

Free to Be?

Paul Strawn, St. Cloud 2007

In the middle of the campus of Concordia University, Seward, Nebraska stands a rather large bronze sculpture of the internationally recognized American artist Paul Granlund (1925-2003). Granlund, who was soon to become sculptor-in-residence at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota (at that time an institution of the LCA), had been commissioned to create the work in the late 1960's¹ and after three years of labor, it was installed in 1971. Entitled *Son of Man Be Free*, the sculpture features an anatomically correct naked male human being, reminiscent of Michelangelo's massive 17-foot tall *David* (1504), emerging from the inside of a cross which has been somewhat shattered. What does it mean? According to the official statement of the university concerning the sculpture, " ...the work can be seen as *Everyman* (or *Everywoman* when it is viewed as universal symbol rather than in the context of sexual identity). In this interpretation we are all released by the liberating, saving work of Jesus Christ. We are restored children of God enabled to move out energetically into new lives of worship and service in the larger world."



The work is definitely stunning and cannot help but draw the attention of anyone walking across the Seward campus. As a student there for one year in the early 1980's, it caught my attention almost daily as I headed to class, not simply because of its beauty, but also because routinely, students, for some reason, would clothe the sculpture in all manner of dress. Without fail, pants would be put on the statue.

That action then, the felt need of future Lutheran teachers and pastors to cloth a naked statue, nicely encapsulates the issue we will address here today, and that is: To what extent is the Christian "free"? We read in the Holy Scriptures "*Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom*" 2 Cor. 3:17 (ESV) and "*For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery*" Gal. 5:1 (ESV). Through faith in Jesus Christ we indeed have been "set free to be people of God" as we sing in "This is the Feast of Victory" in Divine Service II, First and Second Setting, in *Lutheran Worship*, and now Divine Service, Settings I and II in the *Lutheran Service Book*.

¹ By whom I have been unable to ascertain.

Last year at this conference we introduced this concept, Christian freedom, by working through Martin Luther's classic work *The Freedom of the Christian* (1520), and learning that Christian freedom is the freedom from the condemnation of the law, from the need to atone for sin by good works. Being freed from a life of good works performed in pursuit of justification, the Christian, freed from a life of service to himself, has been freed to become totally bound to serve his neighbor in love. This year, however, we ask the question: What is the definition of that love? For Luther the answer was simple: If a Christian wishes to love his neighbor, he obeys the Ten Commandments.² That being the case, Christians still needed to learn the Ten Commandments and strive to live their lives according to them. Soon after the appearance of *The Freedom of the Christian*, however, the question began to be asked: If the Christian has been redeemed by Christ, if the Christian possesses the Holy Spirit, if the Christian possesses Christ, why must the Christian continue to hear the Law? Does not the redeemed Christian, by nature, simply live in a God-pleasing fashion?

The book in your hands is Martin Luther's answer to these questions.³ It is an easy-reading edition of what are known in academic circles as the *Antinomian Theses*. The term *antinomian* means literally "against the law". In the late 1530's

Why must a Christian continue to hear the Law?

and early 1540's, Luther wrote six sets of theses dealing with these ideas, restating more clearly what he had written in *The Freedom of the Christian*, and providing the opportunity for his students to

discuss a new teaching that had arisen in Wittenberg, promoted by a man by the name of Johann Agricola (1494-1566).⁴ Agricola, a colleague of Luther whom he originally had asked to write the *Small Catechism*, had begun to assert in sermons and elsewhere, that since a Christian was redeemed in Christ, he need no longer be

² In Luther's comments from 1531 on the first 31 Psalms he notes: "We have pointed these out so that we might learn well to use and understand the commands of God and the Lord's Prayer. We see that the beloved saints and prophets spoke of and devoted themselves so abundantly and in such diverse ways to the first three commandments and petitions. They always treated them anew and afresh, yet without having something new to teach, nor did they go beyond the Tables of Moses and the Lord's Prayer...Against the new teachings they cry and struggle the hardest, so that the people might remain with the Commandments and the pure and clear Word of God, and so that false teachings and other errors might always be prevented," in *Reading the Psalms with Luther* (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House: 2007), p. 77.

³ *Don't Tell Me That!* is slated to be excerpted in two issues of *Concordia Pulpit Resources* in 2008.

⁴ For more on Agricola see Gustav Kawerau, *Johann Agricola von Eisleben* (Berlin: Wilhelm Hertz, 1881); Wilfried Joest, *Gesetz und Freiheit, Das Problem des Tertius Usus Legis bei Luther und die Neutestamentliche Parainese* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1951); Joachim Rogge, *Johann Agricolas Lutherverständnis. Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Antinomismus* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, ???); Timothy J. Wengert, *Law and Gospel: Philip Melancthon's Debate with John Agricola of Eisleben over Poenitentia* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997).

confronted with the Law of God. In the six sets of theses which Luther penned, he clearly demonstrated on the basis of Scripture that this was not true.

A discussion of that work and its application I will leave to the other speakers. My task is simply to provide the modern theological context which necessitated the reintroduction of the *Antinomian Theses* of Luther in *Don't Tell Me That!* In order to do this as clearly and quickly as possible, we will begin with the sculpture mentioned above, in the 1970's, and work back through a bit of church history, digging downward, as it were, to discover the theological source of modern Antinomianism within the present-day Lutheran church.

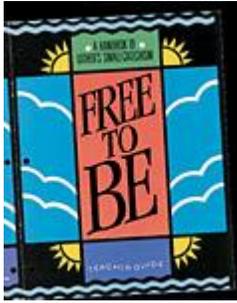
1. Christian Freedom within Post WWII Lutheranism

The sculpture on the campus of Concordia University in Seward mentioned above is known not only by the title "Son of Man Be Free", but also more popularly as "Christ Frees Us." It is with this concept, 'Christ frees us', that we begin. Sculptors do not create in a vacuum. Whether it is Michelangelo in the first decade of the 16th century, or Paul Grandlund in the 1960's, what a sculptor creates reflects the viewpoints, the thoughts, the feelings, the emotions, of a certain segment of society in a given culture at a certain time. In fact, an artist is recognized to be an artist, by the extent to which he or she is successful in doing just that.

Grandlund's sculpture certainly reflected the spirit of the time in which it was created. Those of you who remember the late 1960's and early 1970's recall that freedom was a huge theme of the era. The *Freedom Rides* of the early 1960's in the south, for example, brought attention to the need for civil freedoms for all races. "*Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!*" a line from a negro spiritual, was how Martin Luther King ended his now famous *I Have a Dream* speech, delivered at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. on August 28, 1963. *Sexual freedom*, whatever we might think of that term, gained a foothold, when in 1965 in *Griswold v. Connecticut*, the Supreme Court, struck down a Connecticut law prohibiting the use of birth control, and gained solid footing, when the pill, made available just five years earlier, began to be widely distributed. *Freedom of speech* became a major topic of discussion as well, when the burning of the American flag during anti-war protests, was brought before the Supreme Court in 1969 in *Street v. New York*.

Throughout those years, books were authored about freedom, songs written about freedom, and movies made about freedom. The topic, in fact, was treated so often, that one is tempted to assert that the 1960's and early 1970's were not just about the establishment of specific freedoms (freedom from unjust or illegal oppression, freedom of private activity or personal expression), but about the establishment of freedom from all authority, whatever that authority might be (the government, parents, culture, tradition, religion, etc.).

The thirst for such freedom even spilled over into the raising of children. One of the most popular children's albums of the time was one entitled *Free to Be... You and Me* released first as an album and children's song book in 1972 featuring



Marlo Thomas, and then as a television special in 1974. The theme of this work was apparently the idea that every child should be free to be happy with their own identity, and also, free to accomplish anything he or she wanted to accomplish. I bring this specific work to your attention, for just a year after the television special (1975), a handbook to *Martin Luther's Small Catechism* was published by Augsburg Publishing House of Minneapolis under the title *Free to Be*. The work of the (then ALC) theologians Gerhard Forde and James

Nestingen (of Luther Seminary, St. Paul), *Free to Be* has gone through multiple printings, and remains the standard book for introducing teenagers in the ELCA to the Christian faith.

Here is where we return to the theological question of the day. Was the title *Free to Be* simply the attempt on Augsburg Publishing House's part to capitalize on the popularity of the television program, and the general societal concern for all sorts of freedoms? Not necessarily. As it turns out the topic "freedom" in the 1960's had also penetrated into the world of theology and had become a major topic of discussion within the Christian church. Most notably, it is in the late 1960's that Roman Catholicism especially was confronted by what is now known as *liberation theology*, a theology promoted among Jesuits in Central and South America, who sought to move the church to help free the socially downtrodden from organized oppression. In some cases, this involved the organization of armed resistance to governments.

Within Lutheranism, however, the influence of the idea of freedom within theology revealed itself in another way. What that idea was, how "freedom" was understood to be part of Lutheran theology, seems to have first taken center stage when the Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) met here in Minneapolis August 15 to 25, 1957, under the theme *Christ Frees and Unites*.⁵ What is the Lutheran World Federation? Presently the Lutheran World Federation describes itself as a "communion" of 140 member churches in 78 countries representing nearly 66.7 million Christians, who confess some sort of adherence to the Bible, the three ecumenical creeds, the *Unaltered Augsburg Confession*, and *Luther's Small Catechism*. In 1957 when the LWF met in Minneapolis, it was just 10 years old, and it was still not clear exactly what it was. Was it a fellowship? A confederation of some sort? A church body? Having been founded shortly after World War II (1947) as much of Europe still lay in ruins, it had been hoped that the LWF would bring together and strengthen relationships between Lutheran

⁵ This same theme, *Christ Frees and Unites*, would be used by the World Council of Churches at its Fifth Assembly in Nairobi, Kenya, November 23-December 10, 1975.

church bodies of different countries, already established before the war at meetings of the Lutheran World Convention in 1923, 1929, and 1935.

That the ultimate vision for the LWF was that of a large Lutheran church body can be seen by the fact that theological “study documents” would be prepared by committees of theologians before each assembly and sent out to delegates for discussion, so that when the assembly convened, the documents could be approved by the delegates, and theological consensus over the topics contained in the documents declared. Once enough assemblies were held, and enough topics covered, and enough consensus declared, there would be no reason to deny that the LWF was actually a communion, a super-church body, encompassing most of the world’s Lutherans.⁶

Back in 1957, as the study document—ultimately approved by the delegates—was being considered for the Minneapolis assembly of the LWF, the question was raised world-wide among Lutheran theologians as to how a Christian actually is free. It was German Lutheran theologian, Herman Sasse (1895-1976), by that time self-exiled to Australia from a professorship in Erlangen, who probably was the first to note publicly that what the study document for the Assembly of the LWF in Minneapolis in 1957 meant by Christian freedom was not that found in the Word of God, nor in the Lutheran Confessions. Treating the study document sent out to the delegates before the assembly in one of his *Letters to Lutheran Pastors* (No. 44, *Questions Concerning Minneapolis*, Lent 1957),⁷ Sasse gets to the heart of the matter quite clearly and plainly:

“And yet one cannot shake the impression that the vast knowledge of theology in the area of the Reformation is not given its due, and that the truths of the Catechism themselves are no longer understood. As an example, we refer to section I B (par. 14 ff.) concerning “The Bondage of Man.” Here the truth article 18 of the Augsburg Confession teaches about the free will of the natural man, namely, “to live in an outwardly respectable way and to choose between the things which reason grasps,” is taken as point of departure. The theological commission was made aware of the fact that here lies the starting point for a Lutheran social ethic. But what have the authors of the draft done with it? “We Christians should not

⁶ In case some of you are wondering, the LC-MS is not a member church in the LWF, nor is the WELS, or ELS. The LC-MS is a member of the International Lutheran Conference. Although informal meetings between the now-member churches of the ILC occurred already in 1952, it did not officially come into existence until 1993 in Antigua, Guatemala, when its constitution was adopted by delegates of its 30 participating churches. The current Executive Secretary of the ILC is Dr. Samuel Nafzger, who is also the Executive Director of the LC-MS’s Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR). Theologically, the LWF claims an adherence to the Bible, the three ecumenical creeds, Luther’s Small Catechism, and the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. This allows for participation of church bodies in the LWF which would otherwise be excluded by other confessional documents within the Book of Concord, such as the Formula of Concord. The ELCA is a member church body in the LWF.

⁷ Soon to be published for the first time in English by Concordia Publishing House.

minimize this gift of freedom given to men in creation to fulfill the commandments of God and to order human society.” As Scriptural proof, Micah 6:8 was adduced: “You have been told, O man, what is good and what the Lord demands from you, namely, to keep God’s word and to practice love and to be humble before your God.” One cannot believe ones eyes. What does the tiny remainder (“etlichermaßen”) of the free will, which makes it possible for the fallen man to achieve a certain civil righteousness, have to do with the free will of man before the fall, when he had the ability to fulfill the commandments of God of which Micah speaks and among which the First Commandment is emphatically mentioned? Do the authors of this document really want to teach a Pelagianism⁸ which



even the Roman Church in its darkest hour condemned as heresy? This we cannot accept. But why does one speak in such a way? “In acknowledging this freedom, we must at the same time be clear about the fact that man in his innermost nature is in bondage. He is a slave to sin, because through God’s wrath he has deservedly become a prisoner to the powers of the enemies of God. He also cannot put his relationship with God into

*order. The confrontation with God’s commandment makes his guilt only greater. In this situation man’s **true nature** and life has been **destroyed**. He cannot free himself from this situation. He is unable to do away with his sinful nature. And he cannot put his relationship with God into order. And the encounter with God’s commandment makes his guilt only greater and does not free him. **This is the biblical explanation of the situation of man, and the Lutheran church declares today, as in the Reformation, that the bondage of man is the slavery of his innermost ‘I’ to sin.**” That is supposed to be the doctrine of the Bible and the Reformation? The Reformation had at least spoken more clearly. What are actually the “powers of the enemies of God”? We respond most simply with Martin Luther’s great Reformation hymn: “Fast bound in Satan’s chains I lay / Death brooded darkly o’er me / ... Free will against God’s judgment fought / Dead to all good remaining ...”⁹ Every child understands that. We are certainly not Freemasons. And what is this unclear language about “the true nature of man,” which is*

⁸ “Pelagianism is the heresy that man can take the initial steps towards salvation by his own efforts, apart from Divine Grace,” “Pelagianism” in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. by Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 391.

⁹ “Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice,” *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: CPH, 1941), # 387, sts. 2, 3.

supposedly destroyed? One then no longer acknowledges the careful distinction between the nature as such and the nature which has been corrupted by sin, as it is so emphatically taught in Art. I of the Formula of Concord: “Because this doctrine, **that there should be no distinction between our corrupted human nature and original sin**, conflicts with the chief articles of our Christian faith concerning the creation, redemption, sanctification, and resurrection of our flesh and cannot stand with them.” One must read this article just one time in order to understand the difference between theology and theological dilettantism. Naturally, the authors of the document at hand did not wish to encroach upon the Lutheran doctrine of original sin. They simply were unaware of it. Behind this dilettantism, however, exists something else which is far more dangerous. According to the teaching of Scripture, man **before the fall** was able to fulfill the commandments of God; **after the fall** this is no longer the case. This document no longer speaks of a fall. The succession of the state of integrity and the state of corruption is here transformed into a dialectical relationship between man who can fulfill God’s commandments, and man who cannot. Why this reinterpretation? Clearly because this document and its authors no longer are familiar with the fall into sin in the sense of the Bible and the Reformation. There is a “situation” in which man finds himself, the situation of one who is guilty before God. But from where the guilt comes, from where the sin of man originates – this no one knows any longer. There is no “before” and “after” the fall, because the fall into sin as an event, as the fall of the first man at the beginning of the history of man, or, if one prefers, of prehistory, never occurred. Concerning this it is incredible how the modern dogmatists themselves are unclear as to what this renunciation of the fall into sin means for all of Christian doctrine. W. Eiert himself, who absolutely does not want to deny “that all sin is interconnected and that this interconnectedness points to a uniform source” (Der christliche Glaube: Grundlinien der lutherischen Dogmatik, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Furche, 1941), 320), demythologizes, as one calls it today, the sayings of Scripture concerning the fall in such a way that hardly anything is left. He criticizes “the old dogmatists,” because they, “following ancient teachers of the church, equate the snake with the devil.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Und doch wird man das Gefühl nicht los, dass die grossen Erkenntnisse der Theologie auf dem Gebiet der Reformation nicht zu ihrem Rechte kommen, ja dass selbst Katechismuswahrheiten nicht mehr verstanden werden. Als Beispiel führen wir den Abschnitt I B (Par. 14 ff.) an über “Die Gebundenheit des Menschen” (“The Bondage of Man”). Hier wird von der Wahrheit ausgegangen, die der 18. Artikel der Augustana lehrt vom freien Willen des natürlichen Menschen, “äusserlich ehrbar zu leben und zu wählen unter den Dingen, so die Vernunft begreift”. Die Theologienkommission war darauf aufmerksam gemacht worden, dass hier der Ansatzpunkt für eine lutherische Sozialethik liege. Aber was haben die Verfasser des Entwurfs

daraus gemacht? “Wir Christen solletn diese dem Menschen in der Schöpfung gegebene Gabe der Freiheit, die Gebote Gottes zu erfüllen und die menschliche Gesellschaft zu ordnen, nicht verkleinern.” Als Schriftbeweis wird Micha 6, 8 angeführt: “Es ist dir gesagt, Mensch, was gut ist und was der Herr von der fordert, nämlich Gottes Word halten und liebe üben und demütig sein vor deinem Gott.” Man traut seinen Augen nicht. Was hat der kүүRest (“etlichermassen”) des freien Willens, der dem gefallen Menschen es möglich machet, eine gewisse *justicia civilis* zu vollbringen, mit dem freien Willen des Menschen vor dem Fall zu tun, der die Fähigkeit hatte, die Gebote Gottes zu erfüllen, von denen Micha redet und unter denen das Erste Gebot ausdrücklich erwähnt wird? Wollen die Verfasser dieses Dokuments wirklich einen Pelagianismus lehren, den selbst die Römische Kirche in ihren schlimmsten Zeiten als Häresie verworfen hat? Wir können das nicht annehmen. Aber warum redet man den so? “Indem wir diese Freiheit anerkennen, müüklar sein, dass der Mensch in seiner innersten Natur in Fesseln liegt (that man in his innermost nature is in bondage). Er ist ein Sklave der Sünde, weil der verdientermassen durch Gottes Zorn zum Gefangenen gottfeindlicher Mägeworden ist. Auch kann er sein Verhältnis zu Gott nicht in Ordnung bringen. Die Begegnung mit Gottes Gebot macht seine Schuld nur grösser und macht ihn nicht frei. Dies ist die biblische Erklärung der Situation des Menschen, und die Lutherische Kirche verküheute wie in der Reformation, dass die Gebundenheit des Menschen in seinem innersten Ich Sklaverei unter die Sünde ist.” Das also soll die Lehre der Schrift und der Reformation sein? Die Reformation hat zum mindesten etwas klarer geredet. Wer sind den die “gottfeindlichen Mächte”? Sagen wir doch ruhig mit Martin Luthers grossem Reformationslied: “Dem Teufel ich gefangen lag / im Tod war ich verloren... Der frei Will hasset Gotts Gericht, / er war zum Gut'n erstorben...” Jedes Kind versteht das. Wird sind doch keine Freimaurer. Und was soll dies unklare Reden über “des Menschen wahre Natur”, die zerstört sein soll. Weiss man denn nichts mehr von der sorgfältigen Unterscheidung zwischen der Natur als solcher und der durch die Sünde verderbten Natur, wie sie im Ersten Artikel der Konkordienformel so nachdrücklich gelehrt wird, “weil diese Lehre, dass zwischen unserer verderbten Menschennatur und der Erbsünde kein Unterschied sein sollte, wider die Hauptartikel unseres christlichen Glaubens von der Erschaffung, Erlösung, Heiligung und Auferstehung unseres Fleisches streitet und neben denselben nicht bestehen kann.” Man lese einmal diesen Artikel, und man wird den Unterschied verstehen zwischen Theologie und theologischem Dilettantismus. Natüühaben die Verfasser des vorliegenden Dokuments nicht daran gedacht, die lutherische Lehre von der Erbsünde antasten zu wollen. Sie haben sie nur nicht gekannt. Aber hinter diesem Dilettantismus steht noch etwas anderes, und das ist gefährlicher. Nach der Lehre der Schrift vermochte der Mensch vor dem Fall Gottes Gebote zu erfüllen, nach dem Fall nicht mehr. Hier ist von einem Fall nicht mehr die Rede. Das Nacheinander des *status integritatis* und des *status corruptionis* wird hier verwandelt in ein dialektisches Verhältnis zwischen dem Menschen, der Gottes Gebote erfüllen kann, und dem Menschen, der es nicht kann. Warum diese Umdeutung? Offenbar weil dies Dokument und seine Verfasser den Sündenfall im Sinne der Bible und der Reformation nicht mehr kennen. Es gibt ein “Situation”, in welcher der Mensch sich vorfindet, die Situation dessen, der schuldig ist vor Gott. Aber woher die Schuld, woher die menschliche Sünde stammt, das weiss man nicht mehr. Es gibt kein “vor” und “nach” dem Fall, weil es den Sündenfall als Ereignis, als den Fall des ersten Menschen am Anfang aller Menschengeschichte oder, wenn man will, der Prähistorie nie gegeben hat. Es ist erstaunlich, wie wenig die modernen Dogmatiker sich darüber klar sind, was diese Leugnung des Urfalls für die gesamte christliche Lehre bedeutet. Selbst W. Elert, der es durchaus nicht bestreiten will, “dass all Sünde in einem einzigen grossen Zusammenhang steht und dass dieser Zusammenhang auf einen einheitlichen Ursprung hinweist” (Der Christliche Glaube, S. 320), entmythologisiert, wie man das heute nennt, die Aussagen der Schrift über den Sündenfall in einer Weise, dass kaum noch etwas übrigbleibt. Er kritisiert “die alten Dogmatiker”, weil sie

That was a long quotation. Let's restate it simply: In the study document for the Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in Minneapolis in 1957, sin is acknowledged, but not a fall into sin, not an original sin. Thus it just can be, that man today is like man was in the Garden of Eden. Thus our statue at Concordia University, the one with the naked man emerging from the cross, is not just symbolic. Our freedom in Christ, so this idea, is a return to our Edenesque state.

2. The Erlangen School or New Lutheranism

But what was the source of such an idea? Why would any federation of churches with the name "Lutheran" in their title promote such an idea of the freedom of man? There can be many answers here. One answer, one source, and an important source at that, is that of the theologian mentioned by Sasse, and that is his former colleague at Erlangen, Werner Elert (1885-1954). Werner Elert was a professor of historical and systematic theology at Erlangen from 1923 to 1953. Along with fellow faculty member, Paul Althaus (1888-1966), Elert was the primary representative in the 20th century of what is known in theological circles today as "Erlangen Theology," or "New Lutheranism." These terms, already coined in the 19th century, refer to a unique theology of the professors in Erlangen, and like-minded professors elsewhere, who preceded Elert and Althaus such as Johannes von Hoffmann (1810-1877), Gottfried Thomasius (1802-1875), and Karl Friedrich August Kahnis (1814-1888). These names will be familiar to the pastors among us, for they are the main foils of Francis Pieper's *Christliche Dogmatik* (3 vols., 1917-1924; translated as *Christian Dogmatics*, 1950-1953) the basic dogmatics textbook yet today at the seminaries of the LCMS, WELS, and ELS. In other words, the three volumes of basic Lutheran theology pastors work through at the seminary refute the *new Lutheranism* of the *Erlangen school*.

But what is it? Why did Pieper, way back at the beginning of the 20th century, write against it? Certainly each individual Erlangen theologian had a unique

Erlangen Theology: The enlightened Christian holds the key to the essence of the Church, Christianity, and the Christian life.

vision, a unique viewpoint, but in general, what Erlangen theologians attempted to do is promote a Lutheran theology based on the Lutheran Confessions, the writings of Martin Luther, and the Bible, but with an understanding of the Bible that is something different than what Luther or the Confessions understood it to be.

The problem? Theologians of the Erlangen school accepted the modern idea that divine revelation was not possible, so the Bible could not be considered to be in its

"nach dem Vorgang alter Kirchenlehrer die Schlange mit dem Teufel gleichsetzten".¹ *Lutherische Blätter* IX, No. 52, 1957, pp. 15-17.

entirety the Word of God, that is, an objective source for Christian life (*rationalism*). Theologians of the Erlangen school also accepted the modern idea, that historical events are not really knowable, so the events described in the Bible were not necessarily reliable sources of historical data (*historical criticism*). Finally, the theologians of the Erlangen school accepted the idea that the Church as it was constituted in their time had been inextricably altered by the cultures in which it found itself, and so could not be a trustworthy source for the Christian life (*demythologization*). In other words, in Erlangen theology, no authority for the Christian life was to be found in the Bible, in history, or in culture.

But if the Bible, history and culture could not be relied upon to be sources of authority within Christianity, what could be such a source? The answer? The Ego. The enlightened Christian. It is the enlightened Christian who holds the key to what the Church is, and what Christianity is, and what the Christian life is. This being the case, this theology, which placed the Christian himself at its very center, came to be known as “Ichtheologie” or in English, “I theology.” In Erlangen theology, the rule and norm of Christian faith is the Christian himself, who somehow is empowered to find the Word of God in the Bible, interpret the facts of history, and shape the Church within a given culture.

Now some of you, if not most of you, heard the term “historical criticism” a few moments ago, and no doubt, when you heard that specific term, you thought of another term, and that is Seminex. Seminex, as you remember, is the shortened form of *Seminary in Exile*, an institution which was formed by the professors and students who walked out of the campus at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis on February 17, 1974 to form a new seminary, which lasted for a little over ten years, before its faculty was dispersed among seminaries of the newly forming ELCA.¹¹ We will not go into that event in detail here, except to ask the question as to the source for the theology of Seminex. Where did it come from? Did the source of the theology taught by the faculty that walked out simply fall out of the sky? Did they just wake up one morning and say to themselves: “I think I will teach rationalism, the historical critical method, and demythologization.”?

3. The (Re)Introduction of *Erlangen Theology/New Lutheranism* at Bad Boll

The answer cannot be given definitively, but for our purposes, one source for the introduction of these ideas into the Missouri Synod was most probably a heath spa in Germany about 40 miles south of Stuttgart, in the town of Bad Boll. How could that be? Just one year after the formation of the Lutheran World Federation in Lund Sweden, the Missouri Synod in 1948 sponsored the first of what would be thirteen conferences at a facility in Bad Boll, the newly founded *Evangelische Akademie* owned by the Swabian territorial church (think here of something like

¹¹ Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Wartburg Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, and Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley, California.

Heartwood, the retreat center in Wisconsin built by Schwan's and now owned by Thrivent), at which theologians of the Missouri Synod and the free Lutheran churches of Germany discussed basic Lutheran doctrines with the theologians of the territorial Lutheran churches of Germany, many of which had already joined the Lutheran World Federation. Initially, these were massive undertakings. The first consisted of three nine-day sessions (June 23-July 2; July 6-15; July 16-25), at which two papers on an agreed-upon topic would be given in the morning, one by the one side, and one by the other. In the afternoon, breakout sessions would be held in which the issues raised by the papers would be discussed. In the evening, a group session would be held in which the afternoon's discussions would be summarized. Yes. It was quite an academic, and German, affair. One-hundred and ten pastors and theologians, hand-picked by the heads of their respective church bodies, attended the first nine-day session, 79 the second, and 120 the third. From the outset the seven Missouri Synod theologians (Walter Baepler, Paul Bretscher, Alfred Fuerbringer, Theo. Graebner, Frederick Mayer, Lawrence Meyer, and John W. Behnken) seemed a bit overmatched.¹² Not only were all proceedings held in the German language, but representing the territorial churches were such notables from Heidelberg university as Hans Freiherr von Campenhausen (1903-1989), Edmund Schlink (1903-1984), who studied under Karl Barth, and Peter Brunner, who would be Robert Jenson's doctoral advisor. From Tübingen came Adolf Köberle (1898-1990) who had studied in Erlangen, and Helmut Thielicke (1908-1986), who had also studied in Erlangen under Paul Althaus. Other personages of note include Eugen Gerstenmaier (1906-1986), a theologian and politician who would eventually become the Chairman of the *Bundestag*, Ernst Gerstenmaier, and Werner Elert of Erlangen. In short, what the representatives of the Missouri Synod and the free Lutheran churches of Germany ran into at that first conference in Bad Boll was a veritable phalanx of the brightest and best representatives of the Erlangen School, or if you will, "New Lutheranism." An additional problem: No books had been purchased from Germany by the Missouri Synod since 1917.¹³

What happened in Bad Boll? We really do not know. Well, we do know something. Initially, a report was issued on the conference of 1948 by the Missouri Synod: A 64 page pamphlet entitled *The Story of Bad Boll: Building Theological Bridges* by F.E. Mayer.¹⁴ A second report, albeit only 20 pages in length, appeared in 1950 after the even larger conference of *four* nine-day sessions in 1949 (June 1-10; 12-21; 23-July 2; 4-13) which had been expanded to



¹² See Behnken's description of the situation in *Concordia Publishing House*, 1964), pp. 115-11

¹³ Kurt Marquart, *Anatomy of an Explosion* (Ft. 1977), p. 51.

¹⁴ St. Louis: CPH, 1949.

included representatives from other Lutheran church bodies in the United States and Scandinavia. That Pamphlet was entitled *Bad Boll 1949* and was written by Martin Franzman. That same year CPH also published a translation of a German perspective of the two conferences, entitled *An Evaluation of Bad Boll: 1948 and 1949* by Martin Hein. After that initial flourish of reporting, not much followed. The gist of those reports? We went, we talked, we held our own.

Greater detail of what occurred at Bad Boll in 1948 and 1949 is supplied by Dr. Karl J. R. Arndt, professor of German at Clark University, Worcester, MA, who at the time of the first two conferences, was the Chief of the Office of Religious Affairs of the U. S. Military Government for Württemberg-Baden. In two articles that appeared in the *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* in 1979 and 1981 respectively,¹⁵ Arndt provides, on the basis of his own archive from the time, details for the planning of both conferences, which paint somewhat less of a clear-cut picture, of purpose, expectation, and outcome. Little tidbits can only be given here, but their mere mentioning should be enough to create greater interest in delving further into the Bad Boll conferences: The LC-MS theologians repeatedly were urged as they prepared their papers not to assert that they possessed the truth nor think of their participation at Bad Boll as evangelization¹⁶ or "reeducation" of the German theologians; the Germans initially wanted to talk about the Barmen Theological Declaration; it was hoped CPH would publish the papers presented there;¹⁷ the three sessions in 1949 were chaired respectively by the LC-MS, the National Lutheran Council, and the VELKD; presenters in 1949 were expanded to include other notables of New Lutheranism such as the Swedish theologian Anders Nygren (1890-1978), Gustaf Wingren (1910-2000), Ragnar Bring and the Dane Regin Prenter (1907-1990); it was hoped that the conferences would alternate between Europe and the United States.¹⁸ Much more could be said, but suffice it to say, that it appears that much went on in Bad Boll that has, as of yet, not been thoroughly examined as to its effects upon subsequent events within the Missouri Synod.

Even though interest in reporting on the conference seemed to wane after the initial two in 1948 and 1949, the conferences themselves continued throughout the 1950's. In 1950 they were held in Bad Harzburg (Aug. 1-7), Neuendettelsau (Aug.

¹⁵ "Missouri and Bad Boll, 1948," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 52, No. 1 (1979), pp. 2-31; "Missouri and World Lutheranism at Bad Boll in 1949," *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 54, No. 2 (1981), pp. 50-60.

¹⁶ Arndt writing to St. Louis in a letter dated Jan. 13, 1948: "I should like to urge you, however, to impress upon every representative whom you wish to send that they are not to come to this meeting in the hope of doing missionary work or with the hope of testifying to the truth. This attitude would deeply offend the theologians present" (Arndt, *Bad Boll*, 1948, p. 13.); and this to Dr. Behnken, the then President of the LC-MS two days later: "Nothing could be more harmful to the best interest which really inspired your action, than if this belief would become current through too strong an emphasis on Missouri purity of doctrine" *ibid* p. 15.

¹⁷ Arndt, *Bad Boll*, 1948, p. 10.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

10-17) and Berlin-Spandau (Aug. 19-25). In 1951 it was Bad Boll again (Jul. 31-Aug. 6; Aug. 9-15) and Berlin Spandau (Aug. 21-28). In 1952 it was Berlin-Spandau (July 2-8;12-18); 1953 Bad Boll (July 16-22; 24-30); 1954 Bad Boll (July 7-13) and Berlin-Spandau (July 16-22); 1955 Gross Oesingen (July 19-22), Oberursel (Jul. 26-29) and Bochum (Aug. 2-5); 1956 Uelzen (Jul. 17-20), Berlin-Zelendorf (Jul. 24-27) and Oberursel (Jul. 31-Aug. 3); 1957 Berlin-Spandau (May 13-17); 1959 Frankfurt (Jul. 14-17), Berlin (Jul. 21-24), Uelzen (Jul. 28-31) and Wuppertal (Aug. 3-7); 1961 Berlin-Spandau (Jun. 20-22) and in 1963 (place and date unknown). Now from this minutia, not only is demonstrated the fact that for a decade the LC-MS was annually interacting with theologians from Germany, but that over time, interest waned in the endeavor, the conferences became shorter and shorter, and finally, they stopped.

What was the result? To a certain extent, once again, we do not know. As far as I know the papers delivered at the conferences were never published. All the papers, the programs, the lists of participants, the correspondences that have to do with what are collectively known as the Bad Boll conferences are in numerous boxes down in the Concordia Historical Institute in St. Louis and have, as far as I can tell, remained untouched for the last fifty years. It is interesting to note, however, what was happening in the LC-MS during the years of the Bad Boll Conferences, when annually, synodical theologians were heading to Germany for week-long theological conferences with theological representatives of Erlangen theology, and what happened immediately after. Herman Sasse, whose critique of the LWF assembly in Minneapolis was noted above, was received coldly at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis in 1948 where he had been invited to lecture.¹⁹ He would resign from his post in Erlangen in December of 1949 and move to Australia. From 1950 to 1953, Pieper's *Dogmatics* was published for the first time in English. In 1955, the gigantic undertaking of the 55-volume American edition of Martin Luther's works was begun under the direction of Jaroslav Pelikan (1923-2006). That same year, the Synodical Conference, in existence since 1872, began to break apart, as the Evangelical Lutheran Synod severed fellowship with the LC-MS, and was followed by the Wisconsin Synod in 1961. Also in 1961, Werner Elert's *The Christian Ethos*, was being used as a textbook at Concordia Theological Seminary in Springfield,²⁰ and his *The Structure of Lutheranism, the Theology and Philosophy of Life of Lutheranism Especially in the 16th & 17th Centuries*, was published by Concordia Publishing House in 1962.

It apparently was Pelikan (Had he participated in any of the Bad Boll conferences?), already in the early 1950's, that began to suggest to his students at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis that to break out of the parochialism of the Missouri Synod they head to Erlangen to study with Werner Elert. At least three of

¹⁹ His comments concerning the incident are found in Marquart, p. 55.

²⁰ I possess a copy of the work which belonged to my father who was a student at Springfield at that time. Inside of the front cover is the note written: "Robert A. Strawn, 2/20/61, Spring quarter."

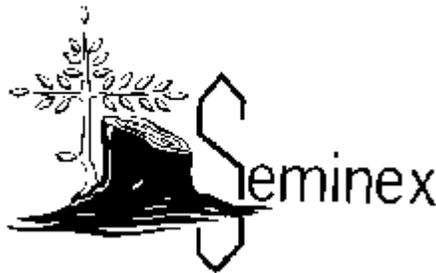
them took him up on the suggestion. Just recently (2004), one of them, Ed Schroeder, who would become a professor of systematic and historical theology at Concordia Seminary, and then Seminex, and now is retired, posted to the world wide web how this occurred:

In the early 1950s in the Luth. Church-Missouri Synod [LCMS] Jaroslav Pelikan, young professor at Concordia Seminary (St. Louis), was recommending to us students that if we wished to escape Missouri's "hang-up" with Verbal Inspiration of the Scriptures, we should go to Erlangen and study under Elert. Elert's 2 volume "Morphologie des Luthertums" [literally: The Morphology of Lutheranism], was "epoch-making"--he said--with its presentation of the "Evangelischer Ansatz" ["Gospel-grounding"] for Lutheran confessional theology.

So three of us students "went to Erlangen" for the academic year 1952-53. Bob Schultz, already graduated from Concordia, became Elert's doctoral candidate. Baepler and I were only half-way through Concordia, but had finagled scholarships to go to Germany for the year. Elert died before Schultz finished his work. He attended Elert's funeral. Elert's colleague, Paul Althaus, took over as his "Doktorvater." Bob's dissertation (written in German, of course) was a flat-out Elertian theme: "Law and Gospel in Lutheran Theology in the 19th Century." It was published by Luthersiches Verlagshaus.

Baepler and I were there only for the "Sommersemester" '53. We all enrolled for Elert's lectures and seminar. He even invited the three of us

over for Kaffeeklatsch one Sunday afternoon, since he appreciated that the pioneer of the Missouri Synod, C.F.W. Walther, had been faithful to law/gospel Lutheranism and had even written a book by that title. At that Kaffeeklatsch Elert agreed to write an article for our Concordia Seminary student theological journal, "The Seminarian"--I can still hear him saying, "Das tue



ich!"--which was then published when Dick and I returned to St. Louis. Its title: "Lutheranism and World History." Most likely it is the one and only Elert article that first appeared in English--and probably never in German. He wrote it, of course, in German and we translated it. It was posted 6 years ago as Thursday Theology #29 in the first year of this enterprise. [If interested GO to the Crossings webpage (www.crossings.org) and click on Thursday Theology, December 10, 1998.]

By 1957 all three of us were at Valparaiso University, and were teaching what we had learned, not only to V.U. students, but to the wider Missouri

Synod. With Bob Bertram as dept. chair and Gottfried Krodel added to the staff later on, law/gospel Lutheranism became the trademark of "Valparaiso Theology." So there were 5 of us in one place at one time. We encountered conflict within Missouri, of course, with our teaching and writing. Verbal inspiration and "Evangelischer Ansatz" were not compatible.

This Elertian sort of Confessional Lutheranism, though hardly ever acknowledged as such, was also near the center of the eventual explosion in Missouri in 1973-74 that took place at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis and then created "Concordia Seminary in Exile, a.k.a. Seminex. That is, of course, one man's opinion. Bertram and I were then on the faculty at Concordia--and "Elertian" confessional Lutheranism, already at home there (but hardly majority opinion), got additional support.

The fuse for the explosion was the LCMS national convention in 1973. By a 55% to 45% vote the convention declared the "faculty majority" [45 of the 50 professors at Concordia Seminary] to be "false teachers." Three false teachings were specified. Two of the three were actually Elert's own "heresies," although he was never named. One heresy of the Concordia faculty was called "Gospel-reductionism." In nickel words: grounding the Bible's authority on the Gospel itself [= Elert's Evangelischer Ansatz] and not on verbal inspiration. The second heresy was on the so-called "third use of God's law," a constant hot potato among Lutherans ever since the 16th century. Our "false teaching" on the law's "third use" was that we opted for Elert's Gospel-grounded interpretation and not the one the LCMS had supposedly "always" taught.²¹

So what is the point? Over the last few pages, I have attempted to demonstrate that "New Lutheranism", "Erlangen Theology" was introduced, or made greater inroads into the Missouri Synod probably as a result of the Bad Boll conferences in the 1950's. This was the theology already embraced by the Lutheran churches of the Lutheran World Federation which although embracing the Bible, the three ecumenical creeds, the Augsburg Confession and Luther's Small Catechism as an authority of some sort, rested their interpretations of these works on the assumptions of rationalism, historical criticism and demythologization. Within the LC-MS these three assumptions of Erlangen theology became the basis for the Walkout. Outside of the LC-MS, these assumptions were not bothersome.

But that did not mean that the New Lutheranism embraced by the other Lutheran church bodies of the world was problem free. Specifically, as matters were heating up within the Missouri Synod at Concordia Seminary, the question began to be raised within other Lutheran church bodies about the Law of God in the life of the

²¹ "Remembering Werner Elert-Fiftieth Anniversary of his Death," Thursday Theology #336, November 18, 2004, <http://www.crossings.org/thursday/Thur111804.htm>.

Christian. To what extent, so the question began to be raised, can Christians even talk about the Law of God? Being redeemed by Christ, are not we as Christians free to do what we wish to do? Already back in the late 1960's, the book you hold in your hand was seen as key to answering that question.²² Once again, what it contains is six sets of theses written by Luther, edited to be readable and used for Bible studies. These theses were not available in the 1960's in English. Nor were four disputations Luther later held on four of the sets of theses in Latin. (These too will soon be printed by Lutheran Press for the first time in English.) Although an open letter written concerning Agricola was printed in the American edition of a Luther's works, entitled *Against the Antinomians*,²³ neither the theses, nor the disputations were included.

Epilogue

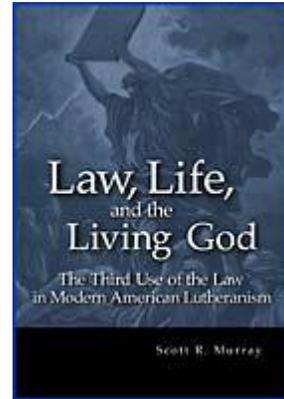
So what are the theses you have in your hand all about? They are Martin Luther's response to the man by the name of Johann Agricola, a friend of Luther, who began to teach that Christians should no longer be confronted with Law of God. Yes, the Christian should be reminded to believe in Christ, Agricola thought, and not to fall out of faith, but having come to Christ, the Christian should no longer be confronted with the Law. To a very real extent, this is the same idea, that was reintroduced by the Erlangen theologians to world Lutheranism, and embraced in the post-WWII Lutheran world. Not surprising then is the fact that just a few weeks ago in *Der Spiegel*, Germany's equivalent to *Time* magazine, Lutheran bishopress of Hanover, Margot Käßmann, was quoted as saying: "*To the freedom of the Christian, about which Luther spoke, belongs, that I am allowed to think, that I am allowed to be critical. If this freedom would be replaced, in that it would be said, you must believe this and that, you must do this and that, then is this, in my experience, the false direction. I would like to feel the promise of the Gospel to be loved, and not the pressure, if I do not live according to certain morals, to be damned.*"²⁴

²² Cf. Gerhard O. Forde's, doctoral thesis under Richard Niebuhr (nephew of the more famous Reinhold Niebuhr) at Harvard Divinity School, *The Law-Gospel Debate, An Interpretation of Its Historical Development* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1969), where he states "The writings of Luther against the Antinomians represent an important and relatively untapped source for Luther's view of the law" Footnote 9, p. 178.

²³ AE 47, pp. 99-119.

²⁴ "...zur Freiheit eines Christenmenschen, von der Lutehr gesprochen hat, gehört, dass ich nachdenken darf, dass ich kritisch sein darf. Wenn diese Freiheit ersetzt wird dadurch, dass gesagt wird, du musst so und so glauben, du musst so and so handeln, dann ist dies meines Erachtens der falsche Weg. Die Zusage des Evangeliums, geliebt zu sein, möchte ich spüren und nicht den Druck, verdammt zu sein, wenn ich nicht nach bestimmten Moralvorstellungen lebe," Alexander Schwabe, "Neidisch bin ich nur auf seine roten Schuhe," *Spiegel Online*, Sept. 7th, 2007, <http://www.spiegel.de/panorama/0,1518,503862-2,00.html>.

The continuing interest in this question within the Missouri Synod was demonstrated again in 2002, when a doctoral dissertation treating the teaching of the law among Lutherans in 20th Century United States by a Lutheran pastor from Houston, Texas, Scott Murray, was published by Concordia Publishing House in St. Louis under the title *Law, Life and the Living God: The Third Use of the Law in Modern American Lutheranism*. Though greeted by mixed reviews, the work gained a substantial audience among Lutheran pastors and theologians when it was featured as the topic of discussion for the 2005 *Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions* held at Concordia Theological, Ft. Wayne, Indiana, at which one of the authors of *Free to Be*, James Nestingen (now Prof. Emer. of church history at Luther Seminary, St. Paul) was invited to speak. Most of the papers delivered at this event were published just this last spring in the seminary journal, the *Concordia Theological Quarterly* (CTQ),²⁵ and so made available to every member of the clergy in the LCMS only recently. At that conference the very simple question was asked again and again, and that is: What does the law of God have to do with the life of the Christian? For Lutherans trained in the tradition of Lutheran orthodoxy, the law of God has three uses: A *political* use, a curb, to restrain evil in general so that the Gospel may be proclaimed among the heathen; a *theological* use, a mirror, to reveal sin with man so that he seeks for a remedy for that sin; and an *ethical* use, a guide, to inform a Christian as to what he should do or not do. The question: Can the law of God ever function as a guide, without functioning as a mirror, as that which accuses and reveals sin? As the papers in the CTQ demonstrate, different answers were given to this question.



The very same month as the appearance of the *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, the *Concordia Journal*, the quarterly journal of the faculty at Concordia Seminary dedicated an entire issue to the theme the *Two Kinds of Righteousness in Luther*.²⁶ (An article with a similar title also appeared recently in the *Lutheran Witness*). Here the same issue, the use of the Law of God in the life of the Christian, was raised. The approach in St. Louis, however, differed from that of Ft. Wayne: If we move away from the either/or of Law/Gospel dynamic, of the fact that a statement is either accusatory Law, or comforting Gospel, and speak about different types of righteousness, perhaps we can then speak about a Christian life that has a structure, a contour to it, that is the same for everyone, without using accusatory law.

In neither discussion was the work in your hands available. But yet what was already asserted way back in the 1960's still holds true: It holds the key for understanding and answering this question.

²⁵ Vol. 69, No. 3 & 4, July & October 2005. (This journal is currently two years behind in its editions.)

²⁶ Vol. 33, No. 2, April 2007.