



The Scope of Forgiveness

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Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income." But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other. (Luke 18:10-14a)

IS FORGIVENESS ENOUGH? THAT DEPENDS ON MANY FACTORS, NOT LEAST OF which is the meaning of "forgiveness." Is forgiveness merely ignoring or winking at sin? Then surely it is not enough. Is forgiveness a principle (e.g., "God is love" or "God will forgive; that's his business")? Then clearly forgiveness is not enough for anything that matters.

However, even if we could decide or define what is meant by forgiveness, the question cannot be answered without also asking, "Enough for what?" Is forgiveness enough for governing the nation? For raising children properly? For becoming a whole person? Is forgiveness enough to achieve justice, peace, and freedom on earth? To end hunger and homelessness? To replace jail sentences? Is forgiveness enough to enable us to bring about God's kingdom on earth? Even without knowing precisely what is meant by forgiveness, it seems apparent that all of the

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Forgiveness of sins is enough to create saving faith in Jesus Christ, enough to get us to heaven. It is not enough to bring about heaven on earth. Life this side of death requires the proper application of God's law.

above questions must be answered in the negative. Divine forgiveness for the sins of individual believers is not sufficient to accomplish, in addition, all of the social, political, and psychological issues listed above.

Certain assumptions about what forgiveness means are implicit already, of course. Therefore, we might ask whether there are some areas of thought or life in which forgiveness *is* enough? It could be argued that forgiveness is enough to encapsulate the New Testament's central message of salvation by faith alone. Martin Luther and the Lutheran confessions make such an argument ("for where there is forgiveness of sins, there are also life and salvation" — *Small Catechism*). It could be argued that forgiveness is an accurate characterization of the most important of Jesus' actions during his earthly ministry. Forgiving sins was the action that repeatedly got him accused of blasphemy by the religious leaders ("only *God* can forgive sins"); it confronted people with having to decide who he was. Finally, it could be argued that forgiveness is enough to describe the content and nature of the gospel that the church is to proclaim through the means of grace.¹

Yet this may seem to be comparing apples and oranges — practical matters of living as Christians, on the one hand, with theological fine points, on the other. So, to put the matter as starkly as possible: *Yes, forgiveness of sins is enough to create saving faith (trust) in Jesus Christ. Yes, it is enough to get us to heaven. But no, it is not enough to bring about heaven on earth. And no, it is not enough to make us perfect people in this present age.* Christians of several sorts might disagree with such answers — from modern day semi-Pelagians, who insist on the necessity of certain required human responses to divine forgiveness, to those who think forgiveness is only a small part of the Christian message and mission and wish instead to speak of individual and social transformation as also being part of God's saving work in Christ. In engaging such disagreements we will get at the heart of the matter. Also, in developing these arguments we will address the most common Lutheran heresy — antinomianism — and at the same time consider the most persistent danger throughout all of the history of Christian theology and practice: turning the gospel into another form of law.

I. HISTORICAL-THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Since it is the sixteenth-century protestant reformation, and especially the

¹These issues have been extensively debated by biblical scholars in the twentieth century in terms of whether or not Luther misunderstood the Pauline writings of the New Testament. Among Lutherans, Krister Stendahl has argued for decades against a Lutheran reading; see his *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) and *Final Account: Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995). Many non-Lutherans agree: see especially the works of E. P. Sanders. Students of Rudolf Bultmann, such as Gerhard Ebeling and, especially, Ernst Käsemann, have defended a Lutheran reading; see Käsemann's *Perspectives on Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) as well as his *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980). Roy Harrisville has been the most vigorous U.S. exegete along these lines. A helpful systematic presentation of a Lutheran reading of the New Testament, centered on forgiveness of sins and justification by faith, is Gustaf Wingren, *Gospel and Church* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1964). Gerhard's Forde's many writings exemplify a theology built on the centrality of the forgiveness of sins; see, e.g., *Theology Is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

Lutheran reformation, that makes the proposals that lead to questions such as “Is forgiveness enough?” it is important to step back and look at the reformation argument. Martin Luther and those he influenced asserted that justification by faith apart from works was the central article of faith by which all other beliefs and practices were to be tested. Why? Because Luther and the Lutherans came to understand that the biblical teaching on how people are saved or “justified” is that this happens solely through God’s mercy in Christ, which takes the form of the promise of the forgiveness of sins that saves all who believe.²

In the Lutheran confessions it is particularly in the *Apology to the Augsburg Confession*, article 4, where the doctrine of justification is elaborated at great length, that the focus on the forgiveness of sins is to be seen most clearly.³ There, time after time, the gospel message is understood and explained in terms of “pardon.” Humans are judged to be guilty, but rather than sentencing them to death or to life imprisonment or demanding that they make restitution, God instead *pardons* them on account of Christ. That is what forgiveness means: that guilty people are pardoned, their sin is not counted against them. Christ is said to bear the punishment that humans deserve; he makes restitution for us. God’s pardon (communicated through the means of grace, e.g., “In the name of Jesus Christ, I declare to you that your sins are forgiven”) is interpreted eschatologically by the reformers as the *final judgment ahead of time*, which sets the hearers free to live as faithful creatures from here to eternity. It is this understanding – of forgiveness as divine pardon pronounced as an eschatological promise – that lies behind Luther’s view in the *Small Catechism* that forgiveness of sins includes everything that God gives: life and salvation.⁴

Later Lutheran orthodoxy often tended to view forgiveness in purely forensic terms as a legal verdict that left Christians unaffected in this life. (Critics sometimes have called this a “legal fiction.”) The reason for this problem seems to be that orthodox theology lost the dynamic biblical eschatology of the early reformers, in which the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins was seen as the inbreaking of the future judgment ahead of time – as a promise that sinners can trust. Then, living in light of that promise, they walk in newness of life. Pietism, recognizing the sterility of orthodoxy’s view on the practical level, tended to supplement forgiveness of sins as a legal pronouncement with a number of other acts of God’s Spirit and with related human responses in order to realize in the present some of the newness of

²For representative presentations of this understanding, see Eric Gritsch and Robert Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) esp. 2-68, and Carl Braaten, *Justification: The Article by Which the Church Stands or Falls* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), esp. chapters 1, 2, and 8.

³*The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959) 107-168. For helpful commentary, see Leif Grane, *The Augsburg Confession: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987), article 4; Bernhard Lohse, *A Short History of Christian Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), chapter 6; and Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961), chapters 3-4.

⁴See Gritsch & Jenson, *Lutheranism*, chapter 3, esp. 41-44. For Martin Luther himself, see, e.g., *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), in *Luther’s Works [LW]*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963) 26:155-164 [on Gal 2:19].

life about which the New Testament speaks. In effect, this was to undermine the centrality of forgiveness and shift the emphasis to human response.⁵

Modern liberal (enlightenment) protestantism, having lost a radical sense of sin, found little in the idea of forgiveness that was adequate to commend it as the preferred form of the Christian message. The emphasis on sin and forgiveness which had prevailed on both the Catholic and protestant sides during the sixteenth century was understood by these later protestants as being a hangover from medieval penitential piety. More "catholic" protestants, in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, have also considered forgiveness of sins as too narrow a focus for guiding the church's life. They argued for a retention of the "Catholic substance" of Christian tradition whereby the gospel must be understood to include not only the promise of forgiveness but also forms of church and ministry as well as (often) forms of individual moral and religious practice.⁶

II. ISSUES AND PROBLEMS

Much of the history of Christian theology since the reformation would seem to express a consensus that forgiveness is *not* enough, even if there is no agreement on what needs to be added to it or substituted for it. Yet the early Lutheran reformers did not claim that forgiveness was enough for *everything*. They argued that forgiveness was enough for the most important thing: setting us right with God—now through faith and hope and in the age to come when sin will be no more.⁷

Again, it was in the *Apology*, article 4, that the most important methodological

⁵For a brief overview of these issues, see Gritsch & Jenson, *Lutheranism*, chapter 5; Braaten, *Justification*, chapter 2; as well as Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: University Press, 1986) 2:39-53. For a classic essay wrestling with the underlying biblical and theological questions, see Wilhelm Dantine, *Justification of the Ungodly* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1968).

⁶See McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 2:135-170; William Placher, *A History of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), chapter 17, gives a helpful overview of these matters during the nineteenth century. The contemporary journals *Lutheran Forum* and *Pro Ecclesia* represent the "evangelical catholic" spirit among Lutherans and others.

⁷A caveat must be mentioned here. It is commonly assumed that the genuine Lutheran reformers reestablished *grace* as the way of salvation, in contrast to works, leading to the slogan in our time that we are "justified by grace." Most often this amounts to what Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace" and is interpreted along the lines of God's benign neglect of our sin or the church's tolerance of just about anything, because Christianity is supposed to be about "grace." Antinomians of all times want to have it thus and well-meaning Lutherans all too often serve it up that way. Yet, as Gerhard Forde has said so powerfully, "The assertion of 'justification by faith' in the sixteenth-century Reformation can be understood only if it is clearly seen as a complete break with 'justification by grace'.... One will mistake the Reformation point if one does not see that justification 'by faith' is in the first instance precisely a polemic *against* justification 'by grace' according to the medieval scheme" (Forde, "Christian Life," in *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, 2 vols. [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984] 2:407). His point is that grace is not a substance or a power that God gives to people to enable them to accomplish meritorious works or to fulfill the demands of the law. Rather, grace is God's graciousness by which he counts us righteous for Jesus' sake. This judgment ("pardoned, on account of Christ") can be grasped only by faith. And this same judgment reveals us to be sinners, so that faith means at the same time the death of the self. The meaning of forgiveness is to be located properly only in relation to Christ's death and resurrection and ours.

move was made to speak to this issue. There it is argued that God's word is to be understood as either law or gospel ("promise" is often used as a synonym for gospel). The reason for insisting on this distinction, they said, was that without it humans tend to hear God's word only as law (that is, commands telling us what *we* should do). The New Testament, however, teaches a very different way of thinking of God's word in Christ—as "gospel," good news, which is not some new law but the power of God for salvation. Law and gospel must be distinguished, in other words, in order to protect the gospel, to keep the good news good, because humans will almost automatically turn all words of God into some sort of law by which to seek to justify ourselves.

According to the *Apology*, if Jesus had come only to reiterate law, or to give a new law, then he and especially his death on the cross is (strictly speaking) unnecessary. That cannot be the case, however, because the New Testament testifies that he alone is the way of salvation and that this was accomplished by his crucifixion. God's law has its own proper work to do, but gaining salvation for humans is not part of the law's work. "Christ crucified" is the good news we are to preach for salvation, for he did what the law could not do. All this is at stake in the insistence on distinguishing law and gospel.

The perennial mistake that Lutherans and others have made with regard to the law-gospel distinction has been to turn it instead into a separation and to identify only the gospel with God's word for fear of confusing law and gospel. Then the law is lost and the gospel of the forgiveness of sins is thought to be not only enough but the only thing God and God's people have to say. This is the mistake known as "antinomianism" because it holds that for the Christian God's law has no role at all, despite Jesus' teachings in the Bible to the contrary. Antinomianism lacks a radical doctrine of sin, whereby sin persists even among believers until physical death, and it fails to see that the gospel is an eschatological word, a promise from and for the future, and not a present possession—an understanding that the early reformers sought to secure with the help of the formula *simul iustus et peccator* (the claim that the Christian is "simultaneously righteous and sinful").⁸

The sorry history of separating law and gospel and holding that the gospel alone is enough for everything is revealed in the frequent and typical examples of "lazy Lutheranism" which are all too familiar: unchanged lives, pale cultural Christianity, ethical and political quietism and passivity, thoughtless universalism, and practical relativism. These alone ought to be sufficient to discredit the separation of law and gospel. Yet the reactions most common against such a separation (which has advocated the retention only of the gospel) have been equally wrong-headed. Against such an approach, some Lutherans, especially in places where nearly all the people were Lutheran, have made the separation of law and gospel

⁸See Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, chapter 4; and Gritsch and Jenson, *Lutheranism*, chapter 5. Also, Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 26:226-323 [on Gal 3:6-3:19].

into a positive principle, holding that the laws and structures of society are where God's law is operative now and that the gospel should have nothing to do with life in society except perhaps in areas of personal obedience.⁹ Second, and more common, well-intentioned renewers of several sorts (pietists, moralists, charismatics, social activists, liturgical purists) have turned instead to lift up the law at the expense of the gospel. For them, the gospel is only enough to get things started but then the law must step in with its moral or spiritual or political demands that create the "true" church or the "real" Christian or the transformed society. Finally, a third reaction against the dangers that follow from separating law and gospel is to reject any distinction at all and mix law and gospel together again. (John Wesley advised this explicitly.) This position holds that works of law must be added to faith and that both are necessary for salvation.¹⁰ But this only throws us back into a pre-reformation muddle.

III. CONSIDERATIONS

If we are to retain the crucial insights of Luther and the early reformers, we must understand the decisive role played by their retrieval of biblical eschatology in determining their formulation of the law-gospel distinction. Luther, especially, saw how the whole New Testament needs to be understood within the eschatological framework of "this age" and "the age to come," of old and new, of now and not yet, of the kingly rule of God and the rule of Satan.¹¹ Within this framework, Jesus is seen to be part of the age to come, but already present in this old age—the first fruits, the fulfillment of the promises, the one in whom the kingdom of God draws near. All of this can be "known" now only in faith and hope; it can only be seen darkly.

The gospel, accordingly, is God's word from the future, the promise concerning what will one day be all in all. The law, in contrast, is God's word for living in this old age, where it protects from evil and promotes good (at least, insofar as sin permits) but does not make us right with God. The point, of course, is that both law and gospel are needed. We cannot get rid of the law this side of death; it is required for "civil" righteousness and for living with our earthly neighbors with some modicum of justice and peace.

Yet it is emphatically not a matter of mixing law and gospel. It is a matter always of distinguishing them while keeping them appropriately related. The law is ended for Christians as far as our ultimate well-being before God is concerned;

⁹For typical, if horrendous, examples, see Karl Hertz, ed., *Two Kingdoms and One World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1975), chapter 4.

¹⁰On Wesley, as well as on the issues generally, see George Tavard, *Justification: An Ecumenical Study* (New York: Paulist, 1983) 85-92, esp. 91. Tavard's conclusions, pp. 107-114, are noteworthy, coming from a Roman Catholic.

¹¹Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), lays out this framework both in a formal sense and by demonstrating how it is inherent everywhere in Luther's substantive positions. See also Wilfried Joest, *Gesetz und Freiheit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956) 58-59, 129-130; as well as Gerhard Forde, "Christian Life," in *Christian Dogmatics* 2:391-469, esp. 411-422.

trust in God's forgiveness sets us free from the fear of death and eternal judgment that the law rightly reveals to sinners. But, since we are always also sinful in this old age, we continue to need the law as much as anyone else. In other words, the proper relationship of law and gospel will of necessity be part of the eschatological tension in which believers find themselves to be simultaneously both new and old.

Law and gospel are different; they must be distinguished, but they must not be separated; and their relationship will itself be one of tension and opposition—and this for several reasons. All people need the law, because all have sinned. Precisely because all are sinners, the law will not only command and compel people to do good and flee evil but it will reveal people's unwillingness or failure to do so. And, in confronting people with this painful truth about themselves, the law will also create hostility toward the God who creates us and gives the law. However, despite all of this, the law ultimately will serve the recalcitrant sinner by revealing the emptiness and futility of seeking to justify ourselves before God, by arousing in us a fear of death and sense of guilt, and by driving us to despair. In so doing, the law will leave us empty (so that Christ may move in) and open (to hear words of forgiveness and hope). To put it even more sharply, as Luther did, the law under which we live each day will put us to death, crucify our old sinful selves, and conform us to Christ on the cross.¹²

In the previous paragraph we see what Luther called the two uses of the law: to lead to civil righteousness and to reveal sin. These uses are very different and both are important to recognize. First, however, we must realize that *we* are not the ones who use the law. It is God's law, and God uses it in two ways: to prevent evil and get good done, and to confront humans with their own sin and inability to save themselves. In its first or "civil" use—getting good done—the law is very much a partner with the gospel, since the gospel frees us to love our neighbor, and love is at the same time the fulfilling of the law. Yet this same law in its simultaneous and inevitable second or "theological" (or "accusing") use is quite opposed to the gospel in that it "makes" sinners of us by revealing our mixed motives, selfish goals, and lack of love, not only when we fail to keep the law but even in the midst of our obeying the demands of the law. Then, if the church has separated law from gospel and proclaimed only law, we will be left in our sin, under the law. But if we have heard law and gospel—distinguished but still related—we will have our relationship to God sharpened, because of our knowledge of our guilt, and threatened, because before God we will know that we have nothing to stand on; yet, even so, we will not be left to ourselves because there is forgiveness with God.

IV. PROPOSALS

Law and gospel must be kept together in some sort of dialectical tension for two reasons: because of their eschatological difference and because humans need each one (law and gospel) to do its necessary work, both for our salvation and for

¹²Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 26:2, 151, 333, 339, and throughout.

our temporal well being and that of our neighbors. The content of the *gospel* can be expressed adequately and fully as forgiveness of sins, because our ultimate problem is sin; that is, our relationship with God is one of rebellion and alienation rather than faith and love, and the ultimate solution for this situation is for God to put an end to our sinful state by pardoning us and thereby creating faith and love in us.

In this sense, forgiveness is enough; indeed, for faith it is everything. (This is not to deny that the proclamation of forgiveness may use other words than only forgiveness to address particular persons or contexts, but the content will still need to be that of pardon or forgiveness, since the ultimate problem can only be dealt with in that way.) For temporal life in this old age of sin, however, forgiveness, while necessary, is not sufficient. Here and now it is *necessary* because it frees our good works (our obedience to God's law) from being directed at God, supposedly for our salvation, so that we can instead do good works for our neighbors and God's world; but forgiveness is *not* sufficient because forgiveness as eschatological pardon does not include God's word for this age—the law.

Some very familiar examples may make this distinction more obvious. Divine forgiveness alone is not sufficient for a pastor or lay professional to remain in a call if he or she is guilty of conduct unbecoming to the office, if that person's guilt undermines the credibility or eliminates the ability of such a person to carry out the duties of the office or constitutes a danger to the congregation or its individual members. Even though God forgives the sin involved, in the present age the guilt may still be such that God's law prevents restoration of the person to the office. Or, is divine forgiveness enough to enable your spouse to stay with you if you are guilty of spousal or child abuse? Perhaps not, since the personal reasons for actualizing your sinful condition by being abusive would not yet have been dealt with simply by God's forgiving you. Or, is forgiveness enough to enable the church council member to remain on the council after being found guilty of misuse of church funds? Probably not, because the civil punishment and possible restitution for such a crime would apply even after forgiveness. It should be noted that in each case the sins involved would not remove a person from being a *member* of the body of Christ, since here forgiveness is enough. But it is not enough to expect others to accept you simply because God does, if the wrong which you have done still exists and remains as an obstacle between you and others. And even if others forgive you, they may not (or should not, in some cases) be able to forget the wrong or allow it to go unpunished.

Is forgiveness enough to free a person to engage in actions in the service of God that go against the laws of the land or cultural norms? Yes, of course, although divine forgiveness will not suffice to keep one from being punished by those charged with enforcing those same laws and norms. Is forgiveness enough to allow for new starts? For remarriage after divorce? Possibly, following repentance and forgiveness as well as seeking to rectify the causes that led to the divorce so that promises can be made honestly for a new marriage. For rehabilitation after committing criminal acts? Possibly, if other aspects of rebuilding one's life and

satisfying the demands of society are met. All of these are examples to illustrate some of the issues involved in the scope of forgiveness: it is sufficient eschatologically; it is necessary but not sufficient in this present age.

Yet saying it this way may be too stark. It risks falling into the sort of two-realms dualism that has marked Lutheranism at its worst, because it does not adequately keep law and gospel not only distinguished but also related in our daily life. Lutherans have usually been rather adept at keeping law and gospel related in speaking of being justified or saved; but we have tended to allow them to fall apart when it comes to life in the present world. The Bible itself would urge against this latter failure with its many “evangelical counsels,” but how might this be expressed in law-gospel categories?

In one sense, law and gospel are related in the life of the believer, because Christians in this present age are always both old and new, so that, while the law compels obedience from the old self, the gospel simultaneously sets the new self free to act in love. Yet there is a sort of formlessness or abstractness to this way of putting it, especially in terms of how the gospel actually will have any decisive impact on the *content* of present actions. What is needed is a way of seeing how the gospel interacts with the law in the Christian’s actions. Here we would need to include such things as the gospel’s *motivating* the believer to do acts of love and justice; *encouraging* acts whose focus is the need of another or the common good, since the self’s good is secure in Christ; *clarifying* actions and situations where concrete forms of law may be distorted or misleading and in need of correction from a faith perspective; and *freeing* people from the fear of failure to take risks because of their faith in divine forgiveness. In all of these examples, forgiveness is essential if the demands of worldly institutions, situations, and roles are to be embraced as commands of God’s law despite the burden they often represent, for without the assurance of our righteousness before God our obedience would be unwilling, self-serving, or lacking altogether.¹³

Yet, such a role for the gospel in the world of law threatens to remain largely at the personal or psychological level. Is there a more critical and creative connection of the two? Certainly the New Testament expectation of self-sacrificial obedience to God that goes beyond the letter of the law is one possibility here (e.g., going the extra mile; forgiving seventy times seven; not even being angry with another person; giving to others at great cost to oneself). While the believer would readily agree that these things are in accordance with God’s will, the law itself does not demand such extravagant obedience. Rather, the gospel of forgiveness that creates faith in Christ brings the newness of life that seeks the *fulfillment* of the law, not only meeting its minimum daily requirements. This self-sacrificial obedience is surely one of the most important aspects of Christian discipleship, involving acts of mercy and charity even to the extent of giving one’s life. Yet it also can be

¹³Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, is especially helpful both in showing how law and gospel are related by Luther and for his contributions to present theological attempts to do this.

perverted into a cheerless and negative form of bondage—self-denial of the worst sort—as well as an insidious route to self-righteousness.

Some of the themes of various liberation theologies may point to more transformative possibilities that the gospel brings to life in the world of law. Here, the gospel of forgiveness, with its future-oriented faith and its hope for God’s kingdom, instills in the Christian a *determination to seek the new*: to be a peacemaker in a warring world; to help create economic, social, racial, and political justice here at home and throughout the whole world; to refuse to give in to the corrosive cynicism of a consumer culture; to be light and salt; to be hopeful when despair draws people down; to speak God’s truth in a world where falsehood abounds; to resist the powers and principalities that destroy; to side with the oppressed, the outsiders, the young, the old, and the lost; to find ways to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, and make government work; to make work more humane and leisure more re-creative; to deal with sinful structures and not only sinful individuals.

This litany is intentionally overly-ambitious to make the point (especially to Lutheran readers) that it is theologically hopeless to think that being saved by grace through faith means that we ought to be passive or irresponsible or mindlessly supportive of the status quo. The gospel is the “power” (δύναμις—dynamite!) of God to all who believe (Rom 1:16). This is the same dynamite that is promised to the disciples (in Acts 1:8). God’s law, whether in written form or built right into the structures and demands of life in God’s world, puts divine pressure on us to be servants of God in every aspect of life. The gospel not only helps us to know this and to be free to do what the law requires for life in this present age, but it gives us power simply to get on with it without elaborate rationalizing or soul-searching, knowing that in any case (acting or doing nothing) we will sin and so will have to end each day with repentance as well as thanksgiving. In any case, our salvation will not be at stake; for that, forgiveness is more than enough. But that doesn’t mean our actions are not important; our neighbors need them; God needs them for those neighbors. For them, the forgiveness we receive is not enough.

V. WHAT NOW?

At this point, my recommendation is for pastoral leaders and congregations to retrieve and develop Luther’s understanding of Christian vocation in the world, especially as that has been pursued by Gustaf Wingren in his many works.¹⁴

¹⁴In addition to *Luther on Vocation*, see Wingren’s *Creation and Law* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1961) 83-120, 149-161; *Gospel and Church*, part II; and many articles. For a bibliography, see his *Creation and Gospel* (Toronto: Mellen, 1979). Recent attempts to take up this task include: Robert Benne, *Ordinary Saints* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); Lee Hardy, *The Fabric of This World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990); and my recent essays: “Work and Meaning: Some Theological Reflections,” *Interpretation* 48 (1994) 262-271; “A Lutheran Understanding of Vocation in Light of Feminist Critiques,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 10 (1996); and “The Necessity of the Doctrine of Vocation,” in *By Faith Alone: Essays on Justification in Honor of Gerhard O. Forde*, ed. Joseph A. Burgess and Marc Kolden (forthcoming from Eerdmans).

Wingren helps to discover ways of thinking about many of the issues of this essay by speaking of Christian “vocation.” In doing this, he remains within classical Lutheran categories for the most part, but also offers possibilities for incorporating some of the transformative social teachings of the Bible more effectively than has been the case during much of Lutheran history; he does this without losing the distinction between this age and the age to come and also without compromising the centrality of the forgiveness of sins. The challenge is to find faithful and critical ways of relating new creation to creation, transformation to preservation, and forgiveness to life as well as to salvation.¹⁵ ⊕

¹⁵Here I would point to the work of my colleague Patrick Keifert and his team of researcher-theologians engaged in the work of congregational studies. What is especially notable in their work is that the concerns of both Lutheran confessional theology and the empirical life of congregations are being brought together with interdisciplinary integrity for the sake of preparing evangelical public leaders in congregations and for helping congregations to take leadership in civil society.