

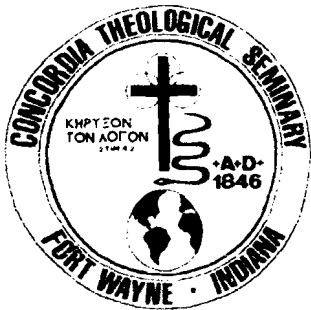
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Are Law and Gospel a Valid Hermeneutical Principle?

Horace Hummel

I. Definitions

Lutherans bandy the phrase “law and Gospel” about so much that to bother to define the terms in a context like this might appear to be a classical case of “carrying coals to Newcastle.” Among theologically trained Lutherans this is undoubtedly true, but among laymen comprehension of the jargon often falls off very sharply. Even among pastors it is not always self-evident that the language has really been internalized. Such generalizations are probably even more true in non-Missourian Lutheranism, where talk about “law and Gospel” usually does not enjoy nearly the currency or priority which it gets in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Furthermore, outside of Lutheranism the terminology is often totally unfamiliar — sometimes because of a substantially different theology, sometimes merely because of semantic differences.

When Lutherans say “law” without further qualification, and especially when the word is contrasted with “Gospel,” it is usually taken for granted that it is the so-called “second” use of the law which is being referred to (*usus elenchthicus*). Unless otherwise specified, that will be true of this paper too. By that “second” use we mean, of course, God’s absolute, holy demand of man, which man, however, can never satisfy. Thus he is disabused of the notion that he can in any way prepare for or contribute to his salvation, and the ground is cleared for the “Gospel” of Christ’s vicarious satisfaction, for *sola gratia, solo Christo, sola fide*.

This primacy of the “second” use of the law has always been a sort of litmus test for traditional, confessional Lutheranism. Wherever that usage is current and readily understood, it is a safe bet that the rest of traditional Lutheran orientation is reasonably alive and well too. Conversely, among “Lutherans” where there is no ready resonance to that vocabulary (and where sometimes it is even scorned as part of the “scholastic” or “confessionalistic” baggage which we can or should jettison), it is a good guess that other confessional principles have also become attenuated or lost altogether.

In contrast to that Lutheran usage, Reformed tradition has tended to be more comfortable with a "Gospel-law" formulation. Karl Barth has in recent times championed that formula, and in a way not essentially different from other heirs of John Calvin. Here, when "law" is spoken of without further specification, it is more often the "third" use of the law which is in mind, that is, God's guidance for the life of sanctification consequent upon the gift of salvation.

Sometimes, as a result, Lutheran "law-Gospel" talk is scarcely understood in those circles, just as the "Gospel-law" sequence tends to raise red flags for Lutherans. And sometimes, no doubt, the differences are little more than semantic. Classical Lutheranism, at least, certainly does not deny a "third" use of the law; an entire article (VI) in the Formula of Concord is devoted to its defense and proper exposition. Neither do Calvin and his heirs deny in theory a "second" use, although I think it is safe to say that in those circles the word "law" is used and heard in that sense much less frequently.

At the same time, I think only the "ecumenist" who is interested in sweeping differences under the rug will try to deny that the different expressions are often pointers toward considerably different styles and accents in both theology and practice. Not by accident are there some hyper-Lutherans who not only deny the third use of the law, but are ready to denounce almost everything besides "law-Gospel" as "Reformed," "legalistic," etc. If Lutherans have often appeared antinomian and insufficiently concerned with the fruits of faith to the Reformed, Lutherans have returned the compliment by often judging Calvinism moralistic and guilty of inordinate accent on rules for living, even, allegedly, to the point of subverting grace. Lutherans, for example, tend to have a hard time not hearing the Reformed accent on "covenant" as at least *crypto*-legalistic, a problem which they themselves tend to solve by avoiding the common biblical term almost entirely.

The different orientations are especially apparent in the public sector. What is often called the "quietism" of the Lutheran "two-kingdom" principle (itself only a restatement of the Law-gospel distinction) stands in obvious contrast to the "activism" of the Reformed tradition, beginning already with Calvin's own attempts to establish a "Christian state" in Geneva, and continuing to the present day in a variety of both traditional and liberal ("prophetic") manifestations.

We need not discuss the "first" use of the law here (i.e., God's rule outside the church through properly constituted authority). Not that there are no theological issues under this rubric (especially when it comes to "natural law" or "general revelation"), but they lie outside our present purview. Neither does it serve our purposes to trace the varying Protestant accents (e.g., Anabaptist, Arminian, Pentecostal, etc.), nor even to detail the original Reformation antithesis in medieval Catholicism. But, of course, we dare not forget that the Reformer's basic complaint was that "our opponents select the law and by it they seek forgiveness of sins and justification" (*Apology* III, 7).¹

Before we proceed, we must also note that similar differences in vocabulary and accent appear not only in the various confessional traditions, but also within the Scriptures themselves. What one does with those differences depends on presuppositions, of course, and to that point we shall return later. In fact, Article V (5 and 6) of the Formula of Concord on the topic of "law and Gospel" notes that difference in biblical usage "was the original occasion of the controversy." Then it goes on to clarify that when "Gospel" is used in the broader sense

it is correct to say or write that the Gospel is a proclamation both of repentance and of forgiveness of sins. But when law and Gospel are opposed to each other . . . , then, we believe, teach, and confess that the Gospel is not a proclamation of contrition and reproof, but is, strictly speaking, precisely a comforting and joyful message which . . . comforts consciences that are frightened by the law

Although the confessional writings do not mention it, the Bible contains broader and narrower uses of the word "law" just as much as of "Gospel." In this case, the contrast is more between the Old Testament's "*torah*" and the New Testament's "*nomos*," or, in some respects, simply between St. Paul's use of *nomos* and that of the rest of the Bible. Here the Lutheran dogmatic tradition is especially dependent upon Paul's narrower usage, and hence it is especially urgent for Lutherans to remember that *exegetically* the "dynamic equivalent" of "*torah*" is more nearly "Gospel" than "law." But we shall speak more of this later too.

Finally, on the matter of semantics, we should consider whether the hyphenated expression, "law-Gospel" is an acceptable substitute for "law *and* Gospel." Words and idioms meaning what we understand them to mean, it must be stated first that there is no *a priori* reason why that sort of shorthand should not

be employed, and we shall, in fact, often do so throughout this paper. Furthermore, the hyphenated phrase may even be useful to indicate that, precisely because man remains *simul iustus et peccator* throughout this life, both law and Gospel continue to have their claim on him. At the same time, however, if philosophical *a priori* statements take precedence over Scripture, there is the danger that the hyphenated phrase may imply a real "dialectic," almost a dualism of two equal but also opposing antitheses within God's Word. Plainly, however, both Bible and Confessions wish to stress the *triumph* of God's love in the Gospel (in the narrow sense) for those who believe, and, in a way, the whole point of specifying "law and Gospel" is to highlight the magnitude of God's grace in achieving vicarious satisfaction through the gift of His Son.² And for this reason we too follow the common convention of usually capitalizing "Gospel" while leaving "law" in the lower case.

II. Dogmatics versus Hermeneutics

Our topic, however, is the hermeneutics of "law-Gospel," not dogmatics as such. The two subjects are closely related, however. Hermeneutics has to do with valid method, with epistemological presuppositions. If Scripture really interprets Scripture, then both method and results, while not coterminous, will nevertheless overlap in their common rootage in the same inspired source. The divorce of the two is one of the major causes of the chaotic malaise in both dogmatics and exegesis in liberal circles. Even in conservative circles, where "law-Gospel" is common dogmatic usage, it is often not thought of in hermeneutical light.

One does not have to read the Lutheran confessions too closely, however, to discover that discussions of law and Gospel there are often hermeneutical in nature. For example, in Apology IV (5-6), Melancthon is very direct (and reduces the discussion to the most basic applications):

All Scripture should be divided into these two chief doctrines, the law and the promises. In some places, it presents the law. In others it presents the promise of Christ; this is done either when it promises that the Messiah will come and promises forgiveness of sins, justification, and eternal life. By "law" in this discussion we mean the commandments of the Decalogue, wherever they appear in the Scriptures.

On the surface, such a statement is very "dogmatic", but it patently is hermeneutical as well. That one "should" divide *all* of

Scripture into these *two* doctrines plainly implies a hermeneutical master key.

Other confessional statements on the subject of law and Gospel are even more explicitly hermeneutical. For example, Solid Declaration V (1) states: "The distinction between law and Gospel is an especially brilliant light which *serves the purpose* that the Word of God may be rightly divided and the writings of the holy apostles may be explained and understood correctly." (Parenthetically, we cannot help but note — although it certainly is not without hermeneutical significance either — that in this quotation "Word of God" and "writings of the holy apostles" are paralleled; the context is preeminently soteriological, to be sure, but it is not accident that the Scriptures and a proper method for expounding them are mentioned in the same breath.)

Also clearly hermeneutical in implication is the later assertion (FC-SD, V:23-24) that a law-Gospel orientation toward Scripture is no Lutheran idiosyncrasy, but that

Since the beginning of the world these two proclamations have continually been set forth side by side in the church of God with the proper distinction. The descendants of the holy patriarchs, like the patriarchs themselves, constantly reminded themselves of these two doctrines, which must be urged constantly and diligently in the church of God until the end of the world, but with the due distinction . . .

Such an assertion, of course, is not so much one of hermeneutical theory as a statement of the result of such hermeneutics in Old Testament interpretation (essentially, the golden thread of "Messianic prophecy"), but again one notes the parallelism of method and doctrinal result.

III. Indispensability

These few quotations are, in a real sense, only samplings of what pervades the entire Book of Concord. The overriding concern throughout is the proper understanding and proclamation of the Gospel on the basis of Scripture. Precisely the same ultimate concern is often articulated in terms of "justification by faith," and it scarcely need be pointed out here that Lutheranism has always considered that doctrine the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*. But if so indispensable a doctrine is derived from Scripture, then it must also define the indispensable key for comprehending those Scriptures. As it must be more than merely one doctrine among many, so it must be more than merely one hermeneutical canon among many.

That is, by Lutheran confession, "justification by faith" or "law-Gospel" is a pivot on which all turns, a perspective without which neither "Gospel" nor Scriptures will ever be understood correctly. Both church history and the contemporary scene are studded with examples, both exegetical and homiletical, of how one may formally be very "biblical," yet ultimately not be "biblical" at all as far as substance is concerned, that is, in expounding the Gospel.

IV. No Gospel-Scripture Dichotomy

Nevertheless, the indispensability of "law-Gospel" as a hermeneutical principle can be asserted onesidedly. We in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod have become painfully aware of that fact, because it lay at the very heart of the bitter theological dispute from which we have just emerged and whose scars are still often very visible. There can be no doubt (and, now that the battle is over, I think few would even bother to deny it) that the hidden agenda of much of the so-called "moderate" appeal to "law-Gospel" was a false dichotomy of Gospel and Scripture.

A "canon within the canon" was commonly championed, not merely in the sense of a material viewpoint by which all must be ordered, but as a means of determining what was really inspired word of God and what was not. Hence, the designation "Gospel-reductionism" came into popular usage; it was commonly argued that "law-Gospel" or "justification by faith" was all that really counted in Bible and theology (and sometimes, it would seem, only "Gospel" in its narrow sense — or "Gospel" in whatever sense). Everything else, allegedly, was dispensable. To argue otherwise was a "Reformed" aberration, or maybe even a quite recent "fundamentalistic" caricature.

Now, of course, that kind of talk is not unique to liberal Lutheranism. One may confidently assert that essentially the same dichotomy is virtually synonymous with theological liberalism as a whole. Outside of Lutheranism one is perhaps more likely to hear what is worth keeping described merely as "Gospel" rather than "law and Gospel," but otherwise it often takes a microscope to tell the difference (if any).

To demonstrate that the different phraseologies have a common ancestry, one probably harks back best to Johann Semler, often regarded as one of the "fathers" of modern biblical study. In his seminal work, *Abhandlung von freier Untersuchung des Canons* (1791), Semler made two main points which have long since become virtual dogma in liberal circles: (1) The Bible merely

contains the word of God. (2) "Treat the Bible like any other book."

Hence one is not surprised to note how easily those who championed that type of reductionistic "law-Gospel" hermeneutics identified with the reductionistic, least common denominator "ecumenism" of the liberal Protestant establishment — no doubt, a major part of the agenda all along. We have no doubt that there are some "ecumenical" Lutherans who retain some uneasiness about the company they keep, and who, at least privately, entertain the hope that if they have anything to contribute to the ecumenical church, it is "law-Gospel" or "justification by faith." Even those of us who cannot share that vision of a valid ecumenism may wish them well, but when one looks at the distaste for almost any kind of doctrinal discipline and the resulting rampant pluralism (often even explicit glorying in it) that seems almost inevitably to accompany that posture, it is hard to see how even that minimal bit of Lutheran "tradition" can ever have a serious impact upon Christendom at large.

Nor is it coincidental that Semler's work concentrated on the *canon*. A fundamentally different *Schriftprinzip* is at the heart of the shift. "Canon" continues to be used as a historical term, of course, but no longer with the same hermeneutical weight. The extent to which canonicity continues to be pivotal is currently illustrated by the typical reaction to Brevard Child's accent on canonical interpretation.³ Among the kinder things he is being called is a "sophisticated fundamentalist." Some critics will acknowledge that they have shortchanged the final (canonical) stage of the history of biblical (re)interpretation and have concentrated onesidedly on the alledged *ipsissima verba* or earlier layers of tradition as centers of authority. But if there is anything they are not about to give up, it is their "right" to continue to dissect the "tradition" and to champion whatever layer happens to appeal.

To suggest that the process stops with or is limited to the final canonical form is obviously anathema. As the popular phrase summarizes it, the modern preacher or theologian may be just as "inspired" as the canonical writer. In technical terms, "special" inspiration is simply denied. It is no longer "*sola Scriptura*," but at best *prima Scriptura* — or maybe *prima semi-Scriptura*, that is, whatever part of it impresses me most. The Bible becomes merely the earliest religious "interpretation" of certain historical events, a classical "witness" to some "encounter" with the numinous. That kind of jargon well illustrates the extent to which much of the

Lutheran "law-Gospel" movement was often little more than an expression in traditional Lutheran categories of the existentialism (and often universalism) of the current academic theological establishment. (Nor has the more recent popularity in some circles of some version of "process" immanentism contributed to evangelical and confessional clarity or identity.)

"Law" and "Gospel" sometimes became simply "bad news" and "good news" for the human situation of almost any type, with the Bible only a major source of paradigms and models. And since the "law" component easily got lost, "Gospel" was frequently assimilated to various liberationist currents, especially to romantic and humanistic notions of individual "freedom" and self-expression, that is, to an antinomianism that was often simply antipodal to all that "law and Gospel" traditionally implied. Or, when politicized as it commonly was, that "other Gospel" easily allied itself with the left-leaning activisms of the liberal establishment. Each church convention ("Lutheran" or not) passed essentially the same laundry list of social and political resolutions, which were usually no more self-evidently related to an authentic "Gospel" than the opposite type of clamor from the religio-political right.

There is something inherently contradictory about that kind of "law-Gospel" claim to genuine Lutheranism which shows such disregard for the two-kingdom doctrine. For precisely because the doctrine of two kingdoms is only a restatement of and application of the "law-Gospel" principle to the public sector, it is indeed of the very essence of confessional Lutheranism. One cannot have his cake and eat it too — or eternally go limping between two opinions, to use a more biblical metaphor. On its face, there is something suspicious about *official* ecclesiastical groups (I underscore the "official") which are almost infinitely latitudinarian in doctrine, but who seem to know precisely what God's infallible will is for San Salvador, Namibia, "peace," or whatever the current cause.

V. "Gospel": Central to Hermeneutics, but Not Exclusive

Hence, we argue that to loosen "law-Gospel" from its Scriptural anchorage, or to try to define "Gospel" by an appeal to "Gospel" without firm anchorage in an infallible Bible is simply to beg the question. One may argue logically or deductively, as well as inductively from the chaotic results.

First of all, logic (the *ministerial* use of reason, that is) excludes the circular argument of using "Gospel" to determine what

"Gospel" is. An indeterminate is not determined by another indeterminate; X times X yields only X^2 . Unless we know what " X ," that is, the "Gospel," is on some external basis, we get only confusion confounded by applying that formula. Now this, of course, assumes that "Gospel" has definite cognitive content, which may be clearly expressed discursively or propositionally. "Faith" in the classical definition is *assensus* and *fiducia* as well as *notitia*, but it emphatically includes *notitia*, and with definite perimeters. Such an argument, to be sure, has its own circularity, or rests on its own "hermeneutical circle," to which we shall return shortly.

But the point here is that a "law-Gospel" hermeneutics independent of Scripture inevitably tends in more mystical or subjectivistic directions. When "Gospel" is no longer normed by a closed canon with an inerrant text, final authority inevitably devolves upon each individual interpreter. The content of faith is swallowed up by the act of faith, the *fides quae* by the *fides qua*. So much accent is put on the experiential and relational that what one should experience or relate to falls between the cracks. Programmatically, hermeneutical space is left for input from modern post-Enlightenment experience, especially from the so-called social "sciences." The so-called "new hermeneutics," somewhat as a reaction to the arid historicism of classical historical-critical method, even attempts to make a virtue out of a sort of text-interpreter dialectic. Alternatively, the "quest" or the "journey" becomes such an end in itself that not only the sufficiency of Scripture but the finality of Christ is condemned as "triumphalistic" and a "theology of glory" — that is, about as great a caricature of Luther's use of such language as is imaginable.

Hence, we argue not only on the basis of reason, but on the basis of *our* experience, if you will, of what happens when "law-Gospel" is accented reductionistically. "By their fruits shall you know them." Its impossibility is amply demonstrated by the latitudinarian subjectivity of liberal definitions and applications. Down that road lies only theological confusion and confessional dissolution. Perhaps the best one can say for such hermeneutics is that, while beginning with something very nearly *uniquely* Lutheran, by turning the unique into the totality, it often loses even the unique. I submit that such one-sided accent on one doctrine, or one hermeneutical axiom, even when it is so central a one as "law and Gospel" is of the very essence of heresy (a vocable which understandably then is usually expunged from the vocabulary of the heresiarchs).

Hence, one is not surprised to discover that such "law-Gospel reductionism" is not the hermeneutical method of the Lutheran confessions either. Since their overriding concern is with soteriology (and specifically salvation through the Gospel, not by works of law), that criterion is indeed prominently employed in interpreting texts dealing with the relationship of faith and works (justification and sanctification).

But the main point to be made here is that the confessions address *other* questions to the Scriptures as well, propositional or doctrinal as well as relational. Even "law-Gospel" then emerges as an "I-It" as well as an "I-Thou" matter. The "authority" of the Scripture is not limited to God's claim on people's lives, or their destiny depending on their relationship to Him.⁴

A major example would be the various sacramentological issues which the Symbols consider. In one sense, because it deals with "means of grace," sacramentology is certainly a "law-Gospel" issue too. But a purely personalistic or functionalistic posture would scarcely have delivered the emphatic emphasis upon the real presence in the Eucharist or upon the baptismal realism which is so integral to the Lutheran confession (and, of course, in this case more against Calvinistic and Anabaptist than against Catholic positions). Other examples, which we need not detail here, would be the confessional discussions about the descent into hell, about monasticism, about obedience to civil government, and so on.

If this were not the procedure, the confessors (and Lutherans who share their confession) might well be charged with imposing alien meanings on biblical texts — a charge against dogmatics and confessional exegesis which has generally accompanied higher criticism and even much "biblical theology" from their inception. But the exegetical method of the confessions throughout is not one of reading "law-Gospel" (or any other doctrine for that matter) into biblical texts, of some arbitrary proof-texting to buttress conclusions which have really been reached on some other basis. The best known instance is again Luther's insistence upon the literal meaning of "is" in the Words of Institution. Another good example is Melancthon's interpretation of James 2:24 in Apology IV (244ff.). The argumentation is not deductive, from some law-Gospel apriorism, but inductive, from "what James meant." Many other examples could be cited, of course.

VI. A Valid Hermeneutical Principle, but Not the Only One

Hence, this paper's main thesis is that "Law and Gospel" is,

indeed, a valid (even indispensable) hermeneutical principle, but not *the* solely valid one (presuming that is meant, as we have seen it tends to be, in some exclusivistic or reductionistic sense). In terms of the scholastic jargon with which we in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod have become very familiar again in recent years, both the “formal” and “material” principles of the Reformation must be upheld. The “material” of the Bible, its heart, core, hub, pivot, center is “law-Gospel,” the power of God through the Holy Spirit to put to death the old Adam and to raise up in baptism a new man. Yet its “form,” its structure, means for defining it, saying what it is and is not, like that of the whole *corpus doctrinae*, is an objective entity, true *extra nos* whether we know it and accept it or not, namely, the Holy Scriptures, the “inscripturated Word of God.”

Now this is not the place for a detailed disquisition on the relationship between these so-called “formal” and “material” principles. Like other scholastic distinctions, those of us who have not abandoned the “correspondence theory” of truth (that is, that words cannot mean whatever anyone wishes them to mean) often find them extremely helpful, if not well-nigh indispensable. But we must remain aware that they easily distinguish too much, and end up divorcing rather than merely distinguishing. Then we become guilty of a “reductionism” of sorts ourselves, at least of a caricaturing compartmentalization of our own. But, short of that extreme, the fact that those two principles cannot ultimately be separated is precisely the point. “Gospel” (or “law-Gospel”) and “Scripture” are two sides of one coin. The Gospel is the material of the Scriptures, and the Scriptures are the “form,” the means by which “Gospel” is defined. The Gospel is the *power* of God unto salvation, but not a mystical, contentless one; the words of Scripture are not magical incantations, effective apart from the Word incarnate, but they do give form and shape to that Word which entered our world of words.

We argue that maintenance of both “Gospel” and “Scripture” in their proper relationship is of the essence of genuinely “confessional” Lutheranism. One would not care to run it through a computer, but I think the record down to the present day speaks for itself. Precisely because they are two sides of one coin, one ends up with something counterfeit or ungentuine if both sides are not clearly minted. Both principles become skewed if they are not held together in what I might venture to call a real sort of “dialectical relationship.”

If, on the one hand, the Scripture pole is weakened (as it is in the

historical-critical method, that is, with a fundamentally different hermeneutics), or "Gospel" becomes a sort of free-floating entity divorced from the sacred text, the inevitable result is some type of subjectivism or relativism, of which there have been and still are many varieties. If the Bible no longer defines "Gospel," then other philosophies or ideologies will rush in to fill the vacuum. The extent to which today "Gospel" commonly becomes a cloak for various countercultural programs makes the problem very clear. If what we have traditionally known as the Gospel of "Word and Sacrament" is not simply denied (as, by any measure, it clearly is sometimes), then at best it is put on the back burner and the church devotes the bulk of its talk and action to psychological, sociological, or political schemes. As "Gospel" gets allegorized or spiritualized into human idealism, even the sacramental realism, which we have always regarded as one of *the* marks of the church, no longer finds a place to stand.

And if, on the other hand, the "law-Gospel" thrust ebbs, then we run the opposite risk — and it is just as real a one — of what can *rightly* be called "biblicism" or "fundamentalism." It goes without saying that we reject the popular use of these terms by liberals to denigrate precisely what we are defending. If it were just a matter of playing with labels, we could even own the terms as laudable: "Biblicism" has an honorable history (and is still occasionally so used in Catholicism) of meaning simply specialization in biblical studies or giving the Bible its due. "Fundamentalism," as is well known, received its name because of concern about the fundamentals of the Christian faith, many of which were — and still are — under attack. But, of course, that is no longer the way the terms are used.

But, all polemics aside, there is no doubt that confessional Lutheranism needs to protect its right flank as well as its left. Precisely because, in the polemical situation, we share a belief in the verbal inspiration and objective authority of Scripture with others on the "right," we must be aware of our vulnerability to undue assimilation to attitudes characteristic of "evangelicalism," but scarcely compatible with Lutheranism.

The proper relation between "Gospel" (or "law-Gospel") and Scripture thus remains a high-priority item. Over against the "right" we stress that we do not and cannot first convert people to the Bible and then move on to the Gospel. Because the Bible is Spirit-breathed, it is also Christ-given, and without prior knowledge of enlightenment by Christ and His Spirit, the veil forever remains unlifted (2 Cor. 3:14 contains St. Paul's words about

the proper reading of the Old Testament versus Jewish biblicists of his day). Similarly, evangelical Protestantism's tendency toward a moralistic reading of the Bible, the tendency to pervert to Gospel into a *nova lex*, and the tendency to read the Sermon on the Mount or the theocratic prescriptions of the Old Testament as codes for a Christian commonwealth today belong to a different ethos.

That is, in a hundred and one ways it is very possible to be very visibly "biblical" and yet to turn the Bible into an instrument purely of law, not of Gospel. Already the Reformers were painfully aware of that fact. An undercurrent of such skirmishing is especially prominent in Apology IV, where Melancthon is countering Roman Catholic arguments. In the preface, he observes that "our opponents brag that they have refuted our Confessions from the Scriptures." Of course, the *Schwaermer* and Zwinglians knew how to appeal to Scripture too.⁵

Hence, there is a constant Reformation accent that the Bible can be made to mean almost anything if the proper key to its vast variety of expression and accent is not in hand. And it is in that light that we must hear Luther's typically picturesque and hyperbolic words, such as: "If my opponents quote Scripture against Christ and the Gospel, I fight back with Christ against the Scriptures." Even better known (partly because so often misquoted and misapplied) are his characterizations of the core of Scripture as "*was Christum treibt*," of James as a "strawy epistle," and so on. If Luther interprets Luther, it is plain that he is not erecting some canon within the canon, but simply summarizing the hermeneutical principle toward which all exegetical detail must be oriented.

VII. General versus Special Hermeneutics

Because our topic is a hermeneutical one, it may be useful to note the partial congruence of "formal" and "material" principles with another time-honored distinction, namely, that between "general" and "special" hermeneutics. "General" hermeneutics, one might say, has to do with the externals, the "form" of the Bible, with the Bible as literature. "Special" hermeneutics, by contrast, concerns itself with what is unique in the Bible, with what it does not have in common with any other literature.

"General" hermeneutics is surely the easier of the two, because no particular faith-stance is involved. The "method" is primarily philological, not theological. Hence, the major criterion is simply whether or not one has done a good job. To a large extent, liberals

and conservatives (or those who are neither of the above, that is, who are not believers at all) can and sometimes do join hands in common labors. Whether one believes that the Bible is God's word or simply a record of man's search for God, there are still such reasonable "objective" or "scientific" pursuits as the original languages, text-criticism, geography, biblical archaeology, etc. Even "history" may — and must — be included, because there is no disagreement, as such, that the Bible is a "historical" book, in a sense a product of history, shaped by the personalities and circumstances of its various writers. That is why we label our method *historical-grammatical*, even if not *historical-critical*. The only question is of the nature and limits of the historical categories applicable to the Bible. Theoretically and traditionally, that type of general-hermeneutical investigation should lay the foundation for subsequent study of the theological *propria* of the Bible. But theory and practice are two different matters. And I fear that *both* liberals and conservatives in their own ways tend to divorce the two, liberals often by design or basic hermeneutical theory, but conservatives often too by oversight.

As is often the case, the liberal divorce is of various types. The more liberal the person is, the easier it is *simply* to "treat the Bible like any other book." Philology and various types of criticism may flourish, but "special hermeneutics" is *a priori* virtually impossible. That means also an almost total *de facto* divorce of systematics and exegesis, with each charting its own path. A more "moderate" position tends to be characterized by the dichotomy of faith and fact or of "what it meant" and "what it means" that we have already described. There is usually a "special hermeneutics" of sorts here, but very vulnerable to trendiness, and tending also to be alienated from systematics, unless both have succumbed to the same trend. A major symptom of the divorce is in the area of the biblical languages; these may well be available on an elective basis to students who have such recondite interests, but, in general, it is no accident at all that mainline seminaries do not require them.

The problem emerges for different reasons in conservative quarters. Here one fears that special hermeneutics (and specifically "law-Gospel," our topic) is easily left to the dogmaticians and not really integrated with or applied to exegetical particulars. Hermeneutical instruction itself spends so much time on literary matters (the nature of a parable, poetry versus prose, etc.) that somehow the law-Gospel, Christological heart of the matter receives remarkably short shrift. Curiously, one ends up with a

de facto (even if not a theoretical) dichotomy of systematics and exegesis almost as total as in liberalism.

Sometimes I think our preparation of exegetical teachers has contributed to the problem. Partly, no doubt, out of concern to spare them from fruitless sparring with those of an incompatible theological persuasion, future teachers are often encouraged to major in philology rather than theology. That choice certainly has its pluses, but on the minus side is the tendency at times to continue to major in philology in subsequent teaching and never really to bring theological hermeutical theory to bear.

Hence, it behooves us to concede that there *is* such a thing as "triumphalism." We are all aware that this is another favorite spitball in the liberal arsenal, and self-evidently we reject its application there to virtually any confessional certitude ("law-Gospel" certainly not excluded) in favor of an "ecumenical" pluralism and sometimes the crassest universalism. Nor do we forget how triumphalistic liberalism readily becomes too, a better example of which can hardly be found than the intolerance currently manifested in some quarters toward those who cannot in conscience accept the novelty of the ordination of women. But conservatism must also confess its tendency toward self-satisfaction with past achievements, and specifically with traditional articulations, sometimes spilling over into that fractiousness toward others who do not dot i's and cross t's in precisely the same way. It is probably even salutary in that connection to recall that the Book of Concord, as its name indicates, was a product of precisely that type of situation, perhaps classically represented in the Majoristic controversy, where one extreme taught that good works were "harmful" to salvation, the other that they were "necessary."

VIII. Hermeneutical Circle

It is especially in the area of special hermeneutics that the idea of the "hermeneutical circle" is helpful (though, of course, general hermeneutics will not remain unaffected by one's theological prepossessions). Some liberal theoreticians have urged this idea in recent years in the sense of a necessary interaction of a given text and the interpreter's subjectivity, of "exegeting the exegete as much as the text." The only merit in that accent is its recognition of the fact that there is no such thing as presuppositionless exegesis, no way to "prove scientifically" to the uninvolved observer that one faith stance is correct and another wrong.

Various people, with various confessions, may well read the texts differently (the major example perhaps being Jewish versus Christian readings of the Old Testament), and if we wait for the historians and grammarians to decide definitely what the texts mean, we will without doubt wait until the parousia.

But the conservative does not proceed from that situation to an exaltation of subjectivity or a relativization of the truth. Our hermeneutical circle is traditionally expressed in terms of "Scripture as its own interpreter." We believe, teach, and confess that the truth revealed there is objectively true, even if only the Holy Spirit can demonstrate it. Sometimes we say we have "no official exegesis," and, indeed, when it comes to the welter of particulars, that is true enough, even up to a point of the exegesis of passages cited in the Confessions. And, of course, there is the matter of new discoveries in modern times, which we shall certainly not disregard. But beyond certain perimeters, different exegesis simply means a different confession, a different hermeneutics, at fundamental variance from Lutheranism's official self-definition.

While we commonly underscore one half of our hermeneutical circle, namely, that our doctrines are based on Scripture, the other half often fails to receive equal stress, namely, that they all double back as hermeneutical guides to the proper understanding of relevant biblical texts. A major part of both halves of that circle will be, as already stated, the "formal" and "material" principles. If both principles are legitimately derived from the Bible, then together they form the major *clavis* by which alone, in turn, we can ever hope to expound the sacred texts rightly. The formal principle is an overarching one, God's own assurance that His word will not lead us astray, either factually nor soteriologically. But the substance, the *materia* of that soteriology and of which all the facts are ultimately an integral part, is *evangelium* (or "law-Gospel"), not *lex Christi* or *philosophia coelestis*, but *promissio*, as Melancthon argues already in his *Loci Communes*.

The purpose of the "law" component is to force us to ask the right questions, the real, the ultimate questions of Scripture (as of ourselves), not those penultimate ones of personal quests and contemporary culture, which so easily obtrude. "Law" emphatically squelches any notion of the "world writing the church's agenda" (hermeneutical or otherwise). Of course, there is always the matter of contemporary and personal application, but the two must not be confused, as characteristically happens in

liberalism. God's answer to the right questions is the Gospel, and the "formal principle" is His own assurance that we have the right source to learn that answer.

That is, as already argued, "law-Gospel," because of its centrality in the Christian faith, will always be preeminent among those principles derived from Scripture and, hence, in turn, indispensable for expounding Scripture. But there will be many others also, as we have already noted; there were in the confessional writings too. Not only is there the doctrine of Scripture as basic prolegomenon, but, in a way, all the other *loci* as well. If these have been validly derived from the Bible to begin with, we cannot basically contradict them when we turn to parts of the Bible relevant to those *loci*, without expressing a different confession.

A good example of those others which cannot be developed in detail here is sacramentology. If both "Word" and "Sacrament" are equal means of grace, as we profess, this cannot help but color our exegesis at many points. Theoretically, this is one of the major divergencies between confessional Lutherans and conservative "evangelicals." Yet it seems obvious to me, at least, that not only in piety, but also in exegesis, excessive anti-Roman Catholic reaction has usually tended to push us in a sub-Lutheran direction that is often barely distinguishable from other conservative Protestants. In Old Testament studies a major application would be to the Old Testament cult, an area where, however, we appear to be even less at home than most "evangelicals." Of course, "law-Gospel" will provide major guidelines to be brought to bear upon that subject too.

Once, however, the path of those who formulated the doctrines out of Scripture to begin with has been retraced, and we have appropriated the fruit of the labors of those who preceded us in making the ancient words become the *viva vox*, or, propositionally put, in helping us release revealed information, all the parts must be related to the whole. That is, the soteriological or "law-Gospel" center must be brought to bear upon every doctrine, every text, every *word* (in part also because we simultaneously confess *verbal* inspiration). That was the element of truth in the "moderate" accent in recent Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod history that there is only *one* "doctrine," the Gospel. We cannot say that in quite the reductionistic sense they did, as though many or even most other doctrines were optional. We insist that in another sense there are many doctrines or "articles of faith" (so, most obviously, in the heading of the Formula of Concord, both

in its Epitome and Solid Declaration). But in a comprehensive sense it remains profoundly true that the church has *no* other message but Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Precisely for conservatives with their concern for *all* the facets of the faith, the danger of an atomistic, intellectualistic, and hence ultimately *legalistic* caricaturing is always at hand. If that is not exactly a *fides historica*, it is a *fides doctrinalis* (to coin a term), ultimately just as deficient. Just as it is possible to be very "biblical," yet not really so, it is also possible to have all the "pure doctrine" in the world, and yet be only "a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" (1 Cor. 13:1).

IX. Corollaries

As there are many doctrines fanning out from the evangelical center, so there are also many hermeneutical correlaries. This is not the place to attempt to detail, or even list, all of them. But two at least appear to deserve passing attention. First of all, we will underscore the corollary of the unity of Scripture. Again, that unity will be both formal and material. It simultaneously involves the confession of the ultimate relatability of every detail to the cross (that is, to "law-Gospel") as well as that of the total reliability of the Bible. Used in that way, "law-Gospel" is again seen as a fundamental part of our hermeneutics. But as urged by some, it emerges again as reductionistic, resulting in what in any ordinary sense can only be called the *disunity* of Scripture. Then the "law-Gospel" emphasis easily fades away into the general liberal blur too. Now, when we say "unity," we do not mean "uniformity." There was a time in the history of the church when dogmatic prooftexting easily eclipsed nearly all historical variety and human individuality, thus "reading into" passages meanings which were not exegetically supportable. And, no doubt, if one looks long enough under all the back pews, we can still find remnants of that tradition.

But one fights windmills if he imagines that the enemy is amassing his major forces on that front today. The *lack* of unity in the Bible, yes, the contradictoriness of the Bible (in any ordinary sense of those terms) has long since been virtual dogma in establishment circles. Even the most tentative efforts to harmonize different accents and idioms are immediately suspect as "fundamentalistic." Following Enlightenment canons, conservative exegetes are often even charged with "dishonesty" in their readings.⁶ Obviously, then, if the biblical canon is itself a product of politically and philosophically inspired harmonizations, that

is, if one cannot go home again because there is no canonical home-base in any traditional sense, it follows unarguably that contemporary pluralism and "ecumenism" is not only to be approved, but applauded. And both logic and experience indicate that "law-Gospel" itself, even in its reductionistic sense, will not long be able to sustain itself, except perhaps as one glob in the stew, and it certainly cannot be hermeneutically defended except on the basis of some Lutheran "tradition" — on its face, of course, as un-Lutheran a hermeneutics as is imaginable.

Somewhat similar points can be made about *unus sensus literalis*. Again, it is not simply a formal philological rule (and basically a rule of all language), but also a Christological or law-Gospel rule. But that is just the point: as already stressed, the Word made flesh becomes indistinct apart from the "*words made flesh*," if you will — that is, inscripturated in the ordinary units of human communication. The ancient usages, applying "Torah" or "Gospel" to literary units as well as to their contents, spoke more truly than they realized. And various liturgical customs honoring the holy book are, indeed, idolatrous if the book does not represent, indeed, sacramentalize Christ, as the Sacraments in the strict sense also do in parallel fashion.

The original antithesis of *unus sensus literalis*, of course, was allegory. And while virtually no one can be found today to defend either literalism or allegorism, both are demonstrably alive and well today in that allegedly "scientific" exegesis, which knows neither formal nor material principles. I have long argued that there is no one so literalistic as the liberal on the make, magnifying every minor variation into different theologies and disparate traditions, almost anything to demonstrate that he is no "fundy" (and, hence, there is no good reason why we should not return with interest the common charge of literalism regularly hurled at conservatives).

Furthermore, *unus sensus* assumes that meaning is to be found *in* the sacred text, not behind it or under it — any more than above it, as allegory attempted. Meaning adheres to words in their normal *usus loquendi* in the original historico-theological context. Hermeneutically, I fail to see much ultimate difference between, on the one hand, the higher-critical game of ferreting out all sorts of early layers of tradition (usually accorded more authority than the canonical level), and, on the other hand, the artificial spiritualizations of formal allegory or of officially pneumatic exegesis.

X. Applications

As far as specific applications go, we have time to consider only a few critical cases. First of all, a major area where both "law-Gospel" and "verbal inspiration" principles must be brought to bear are the many passages in both testaments which speak in terms of "reward," or which seem to condition God's gifts upon human behavior. As noted earlier, this problem figured prominently already in the Reformation. If Scripture ultimately has no common Author, then there is no ultimate hermeneutical problem either; there may well then be a fundamental contradiction at the very *heart* of Scripture, and we simply erect our own canon on the alternative that suits. But, then, neither does Lutheranism have any *biblical* basis for insisting upon even "law-Gospel" or "justification by faith" as a minimum precondition for ecclesiastical unity. But if it is axiomatic that the Bible does not contradict itself, and if that non-contradiction may be summarized under the caption of "law-Gospel," then it is no great trick to harmonize the two accents, any more than it is to fit James and Paul together. God, indeed, "rewards" but according to His grace, essentially in the realm of sanctification rather than of justification. We cannot earn our "reward," but we can forfeit it. We are saved by grace through faith alone, but faith is not alone (to repeat some tried and tested formulae).

In the Old Testament a major bloc of material requiring that kind of treatment is the Wisdom literature. Not only in moralistic popular piety, but explicitly and hermeneutically in most critical literature, Proverbs (to cite the major example) is commonly treated as an alien element in the canon. Even the flurry of attention to Wisdom in the past decade has scarcely confronted the question of its canonical meaning. Here, then, "law-Gospel" is indispensable. We believe, teach, and confess that Wisdom is not an alien universalism and humanism at odds with much of the rest of the canon, but an alternate expression of an application to more private, personal circumstances of the "third use of the law," essentially parallel to the "legal" formulations of the Pentateuch. Hence, the moral aspects of both are assumed and restated in the New Testament; both Torah and Wisdom are embodied in Christ.

A second major example concerns Lutheran interpretation of the prophets. Liberal activism characteristically wraps itself in a cloak of the "prophetic." The prophets' challenge to the establishment of that day becomes a major model of what church life, yes, even the "Gospel," is all about. Never mind, of course, that the New Testament does not so quote and use the prophets. Never

mind that the prophets spoke to a theocracy or union of "church" and state, which otherwise the ACLU and ADA would be most vigorous in opposing in any modern dress. Never mind even that the so-called "prophetic" often retains only the most tenuous substantial connection with the Bible, but becomes a universalistic, sociological term, in practice often filled with leftist, even Marxist, content, which is defended "biblically" on the basis of the flimsiest of analogies. Obviously, neither verbal inspiration nor "law-Gospel" is being upheld.

For a full-orbed Reformation hermeneutics, such a posture is impossible. From the formal standpoint of inspiration, it simply will not do to highlight the prophetic canon read historicistically and literalistically apart from the whole canon of both testaments. A distinction between the "two kingdoms" defines "church," the "Israel according to the Spirit," in a way which was not true of ancient Israel. To confuse the two again is not only subversive ecclesiologically, but implies a renunciation of the finality and *ephapax* quality of the revelation of Christ.

The doctrine of the "two kingdoms" thus becomes a prime example of a formulation derived from Scripture in turn becoming indispensable hermeneutics for "rightly dividing the Word of truth." And if one recalls again that the doctrine of the "two kingdoms" is little more than a variant of "Law-Gospel," it becomes apparent also from the material standpoint of Reformation hermeneutics, that *ein anderer Geist* pervades the common Protestant notion of the "prophetic." Political and social action under such auspices has nothing to do with the coming of God's kingdom. Now, in all fairness, we must also stress that the alternative is not the privatism and quietism of much traditional Protestantism, including much classical Lutheranism. In terms of individual or group initiatives, it must also be stressed that the believer still exists in the "kingdom of power" on God's "left-hand," and political "activism," like the life of sanctification in general, in that context has much to learn from prophetic examples.

XI. Symbolics versus Dogmatics

Finally, we need to explore the difference between symbolics and dogmatics, or, somewhat similarly, between dogmatic theology and "biblical" - exegetical theology. As noted earlier, a persistent charge of critical hermeneutics against traditional exegesis has been that it imposes dogmatic meanings on Scripture. "Law-Gospel" would, of course, be a major example,

wherever the Bible itself does not express itself in that terminology. Hence, a major plank in the critical program has always been to "free" the Bible to be heard "on its own terms." We have already sketched the two different universes of hermeneutical discourse which often makes communication itself across the canyon difficult, if not impossible, and we need not repeat. And, as we have tried to illustrate, "Law-Gospel" is also a particularly good illustration of the confessional convictions that it is not a matter of artificially harmonizing or of imposing anything upon Scriptures, but of a modality which enables all the voices in the choir to sing in harmony.

But confessionalists easily protest too much or too soon. First, it needs to be emphasized that our Symbols pretend to offer neither a comprehensive exposition of dogma nor a complete hermeneutical handbook. What they do provide for those who subscribe to them is chart and compass for exegetical labors, a major symbolic system by which one "does theology." The specific issues they address are largely those which were in dispute at the time — but these, of course, were largely ones involving the very essence of the Christian message. Furthermore, the Symbols speak largely in proto-dogmatic terms upon which the later systems build, not exegetical ones as such. However, the faithfulness of a subsequent doctrinal system to the primary symbol system cannot be measured mechanically by use of the same language, any more than whether a theology is truly "biblical" can be determined merely by how much actual biblical language is employed.

The necessary distinction between symbolics and systematics overlaps somewhat with that between symbolics-systematics, on the one hand, and biblical-exegetical theology, on the other. "Biblical theology" (in the academic sense) arose in the early years of historical-critical approaches as a more or less explicit protest against what was regarded as the dogmatic-ecclesiastical tyranny over the ancient texts, which needed to be freed and heard in their original accents. If it were not for the fundamentally different hermeneutics involved, it might have been a trend hard to buck. Yet the subsequent history of the "biblical theology" movement itself amply illustrates the fact that, when you throw away keys and chase after a will-of-the-wisp notion of "freedom," the results inevitably are about as variegated and often mutually contradictory as could possibly be. The movement has always had a hard time distinguishing itself from a study of the "history of Israel's religion," thus faithfully reproducing the presuppositions

and limitations of its historical-critical parents. For a time neo-Orthodoxy gave it a sense of purpose and unity, and often nudged it in relatively traditional directions. But the old nemesis of the unity of Scripture (certainly not of both testaments, and often not even of either testament by itself) continued to haunt it, and eventually the ship broke up precisely on that reef of the "center" (or lack of it) in Scripture. Today, if the movement is not simply dead, as many pronounce it, it is undeniably moribund.

Confessional movements made various efforts to tune into the biblical-theology movement, perhaps even to claim it, but, at best, the alliance was very uneasy. At the risk of gross oversimplification, one may assert that the Lutheran wing (Eissfeldt, Bultmann, etc.) tended in the more existentialist direction of a dichotomy of faith and fact, while those with a Reformed background found more congenial some version of their historic accent on the covenant (Eichrodt, Vos, and much of the *Heilsgeschichte* accent).⁷

"Exegetical theology," of course, is a much older term. Since it never was, as such, caught up in the ebb and flow of academic fashions, it appears to have weathered the storms quite well and still to be a very serviceable term. In fact, we can and should even thank historical-critical efforts for often providing raw materials and insights for exegesis which presumably would never have been available otherwise. A fair amount of sifting and culling is usually necessary to determine whether or not the results are really compatible with our confessional stance. But as our very term "*historical-grammatical*" indicates (over against the Reformation's merely "*grammatical*" approach), not even the most conservative exegete is able to do exegesis as was possible in the pre-critical world. While maintaining the unity of Scripture, we are much more aware of the variety, and surely the richer for it. The "*historical*" inevitably bulks much larger in our consciousness, but, of course, the question of what "*historical*" means and does not mean remains in many ways *the* question. The whole environment requires constant attention to boundary patrol or fence-mending if confessional identity is to be maintained.

The other side of that coin is overprotection of one's tradition. Recent Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod history, as everyone knows, has been characterized by reinstatement of the centrality of our confessional and dogmatic traditions, both their "*formal*" and "*material*" principles. Since the "*historical-critical*" method lay at the heart of the dispute, it is no accident that the exegetical departments were at the eye of the storm. As I have indicated

elsewhere, I believe that, although the theoretical principle has been established, the implementation of our *sola Scriptura* and *sola gratia* principles on the exegetical (and probably also homiletical) level has not been resuscitated to the same degree. Our recent graduates, by and large, know their confessional and dogmatic principles as well as can reasonably be expected. But a comparable familiarity with the Bible, with "exegetical theology," is far from having been achieved. Hence, confessional Lutherans, somewhat like other conservatives, often operate (curiously) more on the basis of a confessional *tradition* than a *sola Scriptura*.

A good share of the problem is simple unfamiliarity with biblical vocabulary and idiom, or with the variety of biblical "theologies" (in the sense of varying formulations and accents, which on the surface, no doubt, sometimes appear mutually contradictory or appear to contradict the dogmatic dicta). Either the biblical usages are confused with the dogmatic ones, or the preacher exhibits simple helplessness when the familiar dogmatic terms and distinctions do not appear in his text. The upshot is that either he preaches a sermon which is magnificently "textual" but which contains no "law-Gospel" (i.e., moralistic, legalistic "inspirational" diatribes of various sorts) or, as one of my students recently observed sagely, no matter what the text, the sermon simply proclaims, "You are a sinner, but God has forgiven your sin" (i.e., law-Gospel, but quite innocent of any grappling with the particulars of the text).

At every point the Old Testament suffers much more than the New, and, especially in this respect, it remains to be demonstrated that the church is really serious about its confession of the Old Testament writers "ut limpidissimos purissimosque Israelis fontes." The common unwillingness or inability to preach on the Old Testament at all is one of the major symptoms of the malaise. And here especially our very accent on "law-Gospel" is, undoubtedly, often a major hurdle. "Law" and "Gospel" provide parade examples of the different usages of dogmatic and exegetical theology: "Gospel" scarcely appears in the Old Testament at all, and until the demon of hearing the Old Testament's *Torah* as a simple synonym of the Pauline *nomos* is exorcised, we shall never do more than spin our wheels. Perhaps not unrelated is the traditional tendency to employ the criterion of "Messianic prophecy," not as, in effect, an indispensable "law-Gospel" center but *de facto* in a sort of "Gospel reductionistic" fashion (i.e., the only part of the Old Testament deemed worthy of

much attention). Add to that the budding dogmatician's unfamiliarity with the theological import of key words like "covenant," "righteousness," "justice," "glory," "name," and sometimes even with a functional "law-Gospel" hermeneutics to add to his subscription to "inerrancy," and the practical dimensions of the two sides of the "law-Gospel" hermeneutical issue which this paper has addressed comes into bold relief.

Before I close, let me append yet an observation that the extent to which familiarity with dogmatic-confessional usages tends to outdistance that with biblical-exegetical ones finds a close parallel in our problems with liturgical (and hymnological) language, as some of our controversies in connection with the new hymnal have illustrated again. Especially our traditional liturgies are often but mosaics of biblical quotations. Properly used, as a pedagogical tool (among other things) they may be as close to the actual world of the Bible as most worshippers ever come. Apparently the shape of our recent controversy has fixed in the minds of many a sort of "liturgical-liberal" association. But that association forgets the extent to which liturgical revival and confessional revival have often gone hand in glove in the history of the church, perhaps most notably that in Germany some one hundred and fifty years ago, of which the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is a direct beneficiary.

As I have argued elsewhere, the suspicion of "high-church" ceremonial is, in my judgment, inseparable from our *de facto* subordination of the Sacraments to the "Word." "Word" or "law-Gospel" then tends to be defined sub-biblically in a verbalistic, fideistic, intellectualistic, almost "Gospel-reductionistic" fashion. The inevitable sequel of that stance is an unguardedness toward non-sacramental or sub-sacramental practices and mentalities for which "Reformed" might well be the kindest label. Here, too, if we had space, we could explore the failure to integrate law-Gospel with our sacramentology and our sacramentology with "law-Gospel."

But, of course, the real antithesis in all of this is the specter of Roman Catholic associations, that is, a confusion of the "law-Gospel" heart of the Reformation struggle with what explicitly were labelled "adiaphora." To the extent that the *Sitz im Leben* of the adiaphoristic controversy (cf. FC, X) still holds, we might be justified on confessional grounds to continue rejecting practices with false associations. But since, in the main, our antitheses are different, I believe, it is our hermeneutical imperative to "search the Scriptures" also for the "catholic" elements which are very

prominent there (especially the lengthy cultic sections of the Old Testament) as well as to recall the high regard for catholicity and patristic tradition everywhere exhibited in our symbolical writings.

This is to say, in conclusion, the task of claiming and proclaiming the "law-Gospel" heart of the biblical message, as well as appropriating all the other facets of a total hermeneutics and properly integrating them with "law-Gospel," is an ongoing, perennial challenge to the church.⁸ In fact, it is a task of such consummate urgency that it cannot be left to any one department, or even to all of them working in isolation. If all, dogmaticians, exegetes, historians, specialists in the confessions, liturgists, homileticians (even administrators), maintain the common vision, then, by God's grace, St. Paul's predicate may become true for us, namely, that we are "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, fitly framed together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit" (Eph. 2:20-22).

FOOTNOTES

1. All confessional quotations follow *The Book of Concord*, trans. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959). It has not been deemed necessary to include page references.
2. Similar points are made by Ralph Bohlmann, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation in the Lutheran Confessions* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), esp. pp. 72-73, and by Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, trans. P.F. Koehneke and H.J.A. Bouman (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), esp. pp. 136-37.
3. Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament As Scripture* (Philadelphia, 1979). In this work Childs draws together and applies to the whole Old Testament a viewpoint he has long been urging in a variety of writings.
4. Cf. the similar arguments of Bohlmann, *op. cit.*, esp. chapter 7, and of Holsten Fagerberg, *A New Look at the Lutheran Confessions*, trans. Gene J. Lund (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House 1972), esp. chapter 1. On this point Schlink (*op. cit.*), however, is less than clear.
5. This point is made emphatically, but with typical "moderate" one-sidedness in Edward H. Schroeder, "Is There a Lutheran Hermeneutics?" pp. 82-97, in M. Bertram, ed., *The Lively Function of the Gospel* (St. Louis, 1966).
6. A recent, unusually offensive presentation of the liberal case in terms of "honesty" is James A. Sanders, "The Bible as Canon," *The Christian Century*, 98: 39 (December 2, 1981), pp. 1250-5. This article makes it crystal clear that Sanders' "canonical criticism" is worlds removed from Childs' method (cf. note 3, above), with which it is often compared, and is really only "classical" higher criticism in new dress. The dilemma which indebtedness to the Enlightenment poses for the liberal is rather classically presented by Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer* (Philadelphia,

1966, rep. 1981). Significantly, it is subtitled "The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief." And just as significantly, after demolishing all the liberal attempts to solve the problem, Harvey really has no solution of his own to offer.

7. A major review of the extent to which classical *Heilsgeschichte* (especially as presented by von Hofmann) was at explicit odds with Orthodoxy's understanding of "law-Gospel" is offered by Gerhard O. Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate* (Minneapolis, 1969).
8. The classic presentation of the imperative, especially in its pastoral dimensions, remains C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, trans. by W.H.T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928).