

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL QUARTERLY



Volume 88:4

October 2024

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Gospel Reductionism: Then and Now

David P. Scaer

Gospel reductionism is a result of a method of eighteenth-century rationalism that interpreted the miraculous events in the biblical documents as ordinary ones, allowing a core message to stay in place that God justifies sinners by the preaching of forgiveness. Events reported as miraculous in the Bible were seen as no more than embellishments of what were otherwise ordinary events. Portraits of Jesus in the Gospels were thought to have been constructed by his followers to enhance early church belief that he was divine. For gospel reductionism, only what belongs to salvation is necessary for belief and so a distinction is made between the Scriptures as historical documents and the gospel as the proclamation of salvation.¹ The phrase “gospel reductionism” is of recent origin, but the principle came into play in eighteenth-century rationalism. With Jesus unburdened of his divinity, nineteenth-century scholars directed their efforts to discovering who Jesus really might have been. These endeavors were called the quest for the historical Jesus.² At the beginning of the twentieth century, Albert Schweitzer collected these diverse and often contradictory results of who Jesus was into *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* and concluded that no more can be known of him than that he was mistaken in expecting that in his death throes “the son of man” would come streaming out of heaven to rescue him.³ With the supernatural elements of the Bible placed off limits to scholarly research and historical research providing uncertain and often contradictory results, the ingredients for the destruction of Christianity were in place. Adolf von Harnack provided a stopgap Christianity that reduced the message of Jesus to the fatherhood of God, our love for him and the neighbor, belief in divine providence, and the infinite value of the soul.⁴

¹ See especially Richard J. Serina Jr., “Gospel Reductionism,” *Lutheran Witness*, March 2023: 25. In comparison to the doctrine of justification, all other doctrines are considered secondary. See also Ken Schurb, “Gospel and Scripture,” in *Rediscovering the Issues Surrounding the 1974 Concordia Seminary Walkout*, ed. Ken Schurb (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2023), 15–37.

² For a concise overview of the quest for the historical Jesus, see Martin Noland, “The Nature of Scripture,” in Schurb, *Rediscovering the Issues*, 42–45.

³ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, trans. W. Montgomery (New York: Macmillan, 1968).

⁴ Adolf von Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, trans. Thomas Bailey Saunders (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), 300; see also the foreword and introduction by Rudolf Bultmann, xiv.

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In America, belief in miracles persisted among the rank and file in the mainline denominations. This faith cracked publicly when James Pike was removed by his fellow Episcopal bishops for saying the same things for which the Concordia Seminary faculty majority would later be censured by J. A. O. Preus' fact-finding committee. No faculty member explicitly denied the virgin birth, but some found it was not a cause for removal from the ministry. After Pike's death, his colleagues recanted by concluding there was no such thing as heresy. If there is no heresy, there is no truth. Denial of the miraculous anticipated the widely influential proposal of Rudolf Bultmann that the miracles are Greek myths to present Jesus as divine that must be demythologized to make the Gospels compatible to the modern man, a position that has largely fallen out of favor with scholars. This was a revival of the old rationalism.

LCMS founding fathers had been taught by German theologians who had advanced rationalist understandings of the Scriptures, but in coming to America they were no longer participants in the theological discussion as it flourished and expanded from the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries. This was the theological world that led up to the Concordia Seminary faculty walkout February 19, 1974. It would be only a matter of time before views spawned mostly by German-speaking theologians would enter the LCMS bloodstream. Radical proposals such as the denials of the virgin birth and the resurrection were bound to catch the eye of the LCMS rank and file, as they did, and congregations, conferences, and districts would have to come to terms with the new theology.

In the modernist-fundamentalist debate, other churches had come face to face with what, in the LCMS, would later be called gospel reductionism: a view that challenged the historical authenticity of what the Bible reported as miraculous. Taking the lead in opposition to this method of biblical interpretation in America at the time of the gospel reductionism in the LCMS were churches that came under the wider umbrella of Evangelical. They established seminaries in which denials of the miraculous in the Bible were successfully addressed. Their professors were widely published scholars with membership in academic associations. Opponents of gospel reductionism in the LCMS made use of Evangelical resources in addressing the denial of supernatural in the Bible.

Gospel reductionism as a theological concept was unique to Lutheran theology and was an extension of the law-gospel paradigm, that in the law's second use God condemns the sinner and in the gospel he offers grace. While there is wide agreement among Lutherans that the law in its first use functions to suppress injustice in civil society and to preserve order, in its second use the law works to produce a conviction of sins in preparation for the hearing of the gospel. In gospel reductionism the law has no function for believers in their lives as believers, a view condemned in

article 6 of the Formula of Concord.⁵ Denial of the third use of the law has consequences for those in churches like the LCMS that accept the entire Book of Concord. It is less crucial for clergy and congregations who do not accept the Formula. However, quite apart from the Formula, the law's continuing to function for faith is set forth in the Augsburg Confession, the Apology, the Smalcald Articles, and especially each of Luther's explanations of the Ten Commandments in the Small and Large Catechisms. Denying that the law functions in the life of believers was a prominent issue in the St. Louis seminary faculty walkout.⁶

The place of the law in the Christian life is not incidental in faith, but belongs to the essence of the faith, since Christ is working his will in his followers. The diminution of the law results from placing law and gospel against one another as opposing words of God so that one is seen as antagonistic to the other. By doing this the gospel emerges as the superior word of God and eventually the only word. Gospel reductionism as the elimination of the law from the life of faith is advanced by Lutheran theologians largely by citing Reformation-era writings. On one hand, gospel reductionism can be understood as the removal of the supernatural from the biblical narratives. Within a Lutheran context it refers to subordination of the law to the gospel as the superior and eventually only word of God.⁷

Neoorthodoxy

Filling the gap historical agnosticism left by the quests for the historical Jesus after World War II was neoorthodoxy, which deflected liberal concerns about biblical history by proposing that all that was needed was the preaching of forgiveness or the promises of God. Revelation, in the neoorthodox view, happens not in past events but in preaching, and preachers today are no less inspired than the biblical writers who had the advantage of being closer to the events they recorded. Theology deals with proclamation, so the focus is shifted from past events to oral communication, under which Edward Schroeder also claimed that Luther subsumed the sacraments. The Bible's value rests in "its witness to the primary element of

⁵ Scott R. Murray, "The Third Use of the Law," in Schurb, *Rediscovering the Issues*, 83–97.

⁶ Quite apart from developments in the LCMS at that time, the view reappeared in Gerhard Forde's "theology of the cross" and then was developed by James Nestingen and Steven Paulson. In their view, God is neither law nor is bound by it. Just as Christians do not live by the law (third use of the law), neither does God. This extreme antinomianism was the logical conclusion to the denial of the law's third use.

⁷ Careful attention might have been given to the title of the collection of essays *The Necessary Distinction: A Continuing Conversation on Law & Gospel*, ed. Albert B. Collver, James Arne Nestingen, and John T. Pless (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017). Law and gospel do function differently but constitute one word of God and not two.

Christianity, the gracious gift.”⁸ Biblical authority is subordinated to justification, which is effected by oral communication. In neoorthodoxy the Bible becomes the word of God in its proclamation when the hearer encounters it in the “I-thou” moment. In that moment of inspiration the hearer recognizes the proclamation as the word of God. Proclamation replaces the Bible’s history and its supernatural origins as set forth in the traditional doctrine of inspiration as the focus of faith and foundation for theology.⁹

Recognized as the leading proponent of neoorthodoxy, Karl Barth after World War I began producing the multivolume *Church Dogmatics*, in which he engaged the biblical texts on their own terms positively. Citing the older Reformation-era and post-Reformation-era Lutheran and Reformed orthodoxies, his program came to be called neoorthodoxy. Unlike the then-failing liberalism, he actually did theology and avoided the rationalist historical criticism that had reinterpreted supernatural events as ordinary ones. The leading British neoorthodox theologian, John Baillie, argued that the same Scriptures can be both inspired and not.¹⁰ To identify what in the Bible was divinely revealed, Baillie invoked Luther’s principle of *Was Christum treibet* (“what concerns Christ”). This principle placed the gospel outside of the Scriptures and judged the latter according to the former. This was incorporated into what would be called gospel reductionism, that what mattered was preaching the gospel.¹¹ Later the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations would say that if we apply gospel reductionism in this sense, “we misuse the gospel and inevitably compromise the whole counsel of God taught in the Scripture[s].”¹² If God’s existence is confined to oral communication, it has to be asked whether he has any existence apart from the act of preaching. An outlier among the neoorthodox theologians was Emil Brunner, who held God existed apart from the preached word.

Though less influential now, Bultmann was then on all sides of the equation. Preaching of the law and the gospel was understood existentially, in that hearers could come to an authentic awareness of themselves. As he was offering an

⁸ Edward Schroeder, “Is There a Lutheran Hermeneutics?,” in *The Lively Function of the Gospel*, ed. Robert Bertram (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 84.

⁹ Schurb, “Gospel and Scripture,” 18.

¹⁰ John Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1956), 114–120; and Matthew Harrison, “Historical Introduction,” in Schurb, *Rediscovering the Issues*, 6. I first encountered neoorthodoxy in a class by Henry Reimann (1955–1956) and soon thereafter in confrontation with Martin Scharlemann (1956–1957). See my *Surviving the Storms: Memoirs of David P. Scaer* (Fort Wayne: Luther Academy, 2018), 22, 33, 34–38.

¹¹ Baillie, *The Idea of Revelation*, 119. “We must remind ourselves again that revelation only takes place within the relationship between the Holy Spirit of God and the individual human soul. Nothing is the vehicle or revelation for me unless I hear God speaking to me through it.”

¹² Serina, “Gospel Reductionism,” 28. See also Murray, “The Third Use of the Law,” 109–112.

existential definition of justification, he republished Adolf von Harnack's *What is Christianity?*, which revived the arguments of rationalism, questioning whether we could with any certainty know anything at all about the historical Jesus. This was the last gasp of a dying liberalism. Going to the other end of the spectrum, Bultmann, like Barth, took the biblical texts at face value and produced his useful *Theology of the New Testament* and *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, avoiding the historically critical question of whether anything the biblical documents reported really happened. In response to neoorthodoxy, Robert Preus set forth "the realist principle in that the theological and historical words of the Bible correspond to objective truth."¹³ This concept rarely, if ever, garners any attention but it does characterize the traditional LCMS approach to the Scriptures: that the things, ordinary or supernatural, really happened. It should be asked if the realist principle should be addressed to the now-popular literary criticism that examines the biblical texts without asking whether they correspond to anything that really happened.

The LCMS Encounters Neoorthodoxy

It was the world of neoorthodoxy into which the LCMS stepped in its meetings with the German Lutheran clergy and professors at Bad Boll, Germany, from 1948 to 1954, and it was a world for which most were largely unprepared. Here gospel reductionism based on the law-gospel paradigm gained a toehold in the LCMS. After his death in 1931, no theologian came to take the place of Francis Pieper, whose *Christian Dogmatics* spoke to nineteenth-century theology and said nothing of the quest for the historical Jesus, which was once the rage in Germany and which was replaced by neoorthodoxy after World War I. Pieper's three-volume *Dogmatics* was completely available in English only in 1953, when the issues it addressed were no longer relevant.¹⁴ By then, neoorthodoxy had found a home at the LCMS-related Valparaiso University and the St. Louis seminary. John Theodore Mueller's one-volume abridgment of Pieper's *Christian Dogmatics* was more of a textbook than a dogmatics and still is more likely to be referenced by outsiders than the original *Dogmatics*.¹⁵ Essays in *The Abiding Word* commemorating the LCMS centennial in 1946 might be best described as a self-content orthodoxy that did not engage with current theologies.¹⁶ At the grassroots level, some LCMS congregations began to

¹³ David P. Scaer, "Justification in the Theology of Robert D. Preus," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 86, no. 1 (January 2022): 46–47.

¹⁴ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 3 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950–1953).

¹⁵ John Theodore Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics: A Handbook of Doctrinal Theology for Pastors, Teachers, and Laymen* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1934).

¹⁶ Theodore Ferdinand Karl Laetsch, ed., *The Abiding Word: An Anthology of Doctrinal Essays*, 3 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1946–1960).

resemble their Protestant neighbors. Crucifixes were found to be too Catholic and were replaced by brass crosses without the corpus. American flags were placed on the sides of the chancel. Methodist hymns were sung and *Lutheran Hour* rallies borrowed the techniques of Billy Sunday and set the table for the popular Baptist preacher Billy Graham, who gained admirers among both LCMS clergy and people. The Sunday school and vacation Bible school materials produced by thriving Evangelical publishers were finding their way into LCMS congregations. Those publishers' homiletical and theological books would soon be lining the shelves of LCMS pastors. The LCMS was shedding the shackles of its German culture and thereby had become an American church.

With World War II fast becoming history, the door was open for the LCMS to have theological discussions with Lutherans in Europe, among whom the theological university professors were the most prominent. The discussions would take place in the resort town of Bad Boll near Stuttgart. The Bad Boll meetings rose out of concerns of army chaplain Karl A. Arndt, stationed with American military forces in Bavaria, for the welfare of a war-devastated German population. From the beginning, at every level this was not a meeting of even near equals. German and American Lutheran congregations were constituted differently. In Germany, church membership was coterminous with boundaries that were in place before the provinces (territories) were assimilated into a nation. Some Protestant lands were Lutheran, others Reformed, and still others "Union," in whose churches Lutherans and the Reformed under government mandate used a common liturgy. All these churches can best be described as territorial in embracing most of the population within their boundaries as members, and it was typical for one pastor to be responsible for thousands of parishioners, perhaps up to one hundred thousand. University theological faculties, like those of other disciplines, were self-perpetuating under the minister of culture. Contrast this with the LCMS in America, whose congregations for membership require instruction before Baptism or Confirmation, choose their own pastors, and nominate seminary presidents and (at one time) college and seminary professors. German participants at Bad Boll took exception to how Lutheran churches in America were run. More important was that for the Lutherans in Germany, the sixteenth-century confessions had a cultural role derived from their history and were not in every instance an expression of what they believed, especially about the Bible.

Before the conferences began, the American military government suspected that the LCMS was seeking to convert the Germans to their particular way of doing theology, a well founded suspicion that the German participants shared and would

use to their advantage in their discussions with the LCMS.¹⁷ With the LCMS at the end of the war beginning to experience a period of phenomenal growth, it had reason to believe that this success in growth at home could be translated into theological success in winning over the German conferees to its theology. Few, if any, LCMS participants realized that each group was living in different worlds. In response to the LCMS proposal that verbal inspiration (i.e., that the Bible is the word of God) be the basis for discussion, the Germans countered that if the LCMS proposal were adopted, the conference would be dead on arrival. The LCMS acquiesced to the German counterproposal that the articles of the Augsburg Confession would provide the outline, with each side lecturing and responding article by article. So the die was cast. With this arrangement, which was as much historical as theological, justification, understood as the law and the gospel, could be put in place as the basis of doing theology and could create the impression of agreement that really was not so. In spite of the courtesies extended by each side to the other, both were suspicious that real agreement would not be achieved.

Justification might be the most prominent interpretative principle of the Augsburg Confession, but it is not the only one, as Horace Hummel pointed out.¹⁸ Even Werner Elert, who is rightly credited with making the law-gospel paradigm the controlling principle in theology, and who went on to become a favorite in the LCMS, saw article 1 of the Augsburg Confession as a regrettable remnant of medieval theology that did not fit the law-gospel paradigm.¹⁹ Hidden in this paradigm were the seeds from which gospel reductionism would spring.

¹⁷ Karl J. R. Arndt, "Missouri and World Lutheranism at Bad Boll in 1949," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (Summer 1981): 50.

¹⁸ Horace D. Hummel, "Are Law and Gospel a Valid Hermeneutical Principle?," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 46, nos. 2–3 (April–July 1982): 189–190. "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."

¹⁹ David Yeago notes that Elert came up against a blank wall with the first article of the Augsburg Confession, which demanded faith in the triune God quite apart from the law-and-gospel paradigm. Yeago, "Gnosticism, Antinomianism, and Reformation Theology: Reflections on the Costs of a Construal," *Pro Ecclesia* 2, no. 1 (Winter 1993): 43. Elert expressed frustration that "the decree of the Nicene Synod concerning the unity of the divine essence and concerning the three Persons is true and must be believed without doubting." His verdict was that "here the ship of the Reformation, which has just recently departed from land, seems to be sailing back into the harbor of the medieval church, which produced laws of faith and demanded obedience to them. Faith itself, the most precious treasure, seems to be betrayed!" Cf. Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism: The Theology and Philosophy of Life of Lutheranism Especially in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, trans. Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), 202. See also Schurb, "Gospel and Scripture," 18–19.

From the reports issuing from Bad Boll, explicit dissent was kept at a minimum. Oberkirchenrat (High Consistory Member) Wolfgang Schmidt, who appeared as the spokesman for the German delegation, noted that “the American brothers put much more emphasis on the stable, remaining elements in the message of the church, which do not have to be put into new forms for every new generation or even for every new theologian.”²⁰ In other words, for the LCMS the Bible was *norma normans* (“the source and standard for doing theology”), and so theology remained quite the same apart from the contemporary situation. For the Germans, theology is done *wissenschaftlich*, in that nontheological elements like philosophy and scientific and historical perspectives are brought into discussion, a method with which the LCMS was not familiar. Here something must be said about what the German word *wissenschaftlich*. It can be translated as either “scholarly” or “scientific,” with the latter sense of the word giving the impression of objectivity. A claim to be *wissenschaftlich*, scientifically objective, does not make it so. Even the still oft cited and influential Luther scholar Hermann Sasse preferred the explanation offered by evolution for the origins of the world to that of Genesis 1–11.²¹ He himself fit the paradigm of a German theologian by incorporating disciplines external to the Scriptures in doing theology. Sasse preferred theories of evolution over Genesis for the origin of the world and constructed a Lutheran theology out of Luther’s writings and the Confessions. Such was the case even more so with Werner Elert, who was a lead theologian at Bad Boll.²² With this approach most LCMS representatives were as unfamiliar as they were unprepared. Introduction of neoorthodoxy into the discussion can be found in a comment by Wolfgang Schmidt that the Germans engage in what he called “a theology of meeting.”²³ An otherwise strange-sounding phrase in English, it would become known as the now more familiar “encounter” theology of neoorthodoxy. “Meeting” translates the German word *Begegnung*, which would soon make its way into the theological vocabulary as “encounter,” as in neoorthodoxy’s “I-thou” theology as proposed by Barth, Emil Brunner, Bultmann, and Paul Tillich. Robert Preus described encounter theology as crisis theology in that preaching was the critical moment of the “I-thou” encounter in which the Scriptures become the word of God for the hearer.

²⁰ Arndt, “Missouri and World Lutheranism at Bad Boll,” 80–81.

²¹ Benjamin T. G. Mayes, “Creation Accommodated to Evolution: Hermann Sasse on Genesis 1–3,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 87, no. 2 (April 2023): 123–150.

²² Elert is reported to have spent 90% of some of his university semesters on non-theological pursuits, such as philosophy, psychology, history, and military science.” Robert C. Schultz, “Werner Elert, Professor of Theology,” in Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, xiv.

²³ Arndt, “Missouri and World Lutheranism at Bad Boll,” 80–81.

Neoorthodoxy on the Oral and Written Word

Those who accept the neoorthodox definition speak of the superiority of the oral or spoken word to the written word in creating faith, and from this go on to attribute greater authority to the oral word. Basic to this argument is that the effect of preaching in creating faith demonstrates its authority. The response to this is that in regard to content, there is no essential difference between the oral and written word. It is agreed the oral proclamation is more likely to affect the hearer in creating faith and has much wider audiences in societies that are largely illiterate, and even with congregations who are literate. That said, faith can be engendered by the written word, which has the advantage over the oral proclamation in that the Scriptures can be passed down more securely intact from generation to generation. Indeed, the original written Scriptures were spoken by prophets and apostles to scribes, and so in this sense, the oral word has priority in regard to originality; however, what was once spoken is available in the written word. The authority of the oral word as we have it in written form has its authority from its inspiration and not from its effect. If effect determines authority, the Scriptures would have no authority over the vast majority of hearers who have not believed them.

The Post-War LCMS in Contact with German Theology

Wolfgang Schmidt reported that LCMS delegates were not familiar with the German approach; however, there is good reason to think that some came to Bad Boll with the hope of expanding their theological horizons beyond what they knew from Pieper. The new law-gospel paradigm for doing theology would not be restrained by what Preus called “the realist principle in that the theological and historical words of the Bible [had to] correspond to objective truth.”²⁴ With an accommodation to neoorthodoxy at Bad Boll, unwitting for some and deliberate for others, an opening was made for the denial of the supernatural, which was at the heart of the St. Louis seminary walkout.

In assessing Bad Boll, LCMS Chaplain Arndt, who was the point man in making the arrangements, painted a rosy picture: “Nevertheless, despite the divergent backgrounds of the conferees, a remarkable unanimity on fundamental questions was discovered.”²⁵ *The Christian Century* spread abroad what for some was the good news that the LCMS and the Germans were in close agreement in how they did theology.²⁶ In spite of having said the LCMS representatives did not understand how

²⁴ Scaer, “Justification in the Theology of Robert D. Preus,” 46–47.

²⁵ Arndt, “Missouri and World Lutheranism at Bad Boll,” 50, 62.

²⁶ Karl J. Arndt, “Bad Boll Conferences: Missouri Synod Lutherans and German Theologians Exchange Views,” *The Christian Century* 65, no. 38 (September 22, 1948): 980. Telling in Arndt’s

the Germans did theology, Schmidt went on to say that the LCMS and the Germans were agreed on the law-gospel hermeneutic and that the Bible did not provide the basis for doctrinal authority. “There was complete agreement in the basic conception of the Gospel: that one must justify the message of the church by the doctrine of justification and not by a hierarchical or formal authority, such as starting from the Scriptural canon. The Good News, however, consists of nothing but the love of God, which gives everything freely and descends to man. Out of this realization follows inevitably the double nature of the Word of God in Law and Gospel.”²⁷

Here we are left hanging in the balance of whether the LCMS representative had failed to make an effective case for the historic LCMS position on verbal inspiration or whether Schmidt failed to grasp it. Or did he declare peace when there was none? St. Louis Seminary Professor Paul M. Bretscher sounded the alarm. He noted that the Germans are so committed to the human side of the Scriptures at the expense of coming to terms with its divine side as the word of God, they had reasons to recognize its imperfections. For them the gospel takes precedence over the Scriptures as authoritative, a principle articulated by rationalism. “Whatever in Scripture does not deal directly with the way of salvation, has little or no relevance for the Christian faith.”²⁸ This was as good as any a definition for what would later be called gospel reductionism.

article is this sentence: “An evaluation of the conferences in *Evangelische Welt*, published in Bethel-Bielefeld, states that no essential differences were noted.”

²⁷ According to Wolfgang A. Schmidt, “Theological Discussion with the Missouri Synod in Bad Boll,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (February 1949): 81:

Along with these technical difficulties went the inner difference of theological method. It is true that Professor Elert found understanding for his excellent dissertations in which he tried to find reasons for the German tendency to “brood” about theology. Also the references to a theology of “meeting,” given especially by Schlink and Merz, were eagerly received. But on the whole the difference remained that the American brothers put much more emphasis on the stable, remaining elements in the message of the church, which do not have to be put into new forms for every new generation or even for every new theologian. They do not put into their theological language the degree of “actuality” which we regarded as necessary. On the other hand, it seemed to many of the Germans that it was worth noting that the Americans, although they had less of a “theology of meeting,” had much more of a “practice of meeting.” We thought that this was an important thing to note about our ecclesiastical and theological work at the conference.

²⁸ Paul M. Bretscher, “Review of ‘Bad Boll’ Conferences,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 25, no. 11 (November 1954): 834–848, 843. He also noted the following on page 843:

Nevertheless, one must record that most European Lutherans so stress the “human” side of Scripture that its “divine” character is practically set aside. From their point of view, Scripture suffers from the imperfections of every historical document. Whatever in Scripture does not deal directly with the way of salvation, has little or no relevance for the Christian faith. Since Scripture is a thoroughly human document, it compels us to assume that there are in it conflicting reports, lapses of memory, contradictions, and interpretations of the origin and nature of the cosmos which are false and must be discredited. Much of what appears to be a record

At the July 1960 Luther Congress in Munster, Germany, Norman Nagel alerted me that the German theologians had never recovered from rationalism. Bad Boll had proven that, and it was noticeably so in the positions of Elert and Sasse. Elert did not follow the classic rationalistic line in interpreting supernatural events in the Bible as ordinary ones, but he allowed secular disciplines to shape classical Lutheran theology. By conceding to the proposal of the German delegation that the Augsburg Confession be made the basis of theological discussion and not insisting on their own proposal that the Bible be recognized as the basis for doing theology, the LCMS conceded the game before it began. Here was unrecognized the influence of Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, who made the Christian consciousness as it expressed itself in the Christian community the basis for doing theology. He retained the rationalist hermeneutic that had little use for the Old Testament. What might be surprising for some is that Schleiermacher replaced the New Testament with Reformation-era documents as authoritative for doing theology.²⁹ Thus with gospel reductionism one is more likely to hear arguments advanced on the basis of Luther's 1518 Heidelberg Disputation rather than on the basis of the Sermon on the Mount.³⁰ What was authoritative was the religious consciousness of the community, which for the Germans was best expressed by Luther's earlier writings and less so by his later ones, much less a confession like the Formula of Concord, especially with its definition of the law's third use.³¹

It seems that the majority of the LCMS participants at Bad Boll were unaware that a different way of doing theology was proposed by the German delegation. Matters are clarified in Robert C. Schultz's doctoral dissertation *Gesetz und Evangelium*, a topic proposed by and begun under Elert, the lead theologian for the German delegation, and after his death defended under Paul Althaus Jr. at the University of

of historical fact is myth, legend, the imagination of a fertile mind, allegory, the opinion of an author who was himself subject to all the crosscurrents of the social forces of his day. Therefore Genesis 1 to 3, or even Genesis 1 to 11, and books like Jonah and Job, though they teach important spiritual truths, are unhistorical. They must be divested of their mythological and allegorical dress and their messages stated in terms intelligible to the mind and language of our generation.

²⁹ Ludger Schwienhorst-Schönberger, "Marcion on the Elbe: A Defense of the Old Testament as Christian Scripture," *First Things* 288 (December 2018): 23. See also Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, trans. Terrence N. Tice, Catherine Kelsey, and Edwina Lawler, ed. Catherine Kelsey and Terrence N. Tice, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 1:166.

³⁰ The same can be said for Gerhard Forde's "theology of the cross." For example, Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 108–109: "The temptation is always to fall back on the law, either in its original sense or perhaps in some new sense like 'third use.' But the theologian of the cross knows that there is no way back."

³¹ Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 9.

Erlangen and then published in 1958.³² It was probably completed several years before and time for the research would correspond with the last of the Bad Boll conferences in 1954. So it is not unlikely that plans or contacts for Schultz to study at the University of Erlangen under Elert and Althaus were made at Bad Boll. In his introduction, Schultz expresses his appreciation for the two men. What is telling is that he proceeds to propose that the doctrine of justification, i.e., the law and gospel, rather than the Scriptures should be the foundation for all of theology.³³ Schultz acknowledges that he has taken over the law-gospel principle that LCMS founding president Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther set forth as a principle for parishioners troubled about their salvation and has put it in the position of how all theology is to be done. There is no subterfuge here, since Schultz is up front in saying that Walther had not done theology in this way, not even in how he preached.³⁴ In contrast to Walther, Schultz is as bold as to say that he sees applying law and gospel to exegetical and systematic theology as the most important task in America, and he sets himself as the pioneer in offering a law-gospel theology on this side of the ocean. Whatever his intentions might have been, he drilled a hole in the dike through which the floodwaters of gospel reductionism would pour on February 19, 1974. Until Bad Boll, the law-gospel method of doing theology was largely unknown, if known at all, among Lutherans in America and not just in the LCMS.

Lead-Up to 1974

Here pieces of the puzzle come together of how the law and the gospel as a theological principle took hold in the LCMS at Bad Boll and then pinnacled in the 1974 faculty majority walkout at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. The elder Paul M. Bretscher, a St. Louis professor, recognized that if the German theologians could not go beyond recognizing the Scriptures as human documents, without their divine origin the Scriptures could be filled with errors, a view from which even the confessionally influential Hermann Sasse could not detach himself.³⁵ Standing in the way of a general optimism that agreement could be reached were negotiations for establishing the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), in which Lutheran, Reformed, and Union churches would be embraced. This might have been enough to frighten the LCMS from pursuing closer relations with the Germans.

³² Robert C. Schultz, *Gesetz und Evangelium* (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1958).

³³ Schultz, *Gesetz und Evangelium*, 9.

³⁴ Schultz, *Gesetz und Evangelium*, 11–16, 148–168. Much of this he summarized in his “The Distinction Between the Law and the Gospel,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 32, no. 10 (October 1961): 591–597.

³⁵ See Eugene F. Klug, “Holy Scripture: The Inerrancy Question and Hermann Sasse,” *Concordia Journal* (July 1985): 124–127.

Ken Schurb, in his editor's note added to Scott R. Murray's essay "The Third Use of the Law," writes that Wilhelm Oesch as "early as the 1920s observed that Werner Elert opposed not only the Formula of Concord's position on the third use but also its entire teaching on God's Law."³⁶ The denial of the third use of the law was only the tip of an iceberg in which the law had no function in the Christian life in pursuing good works. Thus, the elimination of the third use of the law, which is so essential to Elert's law-gospel paradigm, was already in place before Bad Boll began and would resurface in the faculty majority walkout. Elert's elimination of the law anticipated gospel reductionism, in which the gospel is regarded as the only revelation of God. This view was expressed later by Steven Paulson's view that God is not law.³⁷

Here we have to pick and choose in the LCMS Bad Boll delegation who would promote the new theology. Lawrence "Lorry" Meyer was the right-hand man to LCMS President John Behnken and was the go-to man in handling arrangements for the conference, including expenses for which the Germans, recovering from the ravages of war, were lavish in their gratitude. German participants were on a first-name basis with Lorry. Behnken was kept informed of developments and expressed his pleasure with how well the meetings were going.³⁸ He was admired by the Germans for his pastoral decor and kindness. Along with the elder Bretscher, St. Louis Professors Frederick Mayer and Theodore Graebner were also there. Mayer handled the arrangement for the conference and took care of expenses. Graebner had been up front in his dislike of Pieper's theology of proof texting, that method of biblical interpretation that references certain Bible passages to the exclusion of others. Richard R. Caemmerer, who joined the St. Louis faculty in 1940, was proposed as a delegate.³⁹ He would give the oration at the majority faculty walkout.⁴⁰

³⁶ Murray, "The Third Use of the Law," 119, n. 33.

³⁷ Steven D. Paulson, "Freedom from the Law and the Experimental 'Third Use,'" *Lutheran Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (Autumn 2023): 268–289.

³⁸ "Fortunately, or unfortunately, he [Behnken] was almost utterly under the control of Lorry Meyer, the first politician in synodical history who built a power-structure and completely changed the Missouri Synod. During the tenure of two weak presidents [Behnken and Oliver Harms], Lorry was the power in Synod." Berthold von Schenk, *Lively Stone: The Autobiography of Berthold von Schenk*, ed. C. George Fry and Joel R. Kurz (Delhi, NY: American Lutheran Publicity Bureau, 2008), 39. Von Schenk had been chosen to head the LCMS relief efforts to German Lutherans, but before his assuming the position, synod officials rescinded his appointment. He was able to continue relief efforts through another church organization under the auspices of the United States government and was highly regarded. Whatever differences he had with Behnken and Meyer, he expedited visa and travel arrangements for them (109–110).

³⁹ Murray, "The Third Use of the Law," 109.

⁴⁰ Noland, "The Nature of Scripture," 47. Before the last of the Bad Boll meetings, Caemmerer had written "A Concordance Study of the Concept the 'Word of God,'" *Concordia Theological Monthly* 22, no. 3 (March 1951): 170–185. According to Martin Noland, this article argued that the "Word of God is not equal to Scripture, though it acknowledged both the 'inspiration' of Scripture

Also present at Bad Boll was Alfred Fuerbringer (1903–1997), President of Concordia Teachers College in Nebraska and son of former St. Louis Seminary President Ludwig Fuerbringer. Not a notable theologian, he was likely viewed as the probable successor to Louis Sieck as seminary president in 1953. Under his tenure as president of Concordia Seminary (1953–1969), professors were added to the faculty who would promote the new theology that led to an LCMS convention calling for an investigation of the seminary. In spring 1969, the resignation of Fuerbringer as seminary president made possible the election of John Tietjen as his successor. In light of later events, Fuerbringer’s participation in Bad Boll was hardly coincidental. His plans for taking the faculty in a new direction were inadvertently disrupted. In 1958 Robert D. Preus was called to Concordia Seminary to take the place of Assistant Professor of Philosophy Paul Riedel, who after only a three-month tenure died unexpectedly during the 1957 Christmas recess. Preus had received his doctoral degree under the leading British neoorthodox theologian John Baillie and it can be surmised that Fuerbringer thought Preus would be an advocate of the new theology. He was not.

Outside the LCMS, the idea that agreement on the gospel rather than on the Scriptures sufficed as the basis of doctrine was gaining momentum among Lutherans in America.⁴¹ Though the term “gospel reductionism” had not entered the common theological vocabulary, the principle that the gospel rather than the Scriptures was the basis for fellowship was gaining support. By 1974, the year of the walkout, the law-gospel principle as the basis for theology was already in place for the ALC and the LCA, which later, with the AELC, a church formed in 1976, formed the ELCA. This was the beginning of an ever-expanding fellowship of churches. The ELCA went on to establish fellowship with the Reformed, Methodist, and Episcopal churches. Today, fellowship among mainline Protestant churches is so taken for granted that what previously were theological discussions working toward doctrinal unity among churches have been replaced by conferences on social issues. The National Lutheran Council, to which the LCMS and predecessor synods to the ELCA belonged, no longer exists and the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA is a shell of what it once was.

and the ‘dynamic quality’ of Christian theology. This position was akin to Karl Barth’s doctrine of the Word of God” (47). Ascribing inspiration to both the Scriptures and preaching may have led to the confusion in not grasping what was entailed in the new theology. Another lesson here is that word studies, on either the Scriptures or the Confessions, can, without further elaboration, lead to erroneous conclusions.

⁴¹ Cameron A. MacKenzie, “Church Fellowship,” in Schurb, *Rediscovering the Issues*, 156–157.

Shift in LCMS Theology

Application of the law-gospel paradigm to preaching and theology initiated a course change in the LCMS theology. In an essay included in a commemorative volume for Caemmerer fittingly called *The Lively Function of the Gospel*, Edward Schroeder took a grand leap in proposing that the act of justification of the believer that took place in the oral or spoken communication of the gospel (preaching) was the basis of theology and that this principle was determinative in doing theology.⁴² Both Robert Bertram and Schroeder would serve at Valparaiso University and Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. This view had appeared in Bad Boll and was largely unrecognized by the LCMS participants.⁴³

With this shift away from the Scriptures as the foundational principle for theology, “Preaching becomes the chief office of the church.”⁴⁴ What counts is a vibrant preaching of the gospel to engender faith while the Scriptures are relegated to a subordinate position as being no more than “the oldest and most ancient witness to the one Word of God.”⁴⁵ The principle *Was Christum treibet* determines what in the Bible qualifies as the word of God. Schroeder goes on to say that “The desire to get back through historical, tangible words and events to a spirit behind them was a voice of no-confidence in God’s own revelatory ability.” Those who attempt to test the gospel on the Scriptures are judged as arrogant and guilty of hubris in the theology of glory.⁴⁶ “Even the sacraments . . . are subsumed in Luther’s theology under the one means of grace,” which is preaching.⁴⁷ John Calvin had already proposed the idea that the sacraments are little more than forms or subcategories of preaching the gospel. (This is similar to a commonly held view among the people that the celebration of Holy Communion can be kept to a minimum on the grounds that its benefits are available in preaching.)

Along with Schroeder, another proponent of the new theology was Valparaiso University colleague Paul G. Bretscher, son of the St. Louis professor who was explicit with his concerns about the German theologians at Bad Boll. For the younger Bretscher, the Bible was defective and law and gospel determined what is worthy of

⁴² Schroeder, “Is There a Lutheran Hermeneutics?,” 83.

⁴³ It would later reappear in the “theology of the cross” that was proposed by Gerhard Forde and advanced by James Nestingen and Steven Paulson.

⁴⁴ Schroeder, “Is There a Lutheran Hermeneutics?,” 84–85.

⁴⁵ Schroeder, “Is There a Lutheran Hermeneutics?,” 86. Though the LCMS debate was explicitly of the law and the gospel specifically in these terms, Schroeder astutely noted, “In fact it is more explicitly Pauline to speak in terms of Law and Promise than of Law and Gospel, for Paul never explicitly juxtapositions the latter two terms” (92).

⁴⁶ Schroeder, “Is There a Lutheran Hermeneutics?,” 89. For a more detailed account of gospel reductionism before the walkout, see David P. Scaer, “The Law-Gospel Debate in the Missouri Synod,” *The Springfielder* 36, no. 3 (December 1972): 156–167, esp. 165.

⁴⁷ Schroeder, “Is There a Lutheran Hermeneutics?,” 85.

belief. Since Schultz, Schroeder, Bertram, and the younger Bretscher were at one time or another associated with Valparaiso University, what is now known as gospel reductionism was for a time called the Valparaiso theology.⁴⁸

Schultz, who in his published doctoral dissertation for Elert and Althaus provided theological rationale for gospel reductionism as the principle for doing theology, later joined the Episcopal Church. After Bertram taught at Seminex, he then joined the faculty of the ELCA Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. Schroeder remained in St. Louis, not far from the seminary campus, to articulate the theology of the faculty majority arguing that the gospel allowed for the ordination of women and the blessing of same-sex marriages, beliefs now held by the ELCA. Bretscher served as Pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church in Valparaiso and went on to write *Christianity's Unknown Gospel*, in which he argued for adoptionism, the belief that Christ gradually became the Son of God.⁴⁹ He was suspended from the ministry by the LCMS Indiana District president for denying the incarnation, the resurrection, and the Trinity, a tragedy from which his friends and family saw no way out for him.⁵⁰ At the time of the 1974 walkout, synods that would later comprise the ELCA and many LCMS Seminex supporters were already arguing for what is now common belief in much of world Lutheranism, that ordination of women was not contrary to the gospel. Since then, this has been expanded to include the ordination of homosexuals and the blessing of same-sex marriages. Transsexualism is condoned.⁵¹ This was all the logical conclusion of gospel reductionism.

The Trauma of the 1960s and 1970s

In preparation for a commemorative issue of *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*, the journal's editor and LCMS Vice President John C. Wohlrabe Jr. wrote letters to those who participated in one or more of the events associated with the seminary walkout. Another collection of memoirs, edited by Theodore E. Mayes, sets forth the personal remembrances of twenty students of Concordia Seminary at the time of the walkout, some of who sympathized with those who started Seminex, and some who remained with the LCMS.⁵² The collection of essays is amazing in that these firsthand experiences are drawn not from secondary written and oral

⁴⁸ Schroeder wrote the article "Law-Gospel Reductionism in the History of the Missouri Synod," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 43, no. 4 (April 1972): 232–247.

⁴⁹ Paul G. Bretscher, *Christianity's Unknown Gospel* (Valparaiso, IN: Dove Group, 2001). Also Paul G. Bretscher, *After the Purifying* (River Forest, IL: Lutheran Education Association, 1975).

⁵⁰ As a personal note, he was an exceptionally fine preacher.

⁵¹ John T. Pless, "After the Walkout: Publications by the Faculty of Seminex," in Schurb, *Rediscovering the Issues*, 253–256.

⁵² Theodore E. Mayes, ed., *Memories of the Walkout from Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri: February 1974* (St. Louis: Concordia Historical Institute, 2021).

sources and then rearranged to fit scholarly prerequisites. In these essays readers can more easily step back into events that happened fifty years ago, e.g., how seminary students discussed among themselves in their dormitory rooms whether they should join the faculty in what they saw as a well-orchestrated walkout.

In reading through their accounts, I relived my own agony as a St. Louis seminary student (1955–1960) on whether to tell church and seminary administrators what was being taught in the classes. Standard responses to students raising concerns were that they should follow protocol and not offend against the eighth commandment. If what the students reported was actually being taught in the classes, the administration would do its best to suppress these concerns and to win the students over to gospel reductionism, which was the de facto seminary theology, as LCMS President Preus' committee of investigation proved.

In an article by now retired LCMS Pastor Terry Weinhold, "A Student during the Walkout from Concordia Seminary," Weinhold describes his meeting as a first-year student with Seminary President Tietjen. He describes how the events for him evolved. In the term before his meeting with Tietjen, he told Alfred von Rohr Sauer that he was being taught that there was no such thing as rectilinear prophecy. To this Sauer responded that it was impossible. Seminary student Weinhold took the next step and arranged a meeting with Tietjen, who as president surely already knew what was going on. As Weinhold tells the story, Tietjen was simply incapable of engaging his concerns and five times Tietjen said he wished that New Testament Professor Edgar Krentz would have been there to explain things.⁵³ As a personal note, I have suspected that faculty members engaged in the walkout were not of one mind in knowing in depth what the issues were. For Tietjen the walkout was as much a political crusade as it was a theological one. His doctoral dissertation had the goal of one unified American Lutheranism, in which by his becoming President, Concordia Seminary would have a part. In the matter of how serious the theological understanding of the faculty was, I call attention to the response of erstwhile LCMS Pastor Richard John Neuhaus to my essay "The Law-Gospel Debate in the Missouri Synod."⁵⁴ The later Catholic priest and founding editor of the politically and theologically conservative-leaning journal *First Things* said I was taking matters more seriously than its proponents. As I read through the article in the commemorative issue of *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly*, the walkout and the events leading up to it had the character of a prolonged football rally. When the die was cast, walking back from what had been done was impossible for nearly all who were involved.

⁵³ Terry Weinhold, "A Student during the Walkout from Concordia Seminary," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 97, no. 1 (Spring 2024): 14.

⁵⁴ As above, n. 46.

The Law-Gospel Paradigm

Just as the law-gospel paradigm found its way into the LCMS through Valparaiso University and Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, it appeared with a different pedigree at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, under the tutelage of Gerhard Forde and became known as the “theology of the cross.” At Luther Seminary, two brothers, J. A. O. Preus and Robert D. Preus, who were later presidents of our seminary (Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne), had prepared for the ministry. The older of the two, Jacob, became the LCMS president who resolved the gospel reductionism controversy. After the walkout, the younger, Robert, as the acting academic dean, took the helm at the St. Louis seminary and more than anyone else was responsible for keeping its accreditation. He was a key figure in the relocation of Concordia Theological Seminary from Springfield, Illinois, where it had been for nearly one hundred years, to its Fort Wayne campus, and for initiating the annual symposium on the Lutheran Confessions.

Forde was the patriarch of what would also be called gospel reductionism, first in a triumvirate that came to include Nestingen and Paulson. Forde saw the atonement not as satisfying God’s wrath over sin, which he denied, but as an event experienced by each believer. “Atonement [is] understood as dying and rising in Christ in faith.”⁵⁵ The moment of faith replaces the historical moment, *crucifixus sub Pontio Pilato* (“crucified under Pontius Pilate”), as where salvation took place. Predestination, in this way of thinking, did not take place before creation, but happens in preaching. At Forde’s death Paulson preached the sermon that, along with Nestingen’s obituary, was published (ironically) in *LOGIA*, a journal founded by Robert D. Preus, the theologian who led the way in addressing the St. Louis seminary’s gospel reductionism and who had taken Forde to task for holding that the Bible’s authority rests not in its inspired character but in its proximity to the events it reported.⁵⁶ Forde also held that our preaching is of the same inspired character as that of the prophets and apostles.⁵⁷ This was straight out of the neoorthodox play-book that appeared in the LCMS as the Valparaiso theology and that became known

⁵⁵ Gerhard O. Forde, “The Seventh Locus: The Work of Christ,” in *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Carl E. Braaten, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 2:97. For a complete presentation of Forde’s denial of the atonement see pp. 5–89, e.g., 47: “Atonement occurs when God succeeds in getting through to us who live under wrath and law. God is satisfied, placated, when his move toward us issues in faith.”

⁵⁶ Steven D. Paulson, “Funeral Sermon for Gerhard O. Forde,” *LOGIA* 15, no. 4 (Reformation 2006): 11–14; James A. Nestingen, “A Tribute to Gerhard Forde and Lou Smith,” *LOGIA* 15, no. 4 (Reformation 2006): 7–8.

⁵⁷ Scaer, “Justification in the Theology of Robert D. Preus,” 50.

as gospel reductionism, which led to the St. Louis faculty walkout.⁵⁸ Views proposed by Forde resembled those put forth by Elert, who took exception to the third use of the law and according to Oesch had long opposed the law itself.⁵⁹ Forde held that the moral law is not eternal, a view that has no place for the third use of the law and for the atonement as a transaction in which the Son offers himself to God as a sacrifice.⁶⁰ Likewise, Paulson's denial of the third use and his position that the law comes to an end relies on an idiosyncratic and false interpretation of Romans 10:4, "Christ is the end of the law,"⁶¹ that is, Christ terminates the law.⁶² But Robert Jewett rightly says that this passage "should not be understood in this context as cessation and termination," but "as 'fulfillment' or 'goal,' which means that the teleological perspective remains primary in this verse."⁶³ It "has a directional sense that explains how Christ is the goal of the law."⁶⁴ It does not refer to the law's cessation as proposed by Forde and persistently advanced by Paulson in spite of biblical evidence to the contrary.

A theology of gospel reductionism that disallows verifying the authenticity of the biblical message disqualifies any apologetics that looks to compare what the Bible says about persons and events accessible by historical research. Schroeder held that one cannot go behind the orally communicated word to verify it.⁶⁵ The view that the oral word is in itself sufficient shares an unintended similarity with Marshall McLuhan's proposal some years back that the medium is the message.⁶⁶ In the theology of the cross, the hearers focus on the proclamation of forgiveness, in which salvation is accomplished and then acquired, and not on the historical moment of Christ's death, in which by atonement as the eternal reciprocal action the Son offers himself as an atonement for sin to the Father, who forgives sin for the sake of the Son.

⁵⁸ James A. Nestingen and Gerhard O. Forde, *Free to Be: A Handbook to Luther's Small Catechism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993).

⁵⁹ Murray, "The Third Use of the Law," 119, n. 33.

⁶⁰ Jack D. Kilcrease, *The Doctrine of the Atonement from Luther to Forde* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018), 121–122, 140.

⁶¹ Steven D. Paulson, "Christ, the Hated God," *Lutheran Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 1, 6. Paulson also claims this interpretation as Luther's position. "For Luther the break-through of the gospel is that where Christ is preached as crucified for our sins and sake, the law comes to an end. That is the central point of Paul's letter to the Romans (10:4): 'Christ is the end of the law'" (Steven D. Paulson, *Lutheran Theology* [London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2011], 4).

⁶² Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations are from the RSV.

⁶³ Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, ed. Eldon Jay Epp (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 619.

⁶⁴ Jewett, *Romans*, 619–620.

⁶⁵ Oswald Bayer, *Theology the Lutheran Way*, ed. and trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 171–172.

⁶⁶ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 1.

Schroeder, who until his death remained the most conspicuous apologist for gospel reductionism, warns that we dare not look behind the curtain of the revelatory word to see if it corresponds with what it tells us. Should we attempt this, we are guilty of not taking God at his word. Those who look for external assurances are said to succumb to the theology of glory. Here it is difficult to distinguish Schroeder from Forde and his disciples, though one may not have influenced the others. Paul's warning that the Jews demand signs (1 Cor 1:22) does not diminish the fact that throughout the Scriptures, in both the Old and New Testaments, signs accompany the revelatory word in support (e.g., in Luke's nativity account).⁶⁷ In several instances in Luke's nativity account, signs are provided to accompany the word of revelation. Shepherds go to Bethlehem to verify the angel's message that the Savior can be found in swaddling clothes (Luke 2:12, 2:16). Such is the case also with the resurrection accounts. Women who come to anoint the body of Jesus accept the invitation of the tomb angel to look at the place where the body of Jesus lay to support the message that he has risen (Matt 28:6). Behind the word as the preached gospel there is something without which the written or especially oral word is a vacuous sound, which in itself is not the object of faith.⁶⁸

A prominently recognizable theme in the law-gospel paradigm is the denial of the third use of the law. At first this seems unimportant, since in the state of sin in which all have existed since the fall of Adam, the law's second use with its

⁶⁷ Brittany E. Wilson, "Seeing Divine Speech: Sensory Intersections in Luke's Birth Narrative and Beyond," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 42, no. 3 (March 2020): 251–273.

⁶⁸ In Steven Paulson's opinion, for Bayer objectivity is found in the proclaimed word and not in a tangible person or thing. Paulson says that "when Bayer speaks of the 'incarnate word,' he is referring to 'the external word of promise,' and the not the creed's 'incarnatus est de spiritu sancto' by which the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, takes on flesh in the Virgin Mary." Steven D. Paulson, "Forward," in Joshua C. Miller, *Hanging by a Promise: The Hidden God in the Theology of Oswald Bayer*, by Joshua C. Miller (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2017), xi. But cf. Oswald Bayer, "Preaching the Word," in *Justification Is for Preaching: Essays by Oswald Bayer, Gerhard O. Forde, and Others* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 196–216. In this essay, Bayer states that one must affirm the historical facts of salvation, and that proclamation reminds us of these facts and distributes the salvation that was won for us under Pontius Pilate. It stands in contradiction to other writings of his:

The gospel is always "distributed" anew, but it was only "won" once, under Pontius Pilate. "And you are blessed [=saved] for ever!" Therefore, it cannot be separated from the historical fact of the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth and its temporal and spatial specificity, nor can it be separated from the original texts that testify to its meaning. These texts contain its authoritative formulations that cannot be extrapolated without losing its definitive, eschatological character as a once-and-for-all event. God's presence in the Spirit does not surpass what happened under Pontius Pilate, but "reminds" us of it (see John 14:26), recalls it, brings it into the present, distributes it, and promises it. The distinction and correlation between the salvation won once under Pontius Pilate and its ever new distribution and application gives preachers a hint of how they can avoid two extreme positions." (204–205)

accusations prepares the sinner to hear and believe the gospel. Also left in place is the law's first use to give society structure and to corral destructive forces that threaten it. Problematic is that the denial of the third use compromises any subscription to the Book of Concord, which, however, is not an issue for those churches in Europe and the ELCA that do not accept the Formula on the same basis as they accept the Augsburg Confession. For European Lutheran territorial churches this is a moot point, since for them the Lutheran Confessions are as much of a cultural artifact belonging to their national history as they are a statement of what they believe. As discussed above, LCMS participants at Bad Boll were unaware of the difference they had with the German delegations. Deniers of the third use typically cite the Apology's *lex semper accusat* (Ap IV 128, 166) without providing the fuller context: "That is, the law condemns all men, but by undergoing the punishment of sin and becoming a sacrifice for us, the sinless Christ took away the right of the law to accuse and condemn those who believe in him, because he himself is the propitiation, for whose sake, they are accounted righteous" (Ap IV 179).⁶⁹ At the base of the third use of the law is the eternal law, which is an expression of God's righteousness, which is himself. Thus denying the third use opens the door to denying the law and that it expresses God's essence. Detached from God, what the law works in us is nothing more than the experience of anxiety.⁷⁰ What God does not require of believers in living according to the law, he would not have to require of himself. By taking the law out of the equation of salvation, God is relieved of having to offer himself as an atonement for sinners. The void left by Forde's denial of the view of the atonement as a sacrifice is filled by a false doctrine of justification. What was once said to be accomplished by the sacrificial death of Christ is said by Forde, Nestingen, and Paulson to be accomplished by the proclamation of the gospel. Thus deniers of the third use of the law consistently and logically hold that since God is not bound by an eternal law, no atonement is required. Through Forde's two disciples, Forde's views have lately found a hearing in the LCMS, but it was Elert's arguments for denying the third use of the law, which surfaced at Bad Boll, that shaped the theology leading to the majority faculty walkout on February 19, 1974.

Care should be used in speaking of any one doctrine as more important than another. In the Trinity each person has his function in a particular order but one is not more important than another. Even if in the context of the atonement the Son makes the sacrifice, nevertheless the Father requires and offers the sacrifice. As stated above, the second use of the law is the most important use in coming to terms with the atonement; however, in coming to terms with the current disorder in

⁶⁹ Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 131.

⁷⁰ Kilcrease, *The Doctrine of the Atonement from Luther to Forde*, 111.

society, the first use of the law in curbing evil and protecting life and property is the most important. For following Christ and living the life and dying the death he died, the third use of the law is the most important. Having said this, Christians are accused by the law only insofar as they are sinners, but as sanctified saints they are not subject to the accusatory function of the law. Shift the context and law functions differently. God remains the same. Since law has its origins in God himself and expresses his righteousness, which is who he is, law as he expressed it in creation might well deserve the honor of being the most important use. How could it be otherwise? How the law functioned in Eden before the fall is prescient of how the law functions in its third use and will function perfectly in paradise, in which believers will no longer sin. Each will live no longer for himself but for the other. Law in what we call its third use or function will last forever. For a glimpse of how the law will look in paradise, one need look no further than Luther's explanations of the Ten Commandments in the Small Catechism. He sets the tone in his explanation of the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me." Here the warning against idolatry becomes an invitation to fear, love, and trust in God above everyone or everything else. This perspective continues with the remaining commandments, each of which begins with "we should fear and love God." In each of the explanations, Luther sets down the third use of the law in that God works his will in what believers do. First Luther sets forth each of the commandments with their impossible demands and punishments threatening the offender. Then he looks at them from the perspective of God's original intentions for them and how believers are to do them now. It is as if he is turning a piece of clothing that has been turned inside out back to its original shape so that we now see the commandments (law) in the way God does and the way God originally intended for us. What by sin had become negative command was transformed into positive possibility, which will be perfected in use in the next life. The prohibition against murder in the fifth commandment stands in sharp contrast to the God who created life and now works through believers to enhance the lives of others. Hence the story of the Good Samaritan. Jesus already had this insight when he defined the greatest commandment as loving God first and the second equally important as loving the neighbor, and he did so by quoting Moses (Matt 22:36–39; Lev 19:18). Here might be the place to rescue the reputation of Moses from the hands of those who in advancing the gospel as the only revelation of God have denigrated the law by presenting Moses as only an instrument of God's wrath. In whatever way Luther is referenced to further this caricature, it should be balanced by the Bible: "Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all men that were on the face of the earth" (Num 12:3). He was the one who stood in the breach between God and Israel and restored Israel to the covenant as God's people (Exod 32:10; Ps 106:23). More than anyone else in the Old Testament, Moses was the

Christlike figure. Luther closes his explanations to the Commandments not as accusations, but with the assurance that “Therefore we should also love and trust in Him and willingly do according to His Commandments.”⁷¹ Forgiveness is dependent on propitiatory atonement: “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Heb 9:22). This Christ did by entering the heavenly sanctuary to appear before God. This is the step that gospel reductionism has yet to recognize. In seeing the law only as accusation, it is easy to conclude that there are two words of God,⁷² law and gospel, and left without explanation this introduces the possibility of a contradiction within God. Thus Paulson resolves that God uses the law but is in himself not intrinsically law. But if law exists apart from God then law, if it exists at all, has autonomous existence, which Paulson denies. If believers are relieved from the law simply by a word of Absolution, the need for atonement is abrogated and we are relieved from praying “forgive us our debts” (Matt 6:12) because there are no debts. If the law does not proceed from God’s attribute of righteousness or justice, then he can easily abolish or ignore it. If God can ignore it (not requiring atonement) then it follows that so can we. Murray sees the practical application of it all when he makes the acute observation that in spite of the plea of the board of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, students who had been taught that there was no third use of the law would be easily persuaded by their professors to join them in walking off the campus February 19, 1974.⁷³

The Third Use of the Law is Forever

Discussion about the law is nothing else than a discussion of God’s righteousness. Should there be discomfort in saying that the law belongs to God’s essence, then substituting the word “righteous” might be satisfactory. Just as God is love in himself, he also is righteous in himself. This is a moral righteousness that in the context of sin is expressed in the law as accusation. By Adam listening and obeying the serpent and doing what God had forbidden, he committed a onetime, unrepeatable offense in which all his descendants took part. It was an offense against God himself in despising the love in which Adam had been created. Adam sinned against the first commandment, in which all the commandments are embraced. In doing what God did not want him to do in loving him, Adam gave the honor due his creator to Satan. So he turned the law as the structure on which he was on speaking terms with God into prohibition with the threat of penalty. The life he received from

⁷¹ *A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther’s Small Catechism: A Handbook of Christian Doctrine* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), 8.

⁷² Jonathan A. Linebaugh, ed., *God’s Two Words: Law and Gospel in the Lutheran and Reformed Traditions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018).

⁷³ Murray, “The Third Use of the Law,” 120.

God, which anticipated an even more glorious life, now was punctuated by death and the disintegration of his body into the dust from which he had been formed. With Christ coming as the second Adam, the law is returned to its original form and is enhanced to a higher level so that in the next life, we will forever know the law as God's love for us and our love for him and for all the redeemed. Jesus already said all this: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:37–39).