personal relationship” with God because even though he is truly human in Jesus Christ, he is truly God (“unmixed, undivided” *Council of Chalcedon*, 451). He remains Creator and Lord. He is our friend (“You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my father, I have made known to you.” John 15:14-15), but in a totally different sense (“You did not choose me, but I chose you.” John 15:16; cp. Rom 5:8). See also “Why Pray?” under “Resources” at www.crossalone.us.

9. Baptism



Roman Catholic: Catholics baptize infants because it is binding tradition. Catholics recognize baptism done by laity and by non-Catholic Christians when done with water in the name of the Trinity.

Conservative Evangelical: For conservative evangelicals baptism is a Biblical ordinance or ritual which involves the commitment of the believer. Conservative evangelicals commonly embrace a covenant understanding of baptism in which the believer is an active agent who shows forth visible evidence of spiritual transformation and growth in holiness. Conservative

evangelicals practice baptism because it is a Biblical ordinance or rule, but not with the understanding that it is God claiming a sinner through his Word and water. Faith makes one a Christian, not baptism.



Luther: Infant baptism is the perfect expression of the gospel. In baptism God snatches us from sin and death. God does it. Faith is a gift whether you are an infant or grown up. Early evidence suggests that whole households were baptized (Acts). Infant baptism admittedly cannot be shown with absolute certainty to have been church practice until the second half of the second century, but the theological rationale was there from the beginning. (And there is equally no evidence for baptism of adult members of a Christian household [believer's baptism].) "A Christian life is nothing else than a daily Baptism, once begun and ever continued" (*Large Catechism* 4:65; Tappert 445).

10. Lord's Supper



Roman Catholic: For Roman Catholics the Lord's Supper is properly understood as the Church's Eucharist (thanksgiving). It involves the dual action of God giving and the priest offering the right sacrifice. The practice of reserving the Host symbolizes the Roman Catholic doctrine of the transubstantiation of the bread and wine.

Conservative Evangelical: Conservative evangelicals do not celebrate communion frequently. What is important for them is faith (deciding for Christ), prayer (done sincerely, earnestly), and visible transformation.



Luther: Again, the sacrament is God's doing, God's giving. We are commanded to do this until he comes. Until then, he promises to be present through his Word, giving believers forgiveness and life. It does not depend on us, our worthiness or understanding, and like baptism it is direct and personal. It happens to people. Word and promise = His action and doing.

11. Use of the Bible



Roman Catholic: Catholics honor the Word of God, but ultimately the Pope (the *magisterium*, teaching office) holds the spiritual power and exclusive authority to interpret Scripture.

Conservative Evangelical: Conservative evangelicals commonly hold that every believer can, with the Holy Spirit, properly interpret Scripture. Ultimately this view means that it is my own experience and feelings that interpret Scripture. Thus, while conservative evangelicals understand the Bible to be inerrant, there is a wide spectrum of interpretation among conservative evangelicals.



Luther: The Bible is the cradle which holds the Christ-child. What is authoritative in the Bible is what promotes Christ. What is clear and simple in the Bible, according to our ordinary human way of thinking and perceiving, is not what is meant by "clear" because then we are thrown back on our own selves and our own resources. "Clarity" is what points to Christ:

"All the genuine sacred books agree on this, that all of them preach Christ and deal with Him. That is the true test, by which to judge all books, when we see whether they deal with Christ or not, since all the Scriptures show us Christ (Romans 3) and St. Paul will know nothing but Christ (1 Cor 2). What does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even though St. Peter or Paul taught it; again, what preaches Christ is apostolic, even though Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod did it" (LW 35:396).

The Bible witnesses to Christ crucified. Luther: "Scripture is not to be understood as against, but for Christ, hence it either refers to him, or is not to be reckoned true Scripture.... If the opponents use Scripture against Christ, then we use Christ against Scripture" (WA, DB 39:1). The gospel is not any collection of New Testament themes or stories. It is also not some fabricated totality of all the verses in the New Testament. Rather, the gospel is the proclamation that through faith alone in the cross alone, Christ alone, the Lord of heaven and earth, has saved you and me.

12. Evangelism



Roman Catholic: Evangelism is geared to spiritual exercises/activities and retreats, which lead to experiences of faith (stations of the cross, walking the labyrinth, rosaries, incense, etc.).

Conservative Evangelical: Evangelism is personal testimony about "my experience." For example, Rick Warren writes: "Your personal testimony is more effective than a sermon" (*The Purpose-Driven Life*, p.290). Warren's four "I" statements shape one's personal testimony: 1. What my life was like before I met Jesus. 2. How I realized I needed Jesus. 3. How I committed my life to Jesus. 4) The difference he has made in my life. (It's all me, me, me.)

For conservative evangelicals generally, evangelism means: You can make it real by what you say and do.



Luther: Evangelism is proclamation of the cross. Following Paul: "Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ" (Rom 10:17). Evangelism is very different because the gospel contradicts experience and desire. The cross is the sign of contradiction. As Oberman summarizes Luther: "In the battle with evil there is no rest, no peace, and no visible success." Also: "Peace... not as the world gives do I give to you" (John 14:27).

The evangelist does all the "left-hand kingdom" community building through fellowship events, service projects, etc., and in the midst of this, the message is "Christ crucified" "outside of us, in spite of us." All experience is de-spiritualized, not unlike bringing Christianity to the natives in Africa (who live in a world of spirits and spiritual experiences). The world in all its ambiguity and brokenness is allowed to be what it is. Faith is hidden under the cross. God's kingdom comes by his power alone. It is his gift.

"Success," that is, by counting heads, is misleading. Many religious programs are "successful" in terms of numbers but lead people astray about the seriousness of sin and how God saves. Results are hidden. See *The Large Catechism* 4:52-55; Tappert 443.

13. Certainty



Roman Catholics: For Roman Catholics there is no certainty in "the Bible" or in "correct doctrines" simply because they are "the Bible" or "correct doctrines," but certainty is found in "thinking with the church," that is, intending to follow and conform to the teachings of the official Roman Catholic Church.

Conservative Evangelicals: For conservative evangelicals certainty lies in an "inerrant" Bible, but because even with an inerrant Bible they disagree widely within their own circles, certainty comes through conversion and ecstatic experiences and feelings.



Luther: Luther is reported to have said at the Diet of Worms: “Unless I am convinced by proofs from Scriptures or by plain and clear reasons and arguments, I can and will not recant, for it is neither safe nor wise to do anything against conscience. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.”

Because Luther said this or something close to this at Worms, does it mean that he made “conscience” a final authority? No. Throughout his writings he points out that certainty is “outside of us, in spite of us,” that is, in Christ and in the gospel. And when he appeals to “the Word,” he is not appealing to the modern understanding of inerrancy but to the Word of Jesus Christ and to proclamation, as in Romans 10:17: “Faith comes by hearing and hearing comes by the preaching of Christ.”

14. Freedom



Roman Catholic: Roman Catholics are free to use reason in order to know about God and how to live but always subject to the overriding decision and authority of the Roman Catholic teaching office when there are disagreements on faith and morals.

Conservative Evangelicals: Conservative evangelicals believe that every person has enough freedom to “decide for Jesus Christ,” and to commit himself to Christ and living the Christian life. The Christian life, of course, is subject to the directives and direction given by an inerrant Bible.



Luther: The gospel for Reformation Sunday begins: “Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, ‘If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free’ (John 8:31-32). Thus freedom is not the freedom of Greek philosophers, to affirm oneself and expand in whatever way one can and wishes. Freedom is the freedom of being in Christ, subject only to the gospel; everything else is a matter of common reason and common freedom. “For if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36). “For freedom Christ has set us free” (Gal 5:1 a). See “The Call to Freedom,” at www.crossalone.us.

15. Tradition: Creeds and Confessions



Roman Catholic: For Roman Catholics the life of the Church led by the Holy Spirit is believed to be “The” tradition. The law of prayer is the law of faith. Creeds and the dogmas of the Roman Catholic Church are considered “irreversible” but they are subject to interpretation and development by the teaching office, and finally the teaching office determines what “The” tradition is.

Conservative Evangelical: Conservative evangelicals hold to the Bible as the source and norm (as inerrant text). They do not understand that creeds and confessions have any weight or importance except as historical records. Therefore they make statements and confessions of faith but these only represent what certain people have held at certain times.



Luther: Lutherans have accepted the first four ecumenical councils and basic creeds and confessions. Yet Lutherans also are aware of the fact that Luther stated that councils can err. Lutherans hold to creeds and confessions not because they are irreversible but because they are expressions of the gospel. For example, Lutherans practice infant baptism not because it can be unequivocally demonstrated to be New Testament practice or because it is irreversible tradition but because it is a perfect expression of the gospel.

16. Mary and the Saints



Roman Catholic: According to Roman Catholic dogma, some Christians have already reached the beatific vision in heaven and are able to pray for us. Most particularly, Mary as the Mother of our Lord is able to pray for us. She has a superior place among the Saints as one who is born without sin and did not pass through the dissolution of death, so that she is able to help us when we pray to her. What is important about these teachings for Roman Catholics is that they are infallibly defined, and therefore it is not decisive for them that a historical basis for them is lacking in Scripture and early tradition. Prayers to Mary are required at baptism and ordination.

Conservative Evangelical: Mary and the biblical saints are important as examples of Christian faith and life, but they do not have any special way to help us after they have died, except by example.



Luther: Luther taught that death is a barrier we cannot penetrate: “Let the dear saints rest where they are.... Let them be, and let God take care of them. We can neither know nor understand how they live in the world beyond. That world is quite different from this one” (WA 17, 2:255).

He held that the invocation of the Saints detracted from the honor due to Christ, the sole Mediator (1 Tim 2:5). Christ is our go-between; he is God for us. What could we gain from praying to someone other than Christ himself?

“When physical and spiritual benefit and help are no longer expected, then the saints will be left in peace, both in the grave and in heaven” (*Smalcald Articles* 11:3:28; Tappert 306).

Luther predicted that if no gain is expected from Mary and the saints, the practice of praying to them would die out, and that’s exactly what happened.

Luther held Mary in high esteem but he would have rejected the infallible authority of the Pope to define the Immaculate Conception (1854) and the Bodily Assumption of Mary (1950).

At the Council of Ephesus (431) Mary was declared “God-bearer” as a way of holding to the true humanity of Jesus Christ, just as at the Councils held in 325 and 381 the “of the same substance” (*homoousios*) defines his true divinity. Therefore we honor Mary, and note that in Luther’s famous essay on the *Magnificat* he lifts Mary up as the perfect example of what it means to believe, namely, being merely passive.

17. The Structure of the Church



Roman Catholic: The structure of the church has roots in Scripture and develops under the guidance of the Holy Spirit to become what it is today. For example, the kernel for the primacy of the Pope is found in Matthew 16:18; this has developed into the more complete structure defined in Vatican I and Vatican II.

Conservative Evangelical: The structure of the church is determined by guidelines found in the New Testament. In general, conservative evangelicals hold to the authority of the local congregation, and pastoral leadership is subject to the control of the congregation even as the pastor is called to proclaim what the Bible says.



Luther: For Lutherans the structure of the church and ministry is determined by the need to proclaim the gospel. For example, Melancthon added to his signature to the *Smalcald Articles* (1537) a statement indicating that he could accept the papal structure of the church as long as it

was not divine law (*Smalcald Articles*, Tappert 316-17). Lutherans ask what structure serves the mission of the church and reject every attempt to claim that a particular structure is mandated or required by Scripture. As eminent Roman Catholic scholars Raymond E. Brown and Jerome D. Quinn have written:

Brown: “This survey shows that the manner and exercise of supervision varied greatly in different places and different periods within the first century or New Testament era” (“A Brief Survey of the New Testament Evidence on Episkope and Episcopos,” in *Episkope and episcopate in ecumenical perspective* [Faith and Order paper 102; Geneva: WCC, 1980] 28.)

Quinn: “5. The structures of first century Ministry involved leadership both by groups (two; three; seven; twelve; *apostoloi*; prophets; teachers; *episkopoi*; *diakonoi*; *presbyteroi*) and by single individuals even within the group (Peter; Paul; James; Titus in Crete; Timothy in Ephesus; the *episkopos*).”

“6. Though there was development of Ministry in the first century it was not unilinear. It is historically more accurate and eventually more instructive theologically to respect the differences in structuring the Ministry that existed simultaneously in different churches (Jerusalem, Corinth; Ephesus; Rome, etc.).” (“Ministry in the New Testament,” in *Eucharist and Ministry* (eds. P.D. Empie and T.A. Murphy; Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue 4; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979) 99-100.

18. Law and Gospel



Roman Catholic: Law is built into the nature of things and is known by correct reason. When anyone has a dispute about law or wants to go beyond it, the church supplies what is lacking, most particularly the message of salvation (sometimes called “the gospel”), which is beyond reason and human calculation.

Conservative Evangelical: The Bible contains laws about existence and life and also the formula that one needs to follow to be saved in Jesus Christ, which is good news to the sinner (otherwise called gospel). Karl Barth, an eccentric Reformed theologian who could properly be called a conservative evangelical, even went so far as to state that the sequence is gospel/law; the gospel is what God does through his covenant in the Old and New Testament. And the law is the revelation of how to live the Christian life.



Luther: Lutherans talk about gospel, by which they mean both law and gospel. The law comes in two forms: 1) In those prescriptions societies have generated through reason to restrain evil and minimize harm, and 2) Law always accuses us of failing to live up to what we should be and do and thus drives us to Christ (*Smalcald Articles* 3:2; Tappert 303).

The gospel is the proclamation of the Word of the cross which saves us. Luther pointed out that law and gospel are to be discerned but not separated and that this is an art, not a science. Some have said that there is a third use of the law, that is, prescriptions, found in the Bible, for living the Christian life, but these prescriptions are really an application of the first use of the law, to restrain evil.

19. DNA – Every Church is an Organic Whole.



Luther: Is Lutheranism half way between Roman Catholics and conservative evangelicals? No. Is Lutheranism a mix of the best of Roman Catholicism and the best of conservative-evangelicalism? No.

To be sure, Roman Catholics, conservative evangelicals, Lutherans, and other kinds of Christians all use the Bible, and they all speak of grace, faith, works, and the like. They *seem* similar to each other. But they are not. They use Scripture differently. They do not mean the same thing when they use words like “faith” and “grace.” They are as different as apples and elephants. The differences among them are not trivial because salvation is at stake.

Each tradition has a different DNA, that is, a different starting point, a different fulcrum that governs the whole, a different final authority. Each tradition is an organic whole. Elements of one cannot be combined with another and retain their meaning.

In general, people mistakenly think that what makes a Christian is to believe in God and try to do good, as in the song, “They’ll know we are Christians by our love.”



Roman Catholic: For Roman Catholics what is decisive is “to believe with” the Roman Catholic Church, and “what the Church is” is ultimately determined by the Pope (the *magisterium*, teaching office).

Conservative Evangelical: For conservative evangelicals what is decisive is to “hold to the Bible,” but what they mean is a particular use of the Bible, as described in #11 above.



Luther: For Luther what is decisive is “the gospel” itself, namely, that God has solved the problem of sin and death himself by sending his Son to die on the cross’ and rise again for you and for me. Through the Word of the cross (1 Cor 1:18) God elects us.

Lutherans hold to the Bible, but our way of using the Bible is to ask: What is the gospel? Whatever is not of the gospel is an *adiaphoron*, that is, a matter which is properly decided on the basis of practical criteria appropriate to the situation. For example, the structure of the church and its ministry is to be determined by what serves mission. Ethical questions are determined by what is needed to restrain evil.

For Lutherans the key question is always: What is the gospel?

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The Cross and the Crown

What it Means to be a Lutheran Christian

Lutherans have used the exclusive word “alone” (*sola* in Latin) – Christ *alone*, scripture *alone*, grace *alone*, faith *alone*, cross *alone* – to guard the pure preaching of the gospel. The little word “alone” defines the big question: What is it to be saved?

Christ Alone excludes all other saviors. Only Jesus is true God and true man. Only his death justifies sinners because on the cross *God himself died*. On the cross God solved the problem of sin by himself, without our cooperation, and he solved it completely: “It is finished” (John 19:30).

Scripture Alone excludes tradition; scripture *alone* must not be confused, however, with a wooden and literalistic use of the Bible. It means that only the Bible shows us our need of a savior and the Savior we need.

Grace Alone excludes salvation by works, including any necessary spiritual experiences, personal decisions, and feelings. It reminds us that we are sinners through and through so that even “all our righteous deeds are filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6). By grace *alone* our salvation is certain because it is not our achievement but God’s own work on the cross; therefore we are free to live and serve the neighbor without judging or grading our own works.

Faith Alone excludes the idea that the Christian life is visible in what we do, experience, feel, think, or decide. It is simply hearing the Word and receiving the sacraments. We cannot judge who is saved (1 Cor. 4:3-4, Matt. 7:1). The life of faith is hidden under the cross, a gift by faith alone in what Christ has done for us.

Cross Alone excludes the idea that salvation is achieved by the joint efforts of God and man. All religious institutions and spiritual experiences are broken. Nothing can be added to the cross, and there are no normative priestly

channels, liturgical rites, or uplifting spiritual experiences that produce Christ’s presence. He is the sole Mediator, the Word alone.

False Gospels. Around Christ *alone*, like a crown, circle the other *solas*, pointing to Christ as the living center. Working together, the *solas* mutually define and determine each other as they point to Christ *alone*. But each *sola*, if isolated from the others, becomes a false gospel. Christ *alone*, by itself, is an empty vessel that can be filled with various meanings. Scripture *alone*, by itself, is fundamentalism. Grace *alone*, by itself, is sentimentalism. Faith *alone*, by itself, is faith in faith. The cross *alone*, by itself, is a tragedy. Only when the *solas* work as a dynamic unity do they rightly proclaim the Lordship of Christ.

Add-Ons Undermine the Message. What if one changes the dynamic by asserting faith *and* works? Grace *and* visible transformation? Christ *and* the historic episcopate? Faith *and* charismatic experience? When add-ons of any sort are regarded as normative or necessary for a full Christian life, the sole sufficiency of the cross is undermined. Then the certainty of salvation and Christian freedom are also lost.

Lutheran Identity. For this reason Lutheran identity has been shaped by the Reformation *solas*. Are Lutherans just being rigorous? No. **Salvation is at stake whenever the purity of the gospel is distorted** (Gal. 1:6-9). On the cross Christ freed us from the law, sin, and death. We are free from all add-ons, including required structures, rites, works, and experiences. As free rulers of all, subject to none, and dutiful servants of all, subject to all, we are free to serve others. Our mission is to spread the message about the cross and the crown: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).

