

Non Sequitur: How Modern Lutherans Lost the Reformation Gospel

It is a widespread assumption in Synodical Conference circles¹ that Francis Pieper, the successor of C. F. W. Walther as professor of dogmatics at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, president of that seminary, and president of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, was also a faithful exponent of the theology of Walther and the Book of Concord of 1580. In fact, Pieper developed a hybrid theological system which relied heavily on the Formula of Concord in explaining sanctification, while abandoning its and Walther's distinction of law and Gospel. Pieper did indeed agree that “renewal” is a proper title of the second half of the Gospel,² based on the Formula of Concord's definition of regeneration as “both the forgiveness of sins solely for Christ's sake and the subsequent renewal which the Holy Spirit works in those who are justified by faith.”³ The works of a Christian are thus truly good, not merely sinful works pardoned; the believer participates in sanctification synergistically, only after being justified monergistically; the new man is a reality in this life, neither perfect nor merely theoretical.⁴ Most importantly, the new man “maintains the dominion over the old man,” with the latter neither the new man's equal nor entirely eliminated.⁵

Yet in his subsequent treatment of law and Gospel, Pieper made no use whatever of Walther's law and Gospel theses, and acknowledged their existence only in a concluding footnote.⁶ In a preceding footnote, he correctly quoted the Formula of Concord's definition of “the law strictly speaking,” that is, any statement of the “immutable will of God” which “threatens the transgressors of the law with God's wrath and temporal and eternal punishment,”⁷ but in a far

¹ The Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America was a federation of “conservative” American Lutherans, founded in 1872 with C. F. W. Walther as its first president. It dissolved in the 1960s when its largest member, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, was accused by its partners of straying from its previous doctrinal positions.

² Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, vol. III (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1953), pp. 4-5.

³ FC SD III, 19 (Tappert, p. 542; Triglotta, p. 921).

⁴ Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, vol. III, pp. 5-6, 14-16.

⁵ Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, vol. III, p. 32.

⁶ Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, vol. III, p. 252.

⁷ FC SD V, 17 (Tappert, p. 561; Triglotta, p. 957).

more prominent discussion earlier in his dogmatics he had removed the second phrase, creating the impression that any statement of God's will for man is law in the proper sense.⁸ Despite his contempt for Philip Melanchthon as “the father of synergism and Majorism in the Lutheran Church,”⁹ he uncritically adopted the “law-promise” dialectic from Melanchthon's *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* in explaining how “Holy Scripture, the Word of God, is divided into Law and Gospel.”¹⁰

Misapplying Melanchthon's Law

Melanchthon had distinguished between “the law and the promises,” the former meaning “the commandments of the Decalogue, wherever they appear in the Scriptures,” the latter consisting of texts in which the Scripture “promises forgiveness of sins, justification, and eternal life.”¹¹ Melanchthon's concern was to show how a person obtains forgiveness of sins, or justification, and thus enters into a right relationship with his Creator. Accordingly, that which pertains to achieving that relationship (divine promise) was contrasted with that which is erroneously thought to achieve it (human activity), with other topics of Holy Scripture left out of consideration. Melanchthon specifically excluded “the ceremonial and civil laws of Moses” from his definition of law, whereas such commandments are definitely included in Paul's (Gal. 5:3). Similarly, Melanchthon's concept of promises does not embrace such articles of the Gospel as the principles of ecclesiology and eschatology, since these are not rightly discussed until after a person has heard and believed the promises of justification.

Melanchthon's definition of promises is thus far narrower than the Formula of Concord's “Gospel strictly speaking,” since the latter excludes only one type of statement: the “proclamation of contrition and reproof.”¹² Similarly, Melanchthon's definition of law is far broader than the Formula of Concord's “law strictly speaking.” As previously noted, the latter always contains two

⁸ The correct version appears in Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. III, p. 222; the truncated version appears in Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. I (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1950), pp. 530-531.

⁹ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. I, p. 150. George Major, one of Melanchthon's students, had made good works the cause rather than the effect of justification; see F. Bente's “Historical Introductions to the Symbolical Books,” sec. 144, in *Triglotta*, p. 115.

¹⁰ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. I, p. 78.

¹¹ AC Ap IV, 5-6 (Tappert, p. 108; *Triglotta*, p. 121).

¹² FC Ep V, 7 (Tappert, p. 478; *Triglotta*, p. 803).

elements: a statement of the “immutable will of God,” and an overt threat of divine wrath.¹³ But Melanchthon's definition of the law as “the commandments of the Decalogue, wherever they appear in the Scriptures” includes many statements of God's will for man which are not attached to any threat, such as “Let us accomplish something good for everyone, especially for the family of the faith” (Gal. 6:10).

Melanchthon's subsequent assertions that “the law always accuses” (lex semper accusat)¹⁴ do not contradict the foregoing. Whereas many modern Lutherans claim that this is an absolute principle governing any use of anything which may be termed “law,”¹⁵ Melanchthon himself employed this phrase only of man prior to justification; after referring to “faith in Christ,” he stated, “Without this, the law always accuses us.”¹⁶ The initial phrase is crucial, for its loss enables the misreading as accusation of large sections of Scripture which have no such

¹³ The threat element of “the law strictly speaking” is elsewhere called the driver of the law, as in FC SD VI, 6 (Tappert, p. 564-565; Triglotta, p. 965) and 17 (Tappert, p. 566; Triglotta, p. 967).

¹⁴ The first is AC Ap IV, 38 (Tappert, p. 112; Triglotta, p. 131).

¹⁵ For example, Robert D. Preus, Justification and Rome (St. Louis: Concordia, 1997), p. 41. See also Robert W. Schaibley, “Lutheran Preaching: Proclamation, Not Communication,” Concordia Journal, vol. 18, no. 1 (January 1992), p. 22, who in addition criticized “some of the really big names in LCMS history” for their allegedly erroneous approach to sanctification.

¹⁶ AC Ap IV, 167 (Tappert, p. 130). The Latin original is alioqui (“otherwise”) lex semper accusat. The Triglotta, pp. 168-169, like the 1882 translation of Henry Jacobs, p. 112, locates this sentence in par. 46 of a section entitled, “Of Love and the Fulfilling of the Law.” By contrast, much of par. 162-174 in Tappert was relegated to secondary text in the recently published edition of Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (The Book of Concord, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), and the key phrase in par. 167 was deleted entirely (p. 148), despite the claim that “important variations in the text” were retained in italics (p. 109). The translator of the latter was Charles Arand (p. viii), an auditor of the original “Permission of Righteousness” paper which I delivered at Concordia Seminary on January 16, 1999, which discussed the alioqui lex semper accusat text (page 4, footnote 15). For a critical evaluation of the Apology text in Kolb and Wengert, which replaced the original Latin (“quarto”) text of the Apology, favored by most 20th century American Lutherans, with the revised Latin (“octavo”) edition, see Roland F. Ziegler, “The New Translation of the Book of Concord: Closing the barn door after....,” Concordia Theological Quarterly, 66:2 (April 2002), pp. 148 and 150-151.

intended function for Christians.

Contributing to Pieper's confusion was a major shift in definitions of the various senses of the Gospel. As has been seen, “promise” indicates the article of justification, and “Gospel strictly speaking” indicates the Gospel in all its articles; only in a broad and improper sense does “Gospel” denote the entire preaching of Jesus Christ,¹⁷ including his “strange deed” of rebuking.¹⁸ Pieper, by contrast, denied that “Gospel” ever includes the preaching of rebuke, and then used “Gospel in the wider sense” to mean what the Formula of Concord called its strict sense, and “Gospel in the proper sense” to mean what Melanchthon called the promises.¹⁹ The result was that narrow promises were opposed to a broad definition of law, instead of the Gospel in its entirety being opposed to the preaching of rebuke.

That Melanchthon's broad definition of law is not rightly set in opposition to the Gospel is further demonstrated when one considers Walther's eighth thesis on law and Gospel, “the Word of God is not rightly divided when the Law is preached to those who are already in terror on account of their sins or the Gospel to those who live securely in their sins.”²⁰ If law here means the Decalogue, the result would be that the Ten Commandments would never be preached to Christians. Walther also taught in his seventh thesis, “the Word of God is not rightly divided when the Gospel is preached first and then the Law.”²¹ Again, if law here means the Decalogue, the Lord himself confused law and Gospel when he gave the Decalogue (Ex. 20:1-17) immediately after declaring that its hearers were “a royal priesthood and a holy nation” (19:6), and when he introduced its commandments with a reminder of Israel's liberation in the Exodus (20:2). Martin Luther's assertion that “anyone who knows the Ten Commandments perfectly knows the entire Scriptures”²² confirms that the Decalogue is not law in the proper sense, for the knowledge of something which excludes the Gospel certainly could not explain the entire Scriptures.

¹⁷ FC SD V, 27 (Tappert, p. 563; Triglotta, p. 961).

¹⁸ FC SD V, 11 (Tappert, p. 560; Triglotta, p. 955).

¹⁹ Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, vol. III, pp. 222-223. Pieper quoted seventeenth century dogmatician Johann Quenstedt in denying the assertion of FC SD V, 3 (Tappert, p. 558; Triglotta, p. 953) that εὐαγγέλιον in Scripture sometimes includes the law.

²⁰ C. F. W. Walther, The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel, W. H. T. Dau, trans. (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1928), p. 101.

²¹ Walther, Proper Distinction, p. 89.

²² LC Preface, 17 (Tappert, p. 361; Triglotta, p. 573).

Pieper's abandonment of these principles caused him to misread several important Gospel texts as impossible demands of the law, such as "You will be holy, for I am holy" (Lev. 11:44-45, quoted in 1 Pet. 1:16), which is in fact a promise that God imputes his holiness to us as a free gift.²³ Jesus' assertion that he did not come to abolish but to fulfill "the law or the prophets" (Matt. 5:17), that is, the entire Old Testament (thus the law in the broad sense), was similarly misread as a reference to the law in the narrow sense by consistent removal of the phrase "or the prophets."²⁴ The latter has become the most commonly cited proof text among modern Lutherans for the notion that salvation comes through works of law which Jesus performed apart from us rather than through faith which Jesus creates in us.

Misdefining the Formula's Third Use of the Law

Pieper's confusion of law and Gospel comes to a head in his analysis of the third use of the law, which is admittedly one of the most controverted issues among theologians otherwise committed to the Book of Concord. The basic problem is the failure to remember that "the law strictly speaking" must contain both the "immutable will of God" and a threatening driver. Those who teach that all statements of the immutable will of God are law in the proper sense, regardless of whether any threat is attached to them in text or context, either read threats into renewal texts (the "conservative" position) or, on the grounds that Christians "are not under law" (Rom. 6:14), refuse to preach such texts as normative (the "liberal" position). The Formula of Concord resolved this problem by clearly distinguishing the will of God which is preached to the new man from the threats which are preached to the old man. On the one hand, the immutable will of God is to be cited "in speaking of good works," and all statements of coercion and threat are excluded from such preaching.²⁵ On the other hand, coercion and threat continue to be directed against the old man or flesh.²⁶ The basis for the latter is Paul's statement, "I give my body a black eye and make it my slave so that, after I have made proclamation to others, I myself would not be

²³ Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, vol. I, p. 456, and vol. III, p. 224. Leviticus 11:45 makes clear that the basis for this holiness was the Lord's act of redeeming Israel from Egypt, not some act of Israel's obedience or self-purification.

²⁴ Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, vol. I, pp. 78 and 532.

²⁵ FC SD VI, 15-17 (Tappert, p. 566; Triglotta, p. 967).

²⁶ FC SD VI, 7-8 and 18-19 (Tappert, pp. 565 and 567; Triglotta, pp. 965, 967, and 969).

disqualified” (1 Cor. 9:27).²⁷ The three confessional uses of the law are therefore the use of coercion and accusation 1) by civil authorities to restrain evil in society; 2) by ministers to reveal all evil and restrain it in the church; and 3) by an individual Christian to restrain evil among the members of his body (Rom. 7:23).

Pieper and the post-Reformation theologians agreed with the confessional definitions of the first two uses of the law,²⁸ but presented the third use as a “didactic” or “normative” discussion of the will of God, and thus the foundation for sanctification, rather than as an application of coercion.²⁹ But since Pieper defined the Gospel solely as “promises,” the “sanctification” which is preached after justification is formally defined as law, and thus ends up including the very coercions which the Formula insisted must be removed at this point. Neither the post-Reformation theologians nor Pieper evince any awareness that the third use is actually to be preached by the new man against the old man, and not by the church or its ministers against the believer. Broad statements such as “the Christian still needs the Law in all its uses”³⁰ fail to distinguish the specific offices which administer each use. The church teaches how all three uses work, but does not directly preach the third use to the old man any more than it directly enforces the first use in civil affairs.

The Consequences of the Truncated Gospel

The tension between Pieper's “law, Gospel, law” exegetical categories and his “law, justification, sanctification” doctrinal categories has subsequently been resolved by twentieth century theologian Hermann Sasse in the wrong direction. Sasse altered the confessional definition of the Gospel, “the forgiveness of sins and the beginning of eternal life in the hearts of believers,”³¹ by eliminating its second clause,³² thus converting sanctification texts into accusations of the law.

²⁷ This text is cited in FC SD VI, 9 (Tappert, p. 565; Triglotta, p. 965).

²⁸ FC SD VI, 1 (Tappert, p. 563; Triglotta, p. 963).

²⁹ Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, vol. III, p. 238; see also Heinrich Schmid, The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961), pp. 514-515, where this terminology is ascribed to David Hollaz. The latter distinguished the church's general work of rebuke from that which precedes absolution, thus in his system the didactic use, which others termed “the third use,” is counted as “the fourth use.”

³⁰ Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, vol. III, p. 238.

³¹ AC Ap XVI, 6 (Tappert, p. 223; Triglotta, p. 331).

³² In Sasse's most familiar work, Here We Stand: Nature and Character of the Lutheran Faith (Adelaide, Australia: Lutheran Publishing House, 1979), p. 119, he

Sasse's followers thus conclude that the second and third uses of the law both involve the preaching of accusation by ministers, the second being directed at unbelievers, the third at believers.

The primary justification for the latter practice is the oft quoted phrase simul justus et peccator, "simultaneously righteous and sinner," frequently rendered "saint and sinner at the same time," a slogan based on similar statements in Martin Luther's private writings.³³ Modern Lutheran teachers appear unaware of Luther's assertion that a Christian is "a sinner no more,"³⁴ and of the fact that simul justus et peccator is nowhere to be found in the Book of Concord, Heinrich Schmid's compendium of post-Reformation theology, Walther's theses, or even Pieper's dogmatics.

The possibility of righteous people simultaneously being sinners is precluded in so many words by several familiar Scripture passages (e.g. Ps. 1:5-6, Prov. 11:31 = 1 Pet. 4:18, and 1 Tim. 1:9). Nevertheless, a proof text for the opposite opinion has been established by the common mistranslation of 1 Timothy 1:15. There Paul is alleged to have called himself "chief" of sinners (other versions read "foremost," or even "worst"). The word so translated can indeed mean "first in rank" (e.g. of Philippi as a "chief" city of Macedonia, Acts 16:12), but just as frequently means "first in time" or "former" (e.g. Rev. 21:4, "the former things have passed away"). It should have been obvious that in no sense was Paul "chief" of a group that includes Cain, the Sodomites, the worshipers of the Golden Calf, Ahab and Jezebel, the Herods, Caiaphas, and Judas Iscariot. In 1 Timothy 1:13, Paul confessed that he was "formerly" (πρότερον) a blasphemer and persecutor of the church, "but I was shown mercy"; in 1 Timothy 1:15 he

proposed, "The gracious promise of the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake--this, and nothing but this, is the Gospel." On pp. 120-121, he contrasted this with Karl Barth's definition of the Gospel as "justification and sanctification on the same footing."

³³ For example, "At the same time he is both a sinner and righteous," from Luther's 1515 lectures on Romans, quoted in James M. Kittleson, Luther the Reformer (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), pp. 98-99. See also Martin Luther, Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians (1535), Theodore Graebner, trans. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1949), pp. 86-106, especially the discussion of Galatians 3:6.

³⁴ From a sermon delivered on April 21, 1530, quoted in Ewald M. Plass, ed., What Luther Says: An Anthology, vol. III (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), p. 1247. Incredibly, Plass titled this citation, "Saints and Sinners at the Same Time."

confirmed that he was a “former” (πρῶτος) sinner, “but I was shown mercy.”³⁵ This agrees with Ephesians 2:1-5 in describing Christians as formerly rather than currently “dead in sins” and “performing the will of the flesh.”

Much of the modern Lutheran confusion regarding how “If we say that we do not have sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8) and “No one who has been conceived by God engages in sin” (1 John 3:9) can both be true might have been avoided if the distinction between mortal and venial sins had been maintained.³⁶ Walther's nineteenth thesis on law and Gospel distinguished sins which “expel the Holy Ghost from the believer” from sins which “a Christian commits without forfeiting the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.” The latter would damn in the absence of faith, while the former cause the absence of faith. Although Walther does not overtly say so, the category of mortal sins is consistent with the biblical treatment of sins against the Decalogue, while the category of venial sins is consistent with the biblical treatment of sins against the other commands of Moses, as well as “the sin which resides within me” described by Paul (Rom. 7:20).³⁷

This distinction clarifies the assertion in Luther's explanation of the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer that “we daily sin much.”³⁸ The latter cannot mean “we daily violate the Decalogue much,” since Luther subsequently distinguished sins confessed in the Lord's Prayer from violations of the Decalogue confessed before a pastor.³⁹ Similarly, when the Formula of Concord declares that

³⁵ πρότερος and πρῶτος are respectively the comparative and superlative forms of a hypothetical adjective derived from the preposition πρό, “before.” πρότερον is an adverbial form of πρότερος.

³⁶ Walther, Proper Distinction, p. 325.

³⁷ Martin Chemnitz, Examination of the Council of Trent, part I, Fred Kramer, trans. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1971), p. 346, asserted in a discussion of Romans 6-8 that “the concupiscence which remains in the regenerate ... is not a mortal or reigning sin.”

³⁸ SC III, 16 (Triglotta, p. 549; Tappert, p. 347, reads “we sin daily,” curiously omitting the German viel and the Latin multifariam).

³⁹ SC V, 17-20 (Tappert, p. 350; Triglotta, p. 553). See also SC V, 25 (Tappert, p. 350; Triglotta, p. 555), where Luther conceded that, although this is “quite unlikely,” some Christians may “have knowledge of no sin at all” in making confession according to the Decalogue. Pieper agreed that the sins confessed in the Lord's Prayer are venial, but his presentation, involving a mere half page of text in Christian Dogmatics, vol. I, p. 568, 10 pages from the end of that volume, is easily overlooked.

Christians “are regarded as holy and righteous (justus) ... even though, on account of their corrupted nature, they are still sinners (peccatores) and remain sinners until they die,” it is neither making this status co-equal (simul) with righteousness,⁴⁰ nor is it employing “sinners” in the scriptural sense of Decalogue violators.⁴¹

Modern Lutherans have become additionally confused about the implications of simul justus et peccator due to the recent reaction of Roman Catholic scholars to this phrase.⁴² In rejecting this formula, traditional Roman theology is not denying that Christians are still sinners, but that any significant number of Christians have already become saints. This is confirmed by the concluding petition in the Ave Maria, possibly the most common Roman Catholic devotional exercise, “Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.” Many modern Lutherans nevertheless mislabel the assertion that Christians are no longer sinners as a “Roman Catholic” opinion. It is rather modern Lutheranism which has embraced a Roman Catholic opinion, since both systems hold that some type of spiritual problem remains unresolved in the baptized. Both agree that “in those who have been reborn nothing remains that would impede their entry into the Kingdom of God,”⁴³ as opposed to affirming clearly that, solely by the grace of God, they have already entered it.

⁴⁰ FC SD III, 22 (Tappert, p. 543; Triglotta, p. 923). The concluding dependent clause may well be contrary to fact (“even if”) rather than concessive (“even though”); see Charles Arand and James Voelz, “Large Catechism, III, 66,” [sic] in Concordia Journal, vol. 29, no. 3 (July 2003), p. 233, which defends the translation of the German phrase ob sei gleich as “even if” in LC II, 66 (where Tappert, p. 419, reads “even though,” and the Triglotta, p. 697, reads “although”).

⁴¹ FC SD III, 23 makes clear that imperfection remains in Christians, not as a result of actual sins, but “because sin still dwells in the flesh even in the case of the regenerate.”

⁴² Wide publicity has been given to the Response of the Catholic Church to the Joint Declaration of the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation on the Doctrine of Justification (Vatican City: Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, 1998), which pronounced simul justus et peccator “a cause of perplexity,” and concluded that, the alleged convergence of the Joint Declaration notwithstanding, “it remains difficult to see how ... this doctrine on simul justus et peccator is not touched by the anathemas of the Tridentine decree on original sin and justification.”

⁴³ Catechism of the Catholic Church (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), pp. 321-322.

The Promise of the Restored Gospel

The recovery of a doctrine of justification which actually justifies believers is the first prerequisite for any genuine reformation of the modern church. The second prerequisite is the understanding of sanctification or renewal texts as “admonitions of the Gospel” rather than “commands of the law.”⁴⁴ Walther's twenty-third thesis, consistently ignored by modern Lutherans, so labels those sections of Scripture known as paraenesis, the imperatives and cohortative subjunctives directed at believers such as dominate the concluding chapters of the Pauline epistles.

Walther, quoting Luther, cited Romans 12:1 as a prime example of this “second half” of the Gospel.⁴⁵ According to the modern Lutheran system, “I encourage you, brothers, through the compassions of God, to present your bodies as a sacrifice which is living, holy, and well-pleasing to God,” would be a law text, since it discusses human work rather than divine forgiveness. Under the assumption that “the law always accuses,” the passage's real purpose would then be to accuse us of not having perfectly performed such sacrifices, that we might seek pardon based on Christ's sacrifice. The only well-known alternate view of such a passage is that embraced by the majority of nominal Christians, who attach some coarse or subtle coercion to this verse. The description of this text as a “duty” or an “injunction”⁴⁶ inevitably calls to mind the image of an army or a courtroom, in which dire consequences arise for disobedience.

This dilemma is resolved by viewing paraenesis as neither coercive injunction nor accusation, but as invitation. Such texts contain several important markers: they follow rather than precede the preaching of justification; they are addressed solely to the believing community; they contain no stated penalty for declining the invitation; the behavior which they affirm is presented very broadly, meaning that many different specific acts would constitute an acceptance of the invitation.

Walther illustrated the difference between an invitation and an injunction when he noted that a hungry person does not hear the imperative, “Come, sit down at my table and eat,” as a coercive command which he might be tempted to

⁴⁴ Walther, Proper Distinction, p. 381.

⁴⁵ Walther, Proper Distinction, p. 388.

⁴⁶ John Murray, The Epistle to the Romans, vol. VI in The New International Commentary on the New Testament, F. F. Bruce, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), p. 109, entitled this chapter of Romans, “Manifold Practical Duties,” and on p. 111 spoke of 12:1 as an “injunction.”

disobey.⁴⁷ This illustration clarifies Walther's immediately preceding remark, "The Law tells us what we are to do. No such instruction is contained in the Gospel. On the contrary, the Gospel reveals to us only what God is doing." Paraenesis is not rightly viewed as commanding "what we are to do,"⁴⁸ but as inviting us to participate in what God is doing, both in his work of salvation and his creation. By the verb "present" in Romans 12:1, Paul is not commanding us to turn our bodies into sacrifices by any effort of our own, but is inviting us to regard our bodies as already constituting living, holy, and well-pleasing sacrifices because God has declared them to be such. This verse turns out to be an affirmation that human physicality is acceptable to God just as it is, in the face of the innumerable demands of human religions and philosophies for the altering of bodily conditions and the abandonment of bodily functions.

Had Hermann Sasse and his followers defined the Gospel with the Greek word ἄφεσις rather than the German "Vergebung" and the English "forgiveness," they might well have arrived at the correct understanding of law and Gospel. Unlike its translations, ἄφεσις means both "forgiveness" (such as that conferred by baptism, Mark 1:4) and "liberty" (during the jubilee year, Lev. 25:10; from captivity, Luke 4:18, quoting Is. 61:1 and 58:6). Its parent verb ἀφίημι occurs when Jesus "remitted" or "forgave" the sins of a paralytic (which, given this text's lack of any confession or amendment of sinful life, must be venial in nature, Matt. 9:2), and when John the Baptist "permitted" or "allowed" Jesus to fulfill all righteousness in his baptism (Matt. 3:15). In the latter sense, ἄφεσις is the purpose of biblical paraenesis; Paul's encouragement to present our bodies as sacrifices constitutes permission to view our physical nature as holy. Sasse's definition of the Gospel thus requires only a slight revision: "The gracious promise of ἄφεσις for Christ's sake--this, and nothing but this, is the Gospel." As forgiveness of sins, the Gospel takes away what is harmful to man; as permission of righteousness, it confers what is beneficial to man.

A thorough discussion of the implications of restoring the law and Gospel system of Walther and the Formula of Concord is not possible here, but it is clearly revolutionary. Walther's fourth thesis asserted that, for those who confuse law and Gospel, "Scripture is and remains a sealed book."⁴⁹ To unseal the

⁴⁷ Walther, Proper Distinction, p. 9.

⁴⁸ The original German text of Walther's theses, Die rechte Unterscheidung von Gesetz und Evangelium (St. Louis: Concordia, 1901), p. 8, at this point reads "was wir thun sollen," and the modern translation of Herbert J. A. Bouman, Law and Gospel (St. Louis: Concordia, 1981), p. 15, reads "what we must do."

⁴⁹ Walther, Proper Distinction, p. 60.

Scripture thus changes the way one preaches on Sunday, and how one lives the rest of the week; it leads to a re-appraisal of the meaning of all the major biblical commands, and provides previously unexplored bases for interpreting everything from the days of creation to the trumpets of Revelation. In short, it proposes to set us free from centuries of unresolved theological conflicts, and lead us to the promised land of truly evangelical faith and life which our forefathers envisioned.

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“Thou shalt be delivered from sins, and be freed from the acrimony and fury of theologians.”

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