



# The End of the End: The Role of Apocalyptic in the Lutheran Reform

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ONE OF THE PERPLEXING QUESTIONS OF LUTHERAN CONFSSIONAL SCHOLARSHIP is the relation between Luther and Melanchthon. For all their friendship and theological agreement, they could come to deep conflict at both levels.<sup>1</sup> In fact, in Luther's last years, Melanchthon was attempting a theological overhaul of the Lutheran witness which subsequently divided the church into contending parties and necessitated the *Formula of Concord*.

Most of the Lutheran confessions, all but the *Formula*, were complete before Melanchthon's proposed theological revisions came to light. Questions have been raised about some of Melanchthon's formulations in the prior confessions; there is evidence of some shifting assumptions as early as 1528.<sup>2</sup> But well into the 1530s, the differences were more a matter of nuance than genuine alternatives. The 1539 *Variata* or altered edition of the *Augsburg Confession* was the first published evi-

<sup>1</sup>The best single-volume introduction to the problem is *Luther and Melanchthon in the History and Theology of the Reformation*, ed. Vilmos Vajta (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1961).

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Leif Grane's comments on Article 6 of the *Augustana* in *The Augsburg Confession: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1987) 83, and Gerhard Ebeling's observations in "The Doctrine of Triplex Usus Legis," in *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 66, 69.

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dence that the differences were becoming substantial – at that point, on the nature of Christ’s presence in the sacrament.<sup>3</sup>

In the later 1540s and ‘50s, following Luther’s death and the defeat of the Lutheran forces in the Smalcald War, Melanchthon’s alternatives became a matter of open conflict. The disputes concerned matters at the very center of the Lutheran witness: sin and grace, law and gospel, repentance and faith, Christ’s presence in the sacrament, the limits of civil obedience, and so forth. Some of Melanchthon’s students, the “Philippists,” stayed with him, sometimes fronting, usually defending his proposed revisions. Others of his students appealed over Melanchthon’s shoulder to Luther, seeking to restore what they considered original or pure Lutheranism. They have subsequently been called the “Gnesio-Lutherans.”

What happened? How did a movement like Lutheranism, with such an historical reputation for “pure doctrine,” come to disagree over such definitive issues? No doubt, there were a whole host of causes – personal, social, and economic as well as theological. This paper proposes that one of the critical factors, commonly overlooked, is a shift from Luther’s apocalyptic interpretation to Melanchthon’s later substantialist ontology taken over from Aristotle.

One way this shift can be demonstrated is by comparing interpretations of a controversial aspect of the Lutheran reform: the “end of the law,” as the Apostle Paul originally speaks of it in Rom 10:4. Luther took the passage apocalyptically, linking Christ’s victory over the law in the “end” to an actual cessation of law in the conscience of the contemporary believer.

While Melanchthon interpreted the end of the law in the same way in the earliest edition of his theological textbook, the *Loci Communes*, in later editions he backed away from the apocalyptic perspective, proposing a more structural view. When the law loses its end, there are theological consequences throughout traditional Lutheran dialectics, including the very topics over which the Philippists and the Gnesio-Lutherans fought so disastrously.

## I. LUTHER: THE END OF THE LAW

Luther speaks of the end of the law in three of his commonly recognized works: the treatise on *The Freedom of a Christian* of 1520, a sermon in the *Church Postil* written in 1522, and the great *Galatians* of 1535. His Antinomian disputations, written between 1536 and 1539, show the apocalyptic basis of his interpretation.

### 1. In *The Freedom of a Christian*

In *The Freedom of a Christian*, features characteristic of Luther’s interpretation of the end of the law immediately appear: a christological heightening and an emphasis on the reality of faith’s participation in Christ.

To preach Christ means to feed the soul, make it righteous, set it free, and save

<sup>3</sup>Luther wasn’t aware of the differences in the *Variata* until Johann Eck, his old enemy, used Melanchthon’s restatement of Article 10 on the Lord’s supper to show that the Lutherans no longer held to the real presence.

it, provided it believes the preaching. Faith alone is the saving and efficacious use of the Word of God, according to Rom. 10[:9]...Furthermore, "Christ is the end of the law, that everyone who has faith may be justified" [Rom. 10:4].<sup>4</sup>

The christological heightening appears in the immediacy of the preaching. Declaring Christ is not a conceptual act, such as an explanation, but the actual bestowal of Christ's benefits on the hearer. When Christ is preached, the soul is actually fed, made righteous, and freed. The word is the power of Christ functioning in the act of speaking to effect that which is being said. Though it is the preacher's mouth, the actor in the word is God, using the common event of human communication to carry out the divine purpose.

The believer participates in these benefits by faith, which is the product of the word, as Luther makes clear in the sentences that follow. "The Word of God cannot be received and cherished by any works whatever but only by faith. Therefore it is clear that, as the soul needs only the Word of God for its life and righteousness, so it is justified by faith alone and not any works."<sup>5</sup> Hearing the word places the hearer *coram deo*, before God, where there are no alternatives: the new creation, like the old, is *ex nihilo*.

## 2. In a Sermon on Gal 3:23-29

Written while Luther was in hiding following his appearance before the emperor at Worms, the *Postil* is a series of sermons on the texts of the church year. While preaching on Gal 3:23-29, Luther quotes Rom 10:4, saying that it implies that "all believers in Christ are justified and receive his Spirit and his grace, through faith. Here the Law ends for them because they are no longer under it. This is the final meaning of the Law; for it follows: 'But now that faith is come, we are no longer under a tutor.'"<sup>6</sup> One of the benefits of Christ is that the law loses its power. The word and faith take the hearer beyond the law, so that it can be spoken of as ending, as "no longer" being in force.

In the same sermon, Luther defines this assertion further, using the example of a person being freed from prison. Such freedom could come in either of two ways, he suggests: either physically, through release; or spiritually, so that even though still held, the prisoner felt at home, gladly accepting the conditions imposed.

Thus, mark you, has Christ given us spiritual freedom from the Law. He did not abrogate, did not destroy, the Law. But he changed the heart which before was unwillingly under the Law. He so benefited it and made the Law so desirable that the heart has no greater delight and joy than in the Law. The heart would not willingly have the Law fail in one tittle.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup>LW31:346 (WA 7:51). (LW = the American edition of Luther's works; WA = the Weimar edition.)

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>*Luther's Epistle Sermons*, vol. 1 (vol. 7 of *Luther's Complete Works*), transl. John N. Lenker (Minneapolis: Luther Press, 1908) 280.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 275.

The end of the law is an event of faith. Externally, in conditions of everyday life, the demands that grow out of creaturely limits and obligations continue in effect. But to faith the demands are no longer demands—caught up in relation to God and the neighbor, the requirements of relationship are no longer impositions but simply strophes in the rhythms of love.

### 3. In the Lectures on Galatians

In the *Galatians* commentary, based on lectures given in 1531 but not published until 1535, the end of the law becomes a major theme. Consequently, Rom 10:4 appears again and again, throughout the discussion.

Only one of the many references to the end of the law and the Romans text is a developed exposition. Summarizing the argument in Galatians in his own introduction, Luther argues that in faith the believer is no longer under the law but is under grace.

How not under Law? According to the new man, to whom the Law does not apply. For the Law had its limits until Christ, as Paul says below (Gal. 3:24): "The Law, until Christ." When He came, Moses and the Law stopped. So did circumcision, sacrifices, and the Sabbath. So did all the prophets.<sup>8</sup>

He goes on to develop the contrast between two kinds of righteousness, the righteousness of the law, an imposed conformity, and the righteousness of faith, the spontaneous consequence of being held in relation to Christ.

The remaining references to the end of the law and Rom 10:4 in the *Galatians* commentary are formulaic invocations of Christ, to the point that "end of the law" becomes a virtual christological title. For example, in Luther's comments on Gal 4:8, he answers those who invoke the presence of demands in scripture to support the law's unbroken continuance:

All right, but it does not follow: "God has commanded; therefore we do so"....In the corruption of their nature men neither do nor can produce this. Therefore the Law, "You shall love the Lord," does not justify but accuses and damns all men, in accordance with the statement (Rom. 4:15): "The Law brings wrath." But "Christ is the end of the Law, that everyone who has faith may be justified" (Rom. 10:4).<sup>9</sup>

There is the sense in these formulaic references of a sequence being completed. Christ is the end of the law in that he is the last step, relieving the suffering that the law imposes, as its completion or finish. But the use of the verse itself is titular, on the order of the so-called "I am" sayings of John's Gospel. Christ is the end of the law just as he is the Good Shepherd, exclusively, exhaustively, as the only one in whom the law is terminated, completed, and fulfilled.

Another difference in the *Galatians* commentary is that, given Paul's polemics and his own situation, Luther freely uses language he sometimes elsewhere disavows, as in the sermon quoted above: the "abrogation" or "abolition" of the law.

<sup>8</sup>LW 26:7 (WA 40/1:44).

<sup>9</sup>LW 26:398 (WA 40/1:605).

From the beginning, where he says the whole purpose of Christian theology is to learn to ignore the law,<sup>10</sup> Luther repeatedly insists that the law has no place in the life of the believer. In another connection, he puts it even more dramatically: "Moses is dead." "Not one little period in Moses [that is, the decalog] pertains to us" as Christians.<sup>11</sup>

It is more than polemics. Luther is convinced, over and against the medieval tradition, that the whole law has come to a terminus in Christ. He explicitly rejects the tradition which excepted the moral law, confining termination to the ceremonial and judicial law of Israel. The theologians who made this distinction, Luther argues, "do not know what they are saying....For when Paul says that through Christ we have been set free from the curse of the Law (Gal. 3:13), he is certainly speaking about the entire Law, and especially about the Moral Law. It alone actually accuses, curses, and condemns consciences."<sup>12</sup>

Insisting on it, driving it home again and again, Luther uses the language of abolition quite carefully. The curse of the law, its continual accusation, has been abolished or abrogated. Because Christ is at work in the word to affect faith, the end of the law is a reality in the conscience: the believer experiences an actual termination of the law's defining characteristic, its constant accusation. So Luther writes:

Now if our sin has been forgiven through Christ Himself, the Lord of the Law — and forgiven by His having given Himself for it — the Law, that slave, no longer has a right to accuse and condemn us because of our sin; for this has been forgiven, and we have become free by the deliverance of the Son. Therefore the entire Law has been abrogated for believers in Christ.<sup>13</sup>

When the law loses its essential quality among sinners, it is no longer law — under the power of the word which creates faith in Christ, the law has literally, historically, come to an end in the conscience of the faithful. Under such circumstances, the language of abolition or abrogation, exhortations to ignorance of the law, and death notices for Moses are entirely appropriate to Luther: the enemy is vanquished.

#### *4. In the Antinomian Disputations*

At the same time, there is another dimension to the law: what it signifies for the constitutive relationships of life, with God, the neighbor, or the earth itself, both now and in the world to come. The law terminates in the conscience in that it loses its defining function in the life of sinners, but as long as relationships remain, the law will continue to have this significative function. At this level, it can only be abolished when it is also completed and fulfilled.

This other dimension of the law's end comes into closer focus in Luther's Antinomian disputations, which were written over several years in an extended

<sup>10</sup>LW 26:6 (WA 40/1:42).

<sup>11</sup>*How Christians Should Regard Moses*, LW 35:165-166.

<sup>12</sup>LW 26:447 (WA 40/1:671).

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

dispute with Johann Agricola, an early friend of both Luther and Melancthon who became the antinomian of the Lutheran reform. Agricola objectified Luther's understanding of the end of the law, presenting it as an external event beyond faith and the conscience, and therefore argued that the law should no longer be preached in the church. The controversy required Luther to break down the argument concerning the end of the law to its basic premises. In the course of this analysis, the apocalyptic frame of reference becomes clear.

Luther never backed away from his earlier argument that the end of the law was an actual termination. Rather, he defined it more fully. Christ puts an end to the law's idiosyncratic function in this age, its accusation, through the forgiveness of sin and in the creation of the new self that gladly goes about the keeping of the law. Thus Luther argues, "Insofar as Christ is now raised in us, so far are we without the law, sin, and death."<sup>14</sup> Faith participates in the gifts of Christ's resurrection.

Participation in the resurrection is at the same time participation in Christ's death, however. So freedom from the law occurs in being crucified with Christ.<sup>15</sup> When the believer is taken up with Christ in his death and resurrection, the law is "quieted" or "emptied,"<sup>16</sup> so that its accusation is silenced. The law remains *in vacuo*, without function.

But having defined his sense of the end more closely, Luther went on to fill in the other side of the dialectic in even more detail. Even as it is silenced, the law can quickly recover its voice, whether to accuse or, more passively, to signify the relationships of restoration.

One source of the law's continuance is its linkage with sin and death. Like Paul before him, Luther speaks of the law as a power working in cooperation with the other forces that contend against Christ. So he follows the earlier statement, "insofar as Christ is raised in us..." with the converse: "Insofar as he is not yet truly raised in us, so far are we under the law, sin, and death."<sup>17</sup> Silenced in the conscience, the law regains its voice whenever sin and death return.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, the law requires a public voice, for believers and unbelievers alike.

But the other, quieter dimension of the law's continuance grows out of its capacity to signify. As is evident in the statement on the end of the law in *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther rejects the notion of signification in relation to the gospel. The gospel doesn't mean anything; it gives everything. It is an active force, a power, through which the Spirit of the risen Christ works to affect what it says, the end of the law. But the law, in contrast, does signify. It points beyond itself to what it requires but can never, in and of itself, either create or give.

The law signifies the restoration of the defining relationships of life: the first

<sup>14</sup>Thesis 5.40, WA 39/1:356 (cf. Thesis 2.45 and 3.35, WA 39/1:349, 354).

<sup>15</sup>Thesis 5.11, WA 39/1:354.

<sup>16</sup>WA 39/1:433.

<sup>17</sup>Thesis 5.41, WA 39/1:356.

<sup>18</sup>Thesis 5.12, WA 39/1:355.

commandment, with the second and the third, in relation to God; the remaining commandments, in relation to the neighbor and the earth. These are the relationships of redemption, the hope of faith. Consequently, Luther insists, they are eternal: they can never end. "The decalog is eternal, in its reality, however, not as law, because in the future those things which the law demands will be realized."<sup>19</sup>

Here the apocalyptic character of Luther's argument is plain. Though the characteristic imagery and terminology of such literature is missing, the frame of reference and the driving force of Luther's language is clearly shaped by this hope: the conviction of a creation-wide end, secured in Christ's death and resurrection, is the basis of the discussion of an end to the law in the conscience of the individual. Christ's victory has brought the powers of this age which contend against him—sin, death, and the law—to submission; he establishes by its fulfillment what the law could at best implicitly promise but never deliver.

## II. MELANCHTHON: THE END OF THE END OF THE LAW

When Melanchthon arrived in Wittenberg in 1518, he and Luther quickly became close friends. Regarded as a prodigy, Melanchthon quickly established himself with Luther as another leading spokesman in the movement that was spreading through Germany and into adjoining areas. His *Loci Communes* of 1521, his editorial work with the *Augsburg Confession*, and his *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* are compelling demonstrations of his contribution to Lutheranism.

But the relationship between Luther and Melanchthon was considerably more complicated than commonly conceived. Luther's continued prominence in theological discussion has put his younger colleague into an unhistorical subservience: Melanchthon was at least Luther's equal at the time, if not in some ways his superior. Such partnerships were no easier in the sixteenth century than they are in the late twentieth.

The first sign of trouble was in 1522, when Melanchthon's difficulties maintaining a firmly consistent hand in leadership prompted Luther's return from the Wartburg. Relations between them were broken off for five years. During these years, Melanchthon was additionally offended both by Luther's marriage and his reply to Erasmus in *The Bondage of the Will*.

As strongly impressed as Melanchthon had been by Luther's theology, he nevertheless retained deep loyalties to Erasmus and the program of renaissance humanism that he had learned, as a younger scholar, at Heidelberg and Tübingen. In 1535, when Erasmus was dying, Melanchthon wrote to him, saying that he had sought to be faithful to Erasmus in everything that he had taught.<sup>20</sup> A particular point of the loyalty was a practical bent characteristic of this type of humanism. Toward the end of his life, Melanchthon wrote to his biographer Joachim Camerius that he had sought in everything that he had written to contribute to the actual

<sup>19</sup>WA 39/1:413.

<sup>20</sup>Robert Stupperich, "The Development of Melanchthon's Theological-Philosophical World-view," *Lutheran World* 7/2 (1960) 169.

betterment of community life, a statement Wilhelm Pauck takes as programmatic for Melanchthon.<sup>21</sup>

Though the personal conflict between Luther and Melanchthon ended in 1527, it soon became clear to the Wittenberg reformers that Melanchthon was moving in a different direction. His *Articles of Visitation*, calling for full-scale use of the law in restoring the moral order of the congregations in Saxony, provoked the first stage of what was to become the antinomian controversy,<sup>22</sup> which erupted in the summer of 1528.

Melanchthon's theological development can be traced by examining his interpretations of the end of the law, in reference to Rom 10:4. The *Loci*, intended for use as a theological textbook, went through several editions as Melanchthon revised it. The revisions give firsthand evidence of the changes in his theological reflection.

The first edition presents a chapter entitled, "The Difference between the Old and the New Testaments and the Abrogation of the Law." It is a systematic presentation of what is spread over several documents in Luther's work, including a ten-page statement on abrogation.<sup>23</sup> The arguments are identical to Luther's: abolishing the accusation of the law, Christ brings a halt to the law's definitive function in the conscience, thereby freeing the faithful to tend, in the liberty of faith, to what the law signifies. "Christ took away the curse of the law and the right it had so that even though you have sinned, even though you now have sin...yet you are saved. Our Samson has shattered the power of death, the power of sin, the gates of hell."<sup>24</sup> "Freedom does not consist in this, that we do not observe the law, but that we will and desire spontaneously and from the heart what the law demands."<sup>25</sup>

Significant changes began to appear in the various editions of the *Loci Communes* after 1525. Taking the 1533 edition as representative,<sup>26</sup> Melanchthon's movement on the doctrine of law is immediately evident. The discussion of the law has been rewritten under the title "On Christian Freedom," with the language of abrogation toned down in careful qualification. It applies not to the impenitent but only to those who faithfully participate in the benefits of Christ. "To be free from the law is not to be free from obedience to the moral law but from the curse of the law."<sup>27</sup>

<sup>21</sup>Wilhelm Pauck, "Luther and Melanchthon," in Vajta, *Luther and Melanchthon*, 15.

<sup>22</sup>*Corpus Reformatorum* (Braunschweig: Schwetschke, 1858) 26:9-27. For a different version of this material, see the *Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors*, LW 40:269-320.

<sup>23</sup>P. Melanchthon, *Loci Communes Theologici*, in *Melanchthon and Bucer*, ed. W. Pauck, vol. 19 of *The Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969) 120-130.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>26</sup>In 1532, a couple of years after his engagement at Augsburg, Melanchthon went back to work on his Romans commentary. The most significant change in his treatment of the end of the law, as he discusses it on Rom 10:4, is the downplaying of the language of abrogation; *Melanchthons Werke in Auswahl* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1965) 5:266.

<sup>27</sup>*Corpus Reformatorum*, 21:459.

The most dramatic changes among the various editions of the *Loci Communes* occur for the most part after 1540. The 1555 edition, which has been translated, shows the transformation. This time in the chapter on Christian freedom, Melancthon goes back to the original medieval limits on abrogation and then, after some further discussion, acknowledges the question: "Here we might ask why freedom from law is only from the ceremonial and civil law of Moses and not also from the Ten Commandments," and while implicitly acknowledging a more carefully qualified abrogation of the moral law, quickly blunts even that: "But the law, which is called the Ten Commandments, or *legem moralem*, is the eternal unchangeable wisdom and righteousness of God....It cannot be effaced...for the order that the rational creature should be obedient to God stands forever."<sup>28</sup>

That Melancthon himself sensed the change and had trouble dealing with it is evident in the question that immediately follows this discussion in the 1555 edition: "If the law is eternal, how could Adam have been received again?" Having emphasized the eternal requirement of the law, Melancthon was apprehensive that forgiveness had been endangered—eternal requirements that cannot be effaced cannot simply be dropped! Beginning by invoking mystery, he finds the answer, predictably, in Christ's eternal satisfaction of the law, finally insisting that we are free from the law in the matter of justification and condemnation but not in obedience.<sup>29</sup>

When the 1521 and 1555 editions of the *Loci* are put side by side, it is clear that the poles of the argument have been reversed. In his earlier work, as in Luther's work throughout, the first premise is implicitly apocalyptic: by his death and resurrection, Christ has brought the powers to submission and is even now doing the same for the individual by abrogating the law in the conscience to enable its spontaneous fulfillment in faith. The abrogation of the law is the focus of the whole argument. In Melancthon's later work, the controlling assumption is the law as an eternal structure of life that above all, demands to be satisfied. The apocalyptic is gone.

### III. THE ROLE OF APOCALYPTIC

Some years ago, Ernst Käsemann called apocalyptic "the mother of Christian theology," asking whether it is possible to think faithfully without it. He was quickly challenged by Gerhard Ebeling, pressing for what has proven very difficult for biblical scholars to achieve: a common definition.<sup>30</sup>

Whatever the status of apocalyptic for Christian theology overall, if it is

<sup>28</sup>Clyde L. Manschreck, tr. and ed., *Melancthon on Christian Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University, 1965) 198; see also the discussion beginning on 196.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>30</sup>Ernst Käsemann, "The Beginnings of Christian Theology," in *New Testament Questions Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 108f. For other definitions, see Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), and J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul's Apocalyptic Gospel: The Coming Triumph of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

defined as the cosmological dimension of Easter hope, the expectation of Christ's imminent return and his present restoration of both creature and creation in light of his coming, this much is certain: Luther's way of thinking theologically cannot be understood without it. His recovery of the eschatology of the New Testament, in its apocalyptic form, has to be counted with the theology of the cross as constitutive of his theology.<sup>31</sup>

In fact, the whole framework of the Lutheran reform was apocalyptic. A variety of forces had combined to heighten the expectations of late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century people;<sup>32</sup> caught up in the eschatology of Paul, Luther, like the apostle before him, was carried from obscurity to stand before the emperor; he was understood and came to understand himself as a prophet on the order of Elijah and John the Baptist, called to faithful confession at the end of time.<sup>33</sup> Given such circumstances, it can hardly be considered surprising that Luther would find apocalyptic so persuasive.

It is a different kind of apocalyptic than commonly conceived, however. Luther had changing views of books like Daniel and Revelation, with their imagery and calculations.<sup>34</sup> But the structure of his thinking, like Isaiah's or Paul's, is shaped by the assumptions evident in his treatment of the end of the law.

Luther's dialectics move accordingly, generally working backwards from the apocalyptic conviction to its predicates. For example, the argument for the bound will begins with a conclusion drawn from the gospel: if Christ has overcome the power of sin, we must be sinners; if Christ's death and resurrection were the necessary condition of such release, humanity must be incapable of freeing itself any other way. There is a descriptive quality to Luther's reasoning; beginning with assumptions about human sinfulness, it is not difficult to find evidence. But the force of the argument theologically is shaped by the gospel.

The same must be said for Luther's understanding of law. It is certainly true, as he argued experientially, that the law must come before the gospel. As commonly observed, people don't change without a reason. But it is just as certain that theologically, Luther's understanding of law is predicated on his prior conviction about the gospel: if Christ saves, the law must not be capable of redeeming; if God saves apart from the law, he must always have intended to come to us in Christ; if there is no salvation in the law, it must have some other essential but ancillary functions.

<sup>31</sup>See Heiko Oberman, *Forerunners of the Reformation: The Shape of Late Medieval Thought* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969); Klaus Aichele, *Das Antichristdrama des Mittelalters, der Reformation und Gegenreformation* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974); Paul Althaus, *Die letzten Dinge: Lehrbuch der Eschatologie*, 5th ed. (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1949); Ulrich Asendorf, *Eschatologie bei Luther* (Tübingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967); and Jane E. Strohl, *Luther's Eschatology: The Last Times and the Last Things* (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1989).

<sup>32</sup>See Oberman, *Forerunners*, 10f., 18.

<sup>33</sup>Karl Holl, "Martin Luther on Luther," in *Interpreters of Luther*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972) 9-31.

<sup>34</sup>Strohl, *Luther's Eschatology*, 22-32.

Lutherans who work in the traditional categories run into trouble as soon as this apocalyptic drive is lost. That is what happened to Melanchthon. Holding to his renaissance humanist convictions concerning moral betterment or transformation, anxious about the alarming disorder he perceived in the congregations, he turned in the later 1520s to the law as a force for renewal; throughout the 1530s, he attempted to develop a theological superstructure that would bear the law's weight.

But the most important change took place in the early 1540s. After his experiments of the '30s, Melanchthon was convinced that more basic steps were needed. He began a programmatic rethinking of the Lutheran witness, using Aristotelian metaphysical categories for this purpose.<sup>35</sup> In such a way of thinking, the law is an eternal structure guaranteeing the cohesiveness of the universe, and freedom of the will is an essential human characteristic necessary to speak of obedience to the law.

The result was a disaster, for Melanchthon as well as his students. Luther's apocalyptically driven, experientially oriented dialectics just wouldn't fit in a structural world dominated by law and the human will. Apart from the gospel, the doctrine of the bound will quickly degenerates into an abstract knowledge to be contended for as part of a theological system; in the context of a Greco-Roman, Aristotelian definition, the law simply cannot end, not even if Christ gets hold of it. It can only be reinterpreted as a "new law," domesticated by definition, but in fact going about its old business, accusing relentlessly.

The *Formula of Concord* salvaged what it could, in the process restoring the Lutheranism it recognized from the earlier confessions. But there is still a remaining question. Early in his theological studies, Luther recognized that the Greco-Roman assumptions characteristic of Aristotle could not provide the support necessary for the theological reflection on the gospel characteristic of effective witness. Going back, Melanchthon simply proved Luther's point. But as Robert W. Jenson has pointed out, Lutheranism has not gone forward from this point. An ontology worked out in the light of the justification of the godless that would serve preaching, as did Luther's apocalyptic thought, remains as one of the challenges for contemporary theological reflection.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup>Clemens Bauer, "Martin Luthers Naturrechtslehre," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 42 (1951) 100.

<sup>36</sup>Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 108f.