

A Review of Article V of the Formula of Concord

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In the pastoral epistles the Lord lays down for us the various qualifications that he and we should expect from those who serve in the public gospel ministry. Arguably, the one qualification which undergirds them all is “apt to teach.” There are many fine Christians who could meet any number of the other qualifications for serving in the ministry, but if they are unable to teach, then it would be most difficult to step into the pulpit or classroom.

At the heart of that qualification of aptness to teach is the ability to “rightly divide the word of truth.” But what does that mean? We have always understood these words to mean that a faithful servant of the word has to be able to distinguish properly between the law and the gospel, and to apply those two doctrines appropriately as well.

This proper distinction between law and gospel, or we might say “the improper distinction between law and gospel,” is what is at the heart of the *Article V* of the *Formula of Concord*. This article dealt with a controversy which plagued the Lutheran church already in Luther's day and has even touched the WELS in our own day. The controversy was caused by John Agricola and the error which he and his followers promoted was called “antinomianism.”

What is antinomianism? It is the teaching that the law has no place preaching, or that the gospel is to accomplish what the law was intended to do. The formulators saw this teaching for what it was—an attack on the gospel itself. The formulators recognized that if the proper distinction between the law or the gospel were not maintained, or if the law was completely eliminated from preaching altogether, the results would be disastrous for the Christian. For the gospel would be made into a new law, God's grace would be minimized, the merits of Christ would be obscured, and troubled conscience would be robbed of the comfort of the gospel promises.

As servants of Word who are charged with and concerned about rightly dividing the word of the truth, *Article V* of the *Formula of Concord* is worthy of our study not only at a pastors' conference, but personally and daily. That we might be renewed in our understanding, appreciation, and ability to rightly divide the word of truth, let us give our prayerful consider to *Article V of the Formula of Concord: Of the Law and the Gospel*:

Part 1: The Historical Background

Antinomianism originally plagued the Lutheran church in two ways and at two different times. One form of antinomianism appeared before Luther's death and was promoted by John Agricola. He basically taught that the true knowledge of sin and repentance was produced not by the law but by the gospel. The other form of antinomianism appeared after Luther's death and was promoted by the likes of Poach and Otto who believed that after conversion the law was not necessary for a Christian. This error is addressed in *Article VI*. It is the former shade of antinomianism promoted by Agricola with which *Article V* of the *Formula of Concord* deals.

Who was John Agricola and how was he an antinomian? John Agricola was born in Leipsig Germany in 1492. He was a student at the university of Wittenberg from 1515-1516 during which time he became a close friend and supporter of Luther and then also of Melancthon after the latter arrived in 1517. That he was a close confidant of both is evident from the fact that he accompanied both Luther and Melancthon to the great debate in Leipzig.

Agricola was no dummy. In 1525 he became the pastor of the church in Eisleben and a Latin instructor. His renown as a speaker is evident from the fact that the Elector engaged him frequently. Many of his sermons and other materials were put in to print for public consumption.

But like so many others who were got caught up in controversy, his Achilles heel was his pride. He felt slighted and hurt when Melancthon was appointed to the new theological professorship created in 1526 at the University of Wittenberg. That Luther saw this weakness is evident from his evaluation of Agricola. In a letter to Jacob Stratner, court preacher in Berlin, Luther wrote, "Master Grickel is not, nor will ever be the man that he may appear...For if you wish to know what vanity itself is, you can recognize in it no surer image than that of Eisleben." (Bents, 162.)

Whether or not pride led Agricola to his fall into antinomianism we are not sure, but what is clear is that his antinomian spirit was displayed very early in his career and brought him into conflict with Melancthon and later with Luther himself. Already in 1525 he wrote the following words in his notes on the gospel of Luke, "The Decalogue belongs in the courthouse, not in the pulpit. All those who are occupied with Moses are bound to go the devil. To the gallows with Moses." (Bents, 163.) He then publicly criticized Melancthon's instruction to the men who were carrying out the Saxon visitation. Melancthon correctly saw that part of the problem that existed in the churches of Saxony was that preachers were offering the gospel and its blessings to hardened sinners. Melancthon properly instructed that repentance must be preached before faith. In other words, the law must be preached to lead sinners to a knowledge of sin before the gospel is to be applied which alone creates true saving faith. In his criticism of Melancthon, Agricola stressed his belief that genuine repentance is brought about not by the law, but by the gospel only. Such teachings brought Agricola into open conflict with Melancthon. Fortunately, in a special meeting in 1527 at Torgau, Luther brought this open split to a peaceful and quiet resolution by getting Agricola to agree that while genuine repentance does indeed involve true faith that is brought about by the gospel, it also involves terrors of the conscience accomplished by the threats of the law.

Agricola, however, did not quiet his antinomian voice for long. In 1537 he renewed his antinomian attacks not just on Melancthon this time but even Luther himself. He accused both Luther and Melancthon of contorting the Scriptures by teaching that the law is needed to terrify sinners in order that they may seek Christ.

Luther defended the proper preaching of both law and gospel through a series of theses which he presented at five public disputations in which he condemned Agricola's false views. On several occasions after those disputations, Agricola admitted his error and sought reconciliation with Luther. But when Agricola demonstrated a duplicitous spirit time and again by returning to the error of his ways, or ways of his errors, Luther refused any more attempts of reconciliation.

But Luther was not the only one to oppose Agricola and his antinomianism. In 1585, long after Luther's death, Agricola published a sermon in which the preachers of Mansfeld believed he demonstrated again his antinomian errors. The preachers lodged a formal protest, but nothing ever came of this conflict because a year later Agricola died.

Although God removed Agricola from the scene, Agricola's antinomian "spirit" was still spooking around within the walls of the Lutheran church and had possessed many others. Therefore, the formulators of the *Formula of Concord* felt it necessary to exorcise the Lutheran church of the antinomian spirits by addressing the need for preaching and applying both the law and gospel properly. They did so through *Article V*.

Part II: Article V of the Formula of Concord—A Brief Overview

Time and space will not allow us to go into this article in any great detail. So for the sake of discussion today, we will only highlight a number of main points from the 27 paragraphs of this article.

The first two paragraphs are really the introduction to the article in which the formulators explain what they believe the debate was all about and why it was necessary to address the danger of antinomianism. These two paragraphs are worth our while reading:

As the distinction between the Law and the Gospel is a special brilliant light, which serves to the end that God's Word may be rightly divided, and the Scriptures and the holy prophets and apostles may be properly explained and understood, we must guard it with especial care, in order that these two doctrines may not be mingled with one another, or a law be made out of the Gospel, whereby the merit of Christ is obscured and troubled consciences are robbed of their comfort, which they otherwise have in the holy Gospel when it is preached genuinely and in its purity, and by which they can support themselves in their most grievous trials against the terrors of the Law.

Now, here likewise there has occurred a dissent among some theologians of the Augsburg Confession; for the one side asserted that the Gospel is properly not only a preaching of grace, but at the same time also a preaching of repentance, which rebukes the greatest sin, namely, unbelief. But the other side held and contended that the Gospel is not properly a preaching of repentance or of reproof (preaching of repentance, convicting of sin), as that properly belongs to God's Law, which reproves all sins, and therefore unbelief also; but that the Gospel is properly a preaching of the grace and favor of God for Christ's sake, through which the unbelief of the converted, which perilously inhered in them, and which the Law of God reproved, is pardoned and forgiven.

I believe these paragraphs speak for themselves. But what is worthy of special mention here is how the formulators dealt with this controversy. In dealing with this controversy, as well as the others addressed in the Formula, our spiritual fathers have set an example for us on how evangelical pastoral work is to be done. Before stating their beliefs or rendering any judgment about the controversy, they first expressed their understanding as to what the dissent was and what the two sides were stating. In this way they made sure that everyone understood the matter up for debate. Then they proceeded to address the matter based on God's Word with support from other confessions. May their way of handling this debate help us whenever and wherever we are called upon to settle disputes, be they disputes about doctrine or practice.

In paragraphs 3-15, the formulators then proceed to define the terms which were at the heart of the antinomian debate and then, whenever and wherever appropriate, provide support from both the Scriptures and previous confessions for their understanding of those terms or words.

The formulators quickly first point out that the term gospel is not used or understood in one and the same sense. From various passages of Scripture and from ancient and modern theologians, the formulators point out that the word "gospel" is employed in two ways. First there is the wide sense or meaning of the term which includes both law and gospel, and repentance and faith, or as the article states "the entire teaching of Christ, both law and gospel."⁽⁴⁾ When the word "gospel" is used in its broad sense, it is correct to define the word as the proclamation of both repentance and forgiveness. Here they cite passages like Luke 24:46-47

which states, “Jesus told them, ‘This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise and from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.’”

But the word “gospel” is also used in a “narrow” or proper “sense.” When the gospel is used this way, it does not include anything that has to do with repentance or the law but only the grace of God. Here they cite Mark 1:15, “Repent and believe the gospel.”

Another term that can be used in both a wide or narrow sense is the word “repentance.” In some passages it is understood as the entire conversion of man, both godly sorrow and also trust in the forgiveness of sins. This type of repentance is accomplished by both the law and gospel working on a sinner’s heart. The law leads sinners to sorrow over sin and it is the gospel which leads sinners to trust in God’s promise of forgiveness.

In other places where repentance and faith are distinguished from one another, the phrase is used in a narrow sense meaning nothing else than to recognize one’s sins and to sorrow over them. This type of repentance, or we might say “contrition”, is accomplished only by the law.

After clarifying the terms that were at the heart of the debate, the formulators went on to discuss what tragic ends are reached when one tries to preach either the law or the gospel without the other, or when one tries to use the law to accomplish what only the gospel can and vice versa.

What happens when only the law is applied? The formulators conclude that mere preaching of the law without Christ ends in one of two results neither of which is good for the hearer. On the one hand, preaching only the law can produce presumptuous people who believe they can fulfill the law by their own works. On the other hand, preaching only the law can drive people to despair.

And yet, the formulators point out, preaching of the law is necessary in evangelical preaching. For through the law the Holy Spirit does his “alien work” of convicting the world of sin. And when, and only when, the Holy Spirit accomplishes his “alien work” can he then go about his “real work” of comforting with the gospel those sinners whose consciences have been first terrorized by the law.

Here is where the formulators address one of the unclear statements of the Antinomians. Agricola and others taught that the gospel, in the narrow sense, alone reproves sin and leads sinners to repentance, in the narrow sense. They also taught that it is the gospel, narrow sense, alone that reproves the sin of unbelief.

In this article, the formulators agree that the gospel can be a preaching of the law that terrifies sinners and reproves unbelief. For they ask “where is there a more earnest and terrible revelation, of God’s wrath over sin than the death of Christ, his own Son?” In other words, if you use the cross of Christ and what he suffered there to proclaim the wrath of God and to terrify man, this is not a proclamation of the gospel, in the proper sense of that word or as stated before in the narrow sense, but in fact it is a preaching of law and of Moses.

That this is so was impressed upon me while sitting in the principal’s office as a student of my home congregation’s Christian Day school. The principal was reprimanding me for something I had done wrong. I remember him telling me that every time we sin, we in a sense are pounding the nails into the hands of the Savior hanging on the cross. Even though he was telling me about Jesus’ death on the cross, that was not a proclamation of God’s love and forgiveness for me, but a proclamation of the law to lead me to sorrow over what I had done. Some of the Lenten hymns also use the cross as a preaching of the law. One such example is hymn 127 of Christian Worship. In verse three we sing:

If you think of sin by lightly
nor suppose the evil great,
Here you see its nature rightly,
here its guilt may estimate.
Mark the sacrifice appointed;
See who bears the awful load,
Tis the Word the Lord's Anointed,
Son of Man and Son of God.

But the formulators quickly add that there can't be just preaching of the law. There must also be added the gospel. The two must always go hand in hand. If you don't preach the law, how will sinners see the need for a Savior. If you don't preach the gospel, how will despairing sinners find comfort without a Savior? To support what they state about the necessity of the preaching of both the law and gospel, the formulators quote from both the *Smalcald Articles* and the *Apology to the Augsburg Confession*. These quotes are worth noting here:

The New Testament retains and performs the office of the law, which reveals sin and God's wrath, but to this office it immediately adds the promise of God's grace through the Gospel. (SA, III, 1,4)

The preaching of the law is not sufficient for genuine and salutary repentance; the Gospel must also be added to it. (AAC, IV, 257)

Thus the formulators conclude that genuine evangelical Lutheran preaching must always include both law and gospel together, but in their proper order and with the correct distinction. Therefore, in this article, they officially condemn the Antinomians who wanted to cast the preaching of the law out of the churches and did not want sin to be reproved from the law, but only from the gospel.

Having shown the necessity of proclaiming both law and gospel and having condemned the Antinomians for their confusion of law and gospel, the formulators proceed in Article V with giving a proper definition again of what the law and the gospel really are. In paragraph 17 they point out that the law, strictly speaking, is a divine doctrine which reveals the righteous and immutable will of God, shows how man ought to be disposed in his nature, thoughts, words, and deeds in order to be pleasing and acceptable to God, and threatens with God's wrath and punishment. And what is the gospel, properly speaking? The formulators define the gospel as that doctrine which teaches what a man should believe in order to obtain the forgiveness of sins from God. In their minds and hearts and in their confession, the content of the gospel is that the Son of God himself assumed the curse of the law and paid for all our sins. In other words, unlike the law which terrifies and condemns, the gospel is everything that comforts and offers mercy to transgressors of the law; a good and joyful message that God will not to punish sins but to forgive them for Christ's sake.

Like any good conclusion in any good sermon where the preacher tells his hearers again what he just told them in the sermon, *Article V* closes with another definition what the law is and what the gospel is. *Article V* then concludes with the formulators advice about the kind of preaching and teaching which makes Lutherans truly Lutheran and that needs to be done in the church until the end of time. And what kind of preaching is that? It is preaching that contains both the law and the gospel properly distinguished and properly applied. Let's hear their final words of this article:

Now, in order that both doctrines, that of the Law and that of the Gospel, be not mingled and confounded with one another, and what belongs to the one may not be ascribed to the other, whereby the merit and benefits of Christ are easily obscured and the Gospel is again turned into a doctrine of the Law, as has occurred in the Papacy, and thus Christians are deprived of the true comfort which they have in the Gospel against the terrors of the Law, and the door is again opened in the Church of God to the Papacy, therefore the true and proper distinction between the Law and the Gospel must with all diligence be inculcated and preserved, and whatever gives occasion for confusion between the Law and the Gospel, that is, whereby the two doctrines may be confounded and mingled into one doctrine, should be diligently prevented. It is, therefore, dangerous and wrong to convert the Gospel, properly so called, as distinguished from the Law, into a preaching of repentance or reproof. For otherwise, if understood in a general sense of the entire doctrine, also the *Apology* says several times that the Gospel is a preaching of repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Meanwhile, however, the *Apology* also shows that the Gospel is properly the promise of the forgiveness of sins and of justification through Christ, but that the Law is a doctrine which reproves sins and condemns.

Part III: Concluding Reactions and Remarks

As we conclude this review of *Article V* of the *Formula of Concord*, there are any number of reactions and remarks that we can share on a personal, historical, and doctrinal level.

As we have already noted, there often seems to be a personality flaw that contributes either in igniting the flames of controversy or fueling the flames. Such was the case with Agricola and antinomianism. Agricola's pride seemed to be a major factor in this controversy. Was he jealous of men like Luther and Melancthon? Did he have delusions of grandeur? Did he have his sights set on the mark of prestige and honor among Lutherans? Whatever was in his heart or what drove his actions we can not judge. But what we can do, is watch for sinful pride raising its ugly head in our dealings with our brothers or allowing it to back us into a corner from which we come out swinging at anyone who would dare to question or challenge us. And we all know how easily that can happen. There are times we can misspeak ourselves or ask a question the perhaps we should have kept to ourselves until other wiser or more experienced brothers can help clarify our own thinking. But then when someone tries to correct us gently or not so gently, our pride gets hurt and we begin to argue or attack with words that take us where we really don't want to be or go. May the history of men like Agricola always stand as a warning that "pride does go before the fall."

But the history of this controversy has another human side, that of the patient but firm and loving instruction of Luther and the formulators. One marvels at Luther's patience in dealing with Agricola and also at the firm, fair, and loving way in which the formulators dealt with this controversy and those involved. When it came to putting down on paper where they stood, the formulators did not belittle anyone or attack with personal barbs. They simply expressed what the debate involved, clearly upheld the truth, and firmly condemned what was false. May God continue to give all of us wisdom in dealing with those who are caught up in sin and false doctrine just as our fathers, the formulators did. And may we also be careful to speak clearly as to what we mean so that others may not only understand us, but also so that they don't misunderstand us.

Another aspect of this controversy from which we can learn is that we must always be vigilant. Although this article was written to address the antinomianism that plagued the

Lutheran church in the 16th century, it still can serve to combat antinomianism whenever and wherever it attacks, even today. And don't think for a moment that antinomianism hasn't attacked our church. The WELS has had its casualties too. Time and space do not allow us to go into great discussion, but one only has to take a little peek into the history books to see that there were shades of antinomianism that colored part of the Protestant controversy in the 1930's and the legal battle in which the Nebraska District was involved in dealing with a congregation in Colorado in the 1970's. I'm sure that there are others as well.

Another thought that suggests itself is that *Article V* of the *Formula of Concord* can serve as a touchstone as to whether or not we are trying to use the law to accomplish what only the gospel can accomplish and vice versa. *Article V* not only emphasizes the distinction between the law and gospel, but also the purpose each doctrine is to serve. In the heat of battle in the trenches of our daily work as pastors, there will always be the temptation and danger to confuse the law and gospel or misapply them. Such danger calls for ministers of the gospel to study these doctrines continually and ask the Holy Spirit constantly for guidance and strength in distinguishing and applying them both so that hardened sinners might be crushed by the law and crushed sinners might be comforted through the gospel, and through it all the Savior is glorified.

The study I did for this paper was both refreshing and uplifting to me personally. One is not only amazed at the gifts the Lord gave to the men who penned this confession, but also at God's grace in preserving the truths contained in it. As history has shown, the Lord has always provided the right men at the right time to be his spokesmen in proclaiming and defending his truths. In *Article V* of the *Formula of Concord*, God's spokesmen did just that. They clearly proclaimed the truths about the proper distinction and application of law and gospel and defended these truths against the error of antinomianism. We praise God for this and pray to him that he would keep us in these truths and defend us by these truths from those same errors.

In closing, I would like to share with you what I believe is one of the most beautiful quotes about this very topic, the distinction of law and gospel. It comes to us from one of the great defenders of the truth in our own synod, the sainted Dr. Becker. In his book *The Foolishness of God*, he writes these words on page 140:

...the greatest and the most persistent apparent contradiction in the Bible is that which exists between the law and the gospel. Both law and gospel are the word of God and therefore completely true, but Luther says that we must keep law and gospel separate from each other as far as the heavens are above the earth. They are both necessary, and they both must be used together, but they must be kept distinct...Law and gospel are as different from each other as giving and taking, frightening and make glad. The law terrifies and makes demands of us. The gospel gives and comforts. The purpose of the law is to make us guilty, to humiliate us, to kill us, to lead us into hell, and to take everything from us. The purpose of the gospel is to declare us not guilty and to make us possessors of all things. Between the two of them, they manage to kill us to life.

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