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BOOK REVIEW AND COMMENTARY

The Necessary Distinction: A Continuing Conversation on Law & Gospel

edited by Albert B. Collver III, James Arne Nestingen, and John T. Pless (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017)

by Matthew Richard

I HAVE HEARD IT SAID before that law and gospel are *not* a mixed drink; they are not a divine cocktail where law and gospel are rightly balanced, shaken together, and served in a coupe glass. Rather, law and gospel are like two different drinks that should not be mixed, but poured into separate shot glasses and served.

Considering this metaphor, I was pleased to read within the pages of the new book, *The Necessary Distinction: A Continuing Conversation on Law & Gospel*, that the twelve different authors (who are pastors and theologians from different Lutheran denominations and traditions) neither served up a mixed drink nor gave recipes to make a divine cocktail. But rather, the authors made the necessary distinction between God's two words of law and gospel.

The Necessary Distinction is an exploratory work published to be a basis for dialogue and study amongst individuals in the North American Lutheran Church, the Lutheran Church Canada, and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, regarding law and gospel. Therefore, while I believe the authors have done an admirable job of distinguishing law and gospel, there is no room for debate and deliberation. Paraphrasing C.F.W. Walther from *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, understanding law and gospel is not an impossible task with the aid of the Holy Spirit, for children can learn this; however, it is the practical application and use of the doctrine that presents the greatest difficulty.¹ Yes, debate and deliberation should arise after reading this book, for its pages contain discussions of law and gospel in a number of applicable settings where much conversation is needed. More specifically, there is much beneficial and edifying law and gospel dialogue on the history of the LCMS, the liturgy, pastoral care, the Christian life, the penitential Psalms, missions, preaching, etc. I will offer a taste

of what is offered to whet your appetite for this scholarly reading:

- Early in the book, Mark Seifrid discusses the differences between Martin Luther and John Calvin regarding their conceptualization of the human being, especially the regenerate human being. He further makes note of Luther's chief view of the law (second use) and Calvin's chief view of the law (third use). But it is with the third use of the law that Seifrid does an excellent service to the reader. He shows how the different anthropological assumptions impact Luther and Calvin's understandings of the third use of the law, which consequently bring forth different definitions of the third use of the law for Lutherans and Calvinists. *Continuing the Conversation: Do the different understandings of the third use of the law lead to confusion in law and gospel conversations today? Has Calvin's anthropology bled into the Lutheran Church via Evangelicalism, since Evangelicalism has roots in the New England Puritans influenced by Calvin's theology?*
- In chapter three, William Cwirla maintains that the proper distinction between law and gospel is of utmost importance for pastors concerning the liturgy. If law and gospel are blurred, blended, or mixed in the liturgy, Christ-crucified for the forgiveness of sinners is lost as the central focus. While this chapter is beneficial regarding law and gospel concerning the liturgy, I found myself drawn to the question of what happens to churches when the liturgy is adjusted for seeker sensitive reasons? Though Cwirla does not specifically address churches that change the liturgy for so-called contemporary mission reasons, his chapter forces us to reckon with the implications of altering the Divine Service. *Continuing the Conversation: If one changes the Divine Service, how*

¹ C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, trans. W.H.T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928), 42–43.

does it impact law and gospel and consequentially, is the worshipper—who is a saint and sinner—still held in the dynamic tension of law and gospel?

- While it is easy to believe that more law is the antidote to individuals ensnared in antinomianism and more gospel is the antidote to people trapped in legalism, Larry Vogel points out that we must guard against becoming a Peter without Jesus or a David without Nathan. In other words, when we put antinomianism and legalism on a sliding scale, we can inadvertently apply law to the exclusion of the gospel toward antinomians or the gospel to the exclusion of the law toward legalists. However, Vogel points out the mistake of this thinking in his closing paragraph of the chapter titled, *Law and Gospel in the Christian Life*, saying, “The weapons of Christ ... never change—they are ever His Word of Law and Gospel.” [107] Indeed, law and gospel are the proper response to legalism and antinomianism. *Continuing the Conversation: Could it be that some of the law and gospel debates in our modern times are nothing more than individuals reacting to each other much like a pendulum swinging back and forth over a sliding scale, when in reality what is needed is not just more law or just more gospel, but ‘both’ law and gospel?*
- Stephen Hultgren offers an extensive essay on *The Problem of Freedom Today and the Third Use of the law*. While Hultgren is to be commended for his thoroughness, I humbly disagree with him in his interpretation of Romans chapter 7. Parting from Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther, Hultgren understands Romans 7 as referring to the “person under the law before (or without) faith in Christ, but from the perspective of one who through faith in Christ has been delivered from that situation and is now able to see life under law in its true colors.”[222]. As a result of this exegetical move, Hultgren proceeds to talk about freedom and the third use of the law within this context. Due to the brevity of this review, permit me to say this: while I am certainly interested to hear more from Hultgren on the specific reasons why he arrived at his interpretation of Romans 7, I am glad that he did not spend too much time on his exegesis of Romans 7. His conciseness on the exegesis of Romans 7 allowed me the time to see things played out regarding freedom and the third use of the law. *Continuing the Conversation: If our understanding of Romans 7 impacts our view of the third use of the law, can people successfully debate the third use of the law without addressing the exegetical assumptions of Romans 7 first?*
- Along with the differences between Calvin and Luther regarding anthropology and the third use of the law, a subtle theme emerged in many chapters which pointed to the difference between Augustine and Luther regarding the Christian. Otherwise stated, when understanding the Christian as simultaneously saint and sinner (i.e., simul), several authors pointed to the importance and ramifications of Luther parting from Augustine’s ecumenical tradition of the Christian as *partim-partim*. As a result, the application of law and gospel will be different, depending on whether or not one embraces Augustine’s view of the *simul* or suspends this view in favor of a more *totus-totus* perspective. *Continuing the Conversation: Are some of the differences over the application of law and gospel in our modern day due to the disagreements between an Augustinian view of the simul (i.e., partim-partim) versus a Lutheran view (i.e., totus-totus)?*
- The term *contextualization* has been very popular within missiological language over the last several decades. In Chapter 12, Albert Collver III discusses the etymology of *contextualization*. In so doing, he asserts in the last chapter that, “Contextualization most helpfully or at its best is the proper distinction between law and gospel to a particular people group.” [308] While emergent church philosophy and sacramental entrepreneurship ideology is all the rave in missional talk today, it is very encouraging to read from Collver that some things never change—law as a point of contact in missions and the gospel as the absolving message. *Continuing the Conversation: What are the dangers of not understanding contextualization in terms of the proper distinction/application of law and gospel to particular people groups?*
- Finally, it is worth noting Roland Ziegler’s essay titled, *What Happens When the Third Use of the Law is Rejected?* So what happens? Ziegler posits that one does not automatically become a libertine. Ziegler supports his thesis through a brief survey of Werner

Elert, Steven Paulson, and Joseph Fletcher. He shows “that a denial of the third use of the law as it is commonly understood among Lutherans does not lead in itself to libertinism. Neither Elert nor Paulson is a libertine. They both believe that the Law continues to convict the Christian of his or her sin.” [329] Regarding Fletcher, though, his antinomianism is not merely tied up with a rejection of the third use of the law but rather with a refusal of the law altogether in exchange for a vacuous idea of love. You see, it seems—according to Ziegler—that antinomianism comes about from a *complete denial* of the law and/or replacing the law with an idea of love that is disconnected from the commandments altogether. *Continuing the Conversation: What criteria is needed to truly classify a person as an antinomian? Is Ziegler right that a denial of the third use of the law does not lead in itself to antinomianism?*

As you can see, this book contains a continuing conversation about law and gospel that is intended to cause all of us to dive deeper into the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. This book is a worthwhile discussion for our times with the goal of clearly proclaiming Christ-crucified for the forgiveness of our sins to a world that needs not a mixed drink; but rather, two distinct shots of law and gospel.

Rev. Dr. Matthew Richard is a pastor of Zion Lutheran Church of Gwinner, ND. He is also the author of a recent book, Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up? 12 False Christs, published by Concordia Publishing House.

BOOK REVIEW AND COMMENTARY

Reformation 500: The Enduring Relevance of the Lutheran Reformation

Compiling editor Curtis A. Jahn (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2017)

by Mark A. Loest

THE OBSERVANCE OF the Reformation's quincentennial this year is proving you cannot separate that event from the reformer Martin Luther. The year 2017 is as much about the reformer as it is about his hammer blows.

Reformation 500 is the contribution to the party by theologians of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), which seeks to show ways in which the Reformation is relevant today. Along with a preface from WELS president Mark G. Schroder, ten essays explore topics including “Luther and the Biblical Canon,” “Luther on Infant Baptism,” and “The Lutheran Influence on Education.”

There are also essays that address specific topics and concerns of WELS pastors, teachers, and congregations. Mark Zarling, president of Martin Luther College, New Ulm, MN, answers the question, “With What Attitude Should We Celebrate the Reformation?” by offering commentary on seven stanzas of the hymn “In Trembling Hands,” number 199 in the WELS hymnal *Christian Worship*. His contribution is that of a college president to his supporting church body.

John F. Brug writes “Luther and Fellowship: The Courage to Break and the Courage to Be Patient” in which he traces the challenges and difficulties of maintaining and breaking fellowship from the time of Luther to the breakup of the Synodical Conference.

There is also plenty that will interest those outside the WELS. Paul O. Wendland discusses the New Perspective on Paul and how theologians like N.T. Wright make Luther's Reformation and theology, and especially the doctrine of justification, out to be a terrible misread and

It shows me there is much agreement in doctrine that is traceable back to our common theological and confessional heritage in the Reformation and Luther.

mistake. Where does that leave us? The church cannot continue without the *articulus stantis*.

Daniel M. Deutschlander, in “The Enduring Uniqueness of the Lutheran Reformation,” seeks to address why Luther was successful when so many others failed. Deutschlander says it is because Luther took God seriously. He also recognizes the Lutheran teaching on law and gospel as important.

It was good to read how our fellow Lutherans and friends in the WELS are celebrating and talking about the Reformation. It shows me

there is much agreement in doctrine that is traceable back to our common theological and confessional heritage in the Reformation and Luther.

The Rev. Mark A. Loest is pastor of Immanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church, Frankentrost, Saginaw, Mich.

BOOK REVIEW AND COMMENTARY

Church Planting in the Secular West: Learning from the European Experience

by Stefan Paas (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016)

by Adam Koontz

SOME YEARS BEFORE Hilaire Belloc asserted that “The Faith is Europe, and Europe is the Faith,” Matthew Arnold heard the tidal wave of faith receding, “The Sea of Faith/ Was once, too, at the full, and round earth’s shore/ Lay like the folds of a bright gurdle furled./ But now I only hear/ Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar.” The secularization of what was once Christendom and the presumed decadence of its ancient churches are familiar tropes, particularly for churches outside Europe descended from and planted by European emigrants. Stefan Paas’ new book, drawn from his extensive experience as a church planter and a missiologist in the Netherlands, has something to unsettle and something to enrich Belloc and Arnold, those who long for Christendom and those who are happy to bid it goodbye.

His first chapter compares an older missiology of *plantatio ecclesiae* (“the classic paradigm”) with the now-widespread missiology of church planting (the “modern” or “late-modern evangelical paradigm”). The distinction is that whereas modern church planting focuses on the growth and multiplication of (generally free-church) congregations, *plantatio ecclesiae* factors much more into the mission of Christ: evangelization as a preliminary proclamation of Christ without necessary recourse to organization, baptism, and ingathering of converts once that proclamation has been received, and the planting of new congregations only once the first two steps have been achieved. Paas finds this older paradigm to be more biblically defensible than a singular focus on increasing the number of congregations. He observes pointedly that the “church” is never the object of “planting” or “sowing” in the Bible, even considering the pioneer missionary situation of the New Testament, but that congregations are the “*result* of planting, not its object,” something that springs up where the vineyard of the Lord is cultivated.

The heart of the book are three chapters that evaluate

different reasons buttressing the “late-modern evangelical paradigm” of church planting in Western Europe: 1) to plant *better* churches than the decadent churches of Christendom, 2) to plant *more* churches because church growth happens more quickly through church planting than any other method, and 3) to plant *new* churches because they will enable the gospel’s spread better than older congregations. The book is rich in historical, missiological, and even exegetical detail, so we will confine ourselves to some salient observations rather than recounting all.

What Paas terms the “confessionalization” of church planting is the planting of denominational churches in an area because that denomination has few or no congregations in that place. He understands this motive as potentially sectarian because the indifference to what is already being done in that place by the churches already present sloughs off the responsibility to take seriously the Christianity of other confessions within the church. He tracks historical examples from the Reformation-era Anabaptists to the DAWN initiatives in the early 1990s in Europe to show that too often church planters have treated any place without evangelical free churches as if they were “pioneer” areas similar to pagan Corinth or Thessalonica. This is a mistaken understanding of the context of the gospel in a post-Christendom and post-Christian area like Western Europe or many sections of North America. Even if we can theologially justify our presence where others may have once built, we cannot speak or behave as if we are the sole representatives of Christianity who have been or are there.

Paas’ discussion of post-Christendom as a different state of affairs from a post-Christian society is also helpful. Many Christians, especially evangelicals with a prior commitment to “religious liberty” not shared by magisterial Protestant confessions like Lutheranism or Calvinism, welcome the passing of official sanctions

against certain confessions and the attendant disestablishment of Christianity. His tracking of the varying reactions among Catholic, Protestant, and free-church traditions in all parts of Europe is informative and enlightening, but for our purposes he says that to be “post-Christendom” is to have lost those societal blessings and curses surrounding establishment and/or social acceptability for Christianity. To be “post-Christian” is something else: for people to have lost altogether the knowledge of Bible stories, of basic Christian customs and notions, never to have heard of “Jesus.” He recognizes in Western Europe a trend from post-Christendom to being post-Christian, a trend with which some of our pastors in North America will be familiar.

This connects to his hard-hitting critique of the methodology of church-growth theory (CGT) and its related sociological school, religious market theory (RMT). He believes much of CGT was formulated with presupposed and unexamined Baptist convictions about baptism and conversion on the basis of data or experiences from the Global South and only masquerades as a confessionally neutral technique. RMT in the work of Stark, Finke, and Bainbridge likewise presumes without explanation that religion functions like economics with supply and demand. Can the church actually work like a business, even if there is a religious marketplace? What if the demand for pastoral absolution has nearly dried up in Europe? Should the church continue offering absolution if no one avails himself of it, or should it shift its product line into areas more compatible with the modern religious consumer? And what of people who have no felt need for religious goods and services?

Paas contends that the theories of classically liberal economics and Baptist theology undergirding CGT and RMT are unprofitable for places without preexistent religious demand. He finds both CGT and RMT to be lacking in confessional and methodological clarity, which complicates or obviates their usefulness for the church in places neither predominantly Baptist nor with a large percentage of the population looking for new kinds of churches. He notes several times that CGT has “worked” in the Netherlands only in the Dutch Bible Belt, the one place in his country with relatively high levels of people looking for a wide variety of “church options.” Otherwise, throughout Europe and especially in Western Europe, he does not find that what worked in the American South or the Global South works at all in secularized Europe. He recounts the fact that Global South immigrant

congregations in the Netherlands nearly always express a sense of mission to evangelize the native Dutch and include “Global” and “Worldwide” and “International” in their churches’ names, but with all that fervor, they still fail, “most immigrant churches are not very effective at reaching Europeans.”

This is all rather hopeless if one remains narrowly focused on planting new congregations as quickly as possible. As a church planter in the Northeast, I myself was surprised to see Paas eviscerate the data on which so much church planting material is based, but I was unsurprised to see that it was possible, knowing that much of the wisdom on church planting in the US itself was developed in and for the South and the Midwest and not for our country’s more secular regions. What hope can Paas provide for the future of the gospel in secular places?

Church planting should be *one* part of the church’s mission. For him the priority in Scripture and in the successful planting of the church in Europe once upon a time was the preaching of the gospel. This sounds elementary, since church planters presumably do that while they organize new congregations, but he contends that a primary focus on the spread of the knowledge of Jesus, God, the Bible, and all the other mental and moral vocabulary secular people do not have is powerful. If we begin by asking how we can acquaint people with the idea of God, of his Son Jesus, and of life after death, we will carry out the preaching of the gospel in more contextually appropriate and more fruitful ways than if we set out to plant congregations right away. Congregations will be the *result* of planting, not its object. The word of the Lord will grow, and churches will grow up alongside. Whether you are intrigued by his approach or a fervent advocate of the “late-modern evangelical paradigm,” I cannot recommend this thought-provoking, sometimes idiosyncratic, and always stimulating book highly enough. You will be challenged and grow in thinking and wrestling through Paas’ provocations, discussions, and thoughtful proposals for the gospel of Christ in a secular age.

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BOOK REVIEW AND COMMENTARY

With My Own Eyes

by Bo Giertz, trans. Bror Erickson (Irvine, CA: New Reformation Publications, 2017. Paperback. 303 pp.)

by John T. Pless

BISHOP BO GIERTZ'S LIFE spanned the twentieth century. He was born in 1905 and died in 1998. The son of atheistic parents, Giertz came to faith in Christ as a university student. His conversion would also mean a change in his course of studies as he switched from the study of medicine to the study of theology. A prominent figure on the Uppsala faculty was the New Testament exegete Anton Fridrichsen, from whom young Giertz gained an appreciation for a "realistic interpretation of the Bible" (vii). It was Fridrichsen who urged Giertz to spend time in Palestine. In 1931, Giertz spent six months in Palestine fully absorbing the landscape, customs, and climate of territory where Jesus was born, lived, died, and was raised again. There is no Gospel without place and time. His immersion in the "holy land" gave Giertz a life-long appreciation for the earthy and historically embedded truth of the evangelical narrative. It was shortly after that trip Giertz would write *With My Own Eyes*. It would eventually be published in an English translation in Great Britain. Rather than attempting to "Americanize" and update that earlier translation, Pastor Bror Erickson has rendered a completely fresh translation based on the Swedish text.

With My Own Eyes is essentially a "life of Jesus" drawn from the four Gospels. While "Gospel harmonies" generally cause exegetes to retch and frown, they do have a long history in the church. Bo Giertz is not writing with the precision of the exegete but with heart of a man who has heard the voice of his living Lord in the pages of the Gospels and now seeks to echo that voice in the form on a continuous narrative. It might be best appreciated as a kind of devotional commentary on the Gospel record. Certainly it was not intended by Giertz as a replacement for the Scriptures or even as a paraphrase.

The warm and humble piety so characteristic of Bo Giertz shines through this book. Here we hear a man narrate the story of Jesus with an eye toward unobtrusively

calling others to "come and see" the Messiah, the Savior of the world in the glory of His humanity. This is a glory not divorced from the world that His Father created, but a glory made manifest in the comings and the goings of His life in the concrete specificities of Palestine. The word pictures painted by Giertz are vivid and often provocative as he gives attention to the ordinariness of this life, with an eye to the detail that he observed during his days in the holy land. His writing invites readers to enter into the world of Jesus, imagining the sounds, smells, and sights while hearing His words which are "Spirit and life."

This book deserves a place alongside of Giertz's *Preaching from the Whole Bible* and *To Live with Christ* in the collection of his devotional writings. Pastors will find insights for preaching. All Christians who take the time to ponder the Bishop's telling of the story of Jesus will be edified and enriched in their faith. We are indebted to Pastor Bror Erickson for his lively translation as well as the insightful historical introduction to the book.

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