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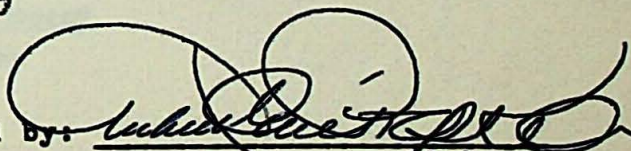
THE PLACE OF THE LAW-GOSPEL POLARITY
IN THE HERMENEUTICAL THEOLOGY OF
GERHARD EBELING

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Systematic Theology
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Sacred Theology

by
David G. Truemper
May 1969

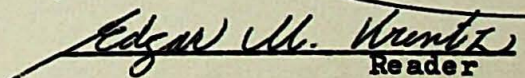
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The present study is an attempt to investigate, in the work of one of the theologians primarily responsible for the contemporary interest in hermeneutical problems, the role that the Law-Gospel Polarity plays in the process of hermeneutics. Gerhard Ebeling, a one-time student of Rudolf Bultmann whose work was first introduced to American theologians by James M. Robinson under the label, "The New Hermeneutic,"¹ was chosen as the subject of this investigation because of the extensive use that he makes of the distinction between the Law and the Gospel, and because of his frequent appeals to, and his many studies in, the theology of Martin Luther. Since Ebeling claims to take his bearings from the theology of the Reformation, a study of his theology, and particularly the place of the Law-Gospel Polarity in that theology, seems most appropriate. Since Ebeling's introduction to American theologians in the early 1960's, several studies of his works have appeared--both appreciative and critical. He has been touted as the systematician of the Bultmann-school, as a linguistically-oriented theologian who builds on the ideas of the later Heidegger as Bultmann built his system on the earlier Heidegger, as one of the participants in the so-called "new quest for the historical Jesus"; yet rarely, if

¹James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr., editors, The New Hermeneutic, New Frontiers in Theology (New York: Harper & Row, c.1964), II.

at all, is his concern with Luther's theology accorded more than a passing and occasionally almost embarrassed acknowledgement by his reviewers and critics. Since almost half of Ebeling's published works are specifically pieces of Luther research, and since references and appeals to Luther abound in his constructive works, it would seem that any adequate study of Ebeling's theology must take into account the role of his Luther-research in Ebeling's total theological activity. The present study, then, focuses on the role of the Law-Gospel Polarity in Ebeling's theology, first, to examine Ebeling's use of "Law and Gospel," and second, to make an initial attempt to compare Ebeling's use with Luther's.

The major emphasis of the present study is, therefore, on the work of Gerhard Ebeling; detailed research on Luther is beyond the scope of this thesis. At the same time this inquiry does not attempt to make a complete study of all aspects of Ebeling's work. Rather, it proposes to sketch the major elements in the development of Ebeling's theology in order to see the context in which his specifically hermeneutical work is carried out, with a view to describing the role of the Law-Gospel Polarity in his work. The procedure followed is indicated by the chapter headings: First, the major stages of development in Ebeling's theological career are briefly outlined; second, account is taken of the nature and extent of Ebeling's Luther-research; third, an attempt is made to describe Ebeling's understanding of hermeneutics; fourth, the role of Law-Gospel Polarity within that hermeneutical theology is examined; fifth, a summary of Luther's use

of the Law-Gospel Polarity is presented, on the basis of which, finally, summary and concluding comments on Ebeling's use of the Law-Gospel Polarity are offered.

Apart from a few early and obscure book reviews and brief articles, all of Ebeling's published works were taken into account in the present study. About half of these have been translated into English; for these works the translations have been used, where available. Included in appendices are the German original of the biographical sketch presented on pages 6 and 7 and a chronological bibliography of Ebeling's works which was sent to the author by Ebeling's Assistent, Karl-Heinz zur Mühlen.

It will be noted that the word "hermeneutics" is used in two senses in this study: traditionally, the term referred to the principles and rules of biblical interpretation, but it is also used in a broader sense to refer to the whole task of interpreting the message of the biblical documents as gospel proclamation for the contemporary situation--thus including the entire process of theological understanding. The latter sense represents Ebeling's characteristic use of the term. Neither Ebeling nor Luther seem to insist on a hermeneutical place for the Law-Gospel Polarity if restricted to the first, common, narrower sense;² but both theologians make much of the Law-Gospel Polarity in the whole process of theological understanding. Ebeling regards the distinction of Law and Gospel as the basic theological

²In the case of Luther, of course, that statement is in need of qualification. See Chapter VI below.

insight (theologische Grunderkenntnis) and Luther makes use of the polarity in a wide variety of contexts. Thus, the question of the role of the Law-Gospel Polarity is really a question of theological method, and not merely a question within the limited field of biblical exegesis.

In view of some contemporary critiques of a so-called "new hermeneutic," it should be made clear that the Law-Gospel Polarity is not used (by either Ebeling or Luther) as an excuse to do violence to biblical texts. It is not an exegete's "open sesame!" that would enable him to throw away the tools of linguistic and critical study. Rather, it functions ideally in such a way as to assure that what the biblical texts have to say gets heard in the proper way, that is, as Gospel or "good news" today. It is as if the light in the biblical documents were polarized light, and that the Law-Gospel Polarity functions as the polarized lens that permits us to see the light of the biblical message. As such a device, it is determined by the biblical texts and a study of them; it is not an alien matter introduced from outside of Scripture which would distort the documents. Nevertheless, the Polarity becomes, for the evangelical theologian, a part of the presuppositions³ with which he comes to the study of the biblical documents. Indicative of this point of view is the following statement from an essay by a contemporary Lutheran systematician, Walter Bouman:

³The German word Vorverständnis seems better to connote our intent here.

There never has been an "objective," presuppositionless study of the Bible. Is it not just possible that the Reformation distinction between God's word of Gospel and God's word of condemnation is the presupposition which unlocks the biblical message? Certainly the Reformation confession can guard against an arbitrary and non-evangelical point of departure for Biblical study. At the same time this whole area may well be one of the most urgent and critical "for a theology bound to the Lutheran Confession."⁴

Ebeling's theology provides an implicit "yes" to Bouman's suggestion and it does so in a way that can be received appreciatively, though not without reservation, by theologians "bound to the Lutheran Confession"--at least, inasfar as Luther is a proper exponent of that Confession.

⁴Walter Bouman, "The Confessions' Contribution to a Catholic Christianity," Lutheran Forum, II (March 1968), 10.

CHAPTER II

THE DEVELOPMENT OF EBELING'S HERMENEUTICAL THEOLOGY

Because of a scarcity of published biographical information, we herewith reproduce, in translation, a biographical note prepared by Ebeling's Assistent, Karl-Heinz zur Mühlen. The note was sent to this writer as part of correspondence dated 21 January, 1966.

Professor Dr. Gerhard Ebeling is an Evangelical theologian. He was born in Berlin in 1912. After completing the classical Gymnasium course of study, he began in 1930 to study theology in Marburg, Zurich, and Berlin, under Rudolf Bultmann, Hans Freiherr von Soden, Emil Brunner, and others, as well as philosophy under Gerhard Krüger, Eberhard Grisebach, and Nicolai Hartmann. In autumn of 1934, during the Kirchenkampf, he applied for examination with the illegal Examination Commission of the Consistory of the Confessing Church of Berlin-Brandenburg. For a year and a half he served as curate in Crossen-an-der-Oder and in Fehrbellin (Mark Brandenburg). For a half year he attended the Predigerseminar of the Confessing Church in Finkenwalde-bei-Stettin, under the direction of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. At his request, he was granted a leave of absence by the church administration for the purpose of graduate study, and he worked on his dissertation in Zurich, where he received the degree of Doctor of Theology in 1938. After the second theological examination and ordination in Berlin-Dahlem, he became pastor of the Notgemeinde of the Confessing Church in Berlin-Hermsdorf. From 1940 to 1945 he was conscripted as a medical orderly. Beginning in August, 1945, he worked as research assistant under Hanns Rückert at the University of Tübingen, and then qualified himself and became Ordinarius in Church History there in 1946, and Ordinarius in Systematic Theology in 1954. In 1956 he was called to the University of Zurich to the chair of systematic theology, history of dogma, and symbolics; beginning in 1962 he assumed the direction of the Institute for Hermeneutics which was established at his suggestion as part of the Theological Faculty at the University of Zurich. In the autumn semester of 1963 he taught as guest professor at Drew University, in Madison, New Jersey. In 1965 he returned to the University of Tübingen as Professor of Systematic Theology and director of the newly established Institute for Hermeneutics there. His residence

. . . is still in Zurich, where he continues to hold a professorship. He is editor of the Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche and the Beiträge zur historischen Theologie and co-editor of Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie and of the Journal for Theology and the Church. In addition, he is a member of the Commission for the Publication of the Works of Martin Luther. His principal fields are dogmatics, Luther studies, and hermeneutics.¹

Ebeling has been involved in hermeneutics² since the beginning of his theological career. His study at Marburg under Bultmann from 1930 to 1932 acquainted him with that philosopher-theologian's hermeneutical work.³ His dissertation, completed at Zurich under Fritz Blanke in 1938, was a study of Luther's hermeneutics on the basis of the Reformer's sermons.⁴ Although he began his academic career in the history of dogma and moved from there into the field of systematic theology, he has centered his interest in the

¹A copy of Karl-Heinz zur Mühlen's Biographische Notiz is to be found in Appendix A.

²Although James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr., use the singular form "hermeneutic" to speak of Ebeling's inclusion of the whole process of theological understanding into his position, and use the plural form "hermeneutics" to describe the traditional reference to the principles of exegesis, it is hardly possible to maintain a meaningful distinction between the two forms. Certainly that distinction is unknown in German, where Hermeneutik is the form employed in all contexts. It therefore seems advisable, in English, to use only one form of the word (in this case, the plural "hermeneutics") in order to permit the ambiguity of the German to remain. See James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr., editors, The New Hermeneutic, New Frontiers in Theology (New York: Harper & Row, c.1964), II, ix-x.

³Robinson, "Hermeneutic Since Barth," Ibid., p. 63 n. 187.

⁴Evangelische Evangelienauslegung: Eine Untersuchung zu Luthers Hermeneutik (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, c.1942; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1962).

hermeneutical aspects of theology. His study of Luther has likewise been a constant factor in the development of his theological position.

Ebeling's inaugural lecture at Tübingen⁵ reflects the church historian's continuing and growing concern with hermeneutics. Already in this essay there appear some of the accents which have since become characteristic of his thought. He insists on the interrelatedness and basic unity of the various sub-disciplines of theology. He speaks of a hermeneutical orientation, by means of which theology is kept at its business of relating itself to the reality that confronts man--and that must include a historical sensitivity, too.⁶ After suggesting, then, that the church historian must take into account the work of the exegete and the systematician,

⁵The lecture was originally published under the title Kirchengeschichte als Geschichte der Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1947); it was then reprinted in Wort Gottes und Tradition (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1964), pp. 9-27. Hereafter the latter volume will be referred to as WGuT. The English translation by S. H. Hooke, The Word of God and Tradition (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, c.1968) will be referred to as WGaT.

⁶"Die einzelnen Zweige der theologischen Arbeit sind derartig aufeinander angewiesen, daß sie gar nicht in der Vereinzelung betrieben werden können. Der Exeget muß nicht nur die Geschichte der Auslegung kennen, sondern auch in der hermeneutischen Besinnung die Arbeit des Systematikers vollziehen, d. h. die Begegnung der Ganzheit der Theologie mit der Ganzheit der Existenz des heutigen Menschen. Und ebenso kann der Systematiker diese seine Arbeit nur leisten, wenn er durch die Exegese und die Kirchengeschichte im weitesten Sinn hindurchgegangen ist, d. h. wenn er die Geschichtlichkeit der Existenz ernst nimmt. . . . Daß schließlich der Kirchenhistoriker weder die exegetische noch die systematische Theologie entbehren kann, dürfte durch die Tatsache einer methodologischen Besinnung über die Kirchengeschichte bereits erwiesen sein und soll im folgenden weitere Klärung erfahren." WGuT, p. 12; WGaT, pp. 14-15.

he discusses the place of church history in the whole of theology, the relation of church history to the whole of the scientific study of history, and the consequent interrelatedness of profane and church history.

In the second part of the essay Ebeling distinguishes between what he considers to be the three main types of approaches to church history: the Roman Catholic, the Enthusiastic, and that of the Reformers. The Roman Catholic approach, he says, grows out of the identification of the church with the mystical Body of Christ, and specifically of the Roman Catholic church as the direct extension of the Incarnation. As a result, both the theological and the historical character of church history flow together. This, the strength in the Roman Catholic approach to church history, is at the same time its greatest weakness; for, while it anticipates a particular type of picture from the course of church history, it also becomes vulnerable to the results of the historical method. This is seen most clearly in confronting the question of the origin of the Roman Church.⁷

The very essence of Enthusiasm (Schwärmertum) likewise provides the strength and the weakness of its approach to church history. Since the church is characterized by its immediate relationship to God, the church itself is removed from the concrete sphere of historicity (Geschichtlichkeit) into essential invisibility. As a result, the Enthusiastic concept of church history lacks

⁷ WGuT, p. 19; WGaT, p. 23.

an essential connection to history. It operates only vertically, in the realm of metaphysics; the horizontal dimension of history can be only the story of a blurred image of the church.⁸

Because the concept of church history depends upon the concept of the church, it is difficult to speak of a Reformation⁹ type of church history. This is so as a result of the constantly-recurring formula "visible and invisible church"--a formula capable of a variety of interpretations. An emphasis upon either aspect of the church's existence colors the corresponding concept of church history. Ebeling sees a way out of this dilemma in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession, particularly in its view of both church and history from the vantage point of the interpretation of the Scriptures in proclamation to the gathered congregation.¹⁰ The exposition of Scripture, then, provides the key to the proper understanding of church history, for exposition takes place in no other way than in and for the sake of the gathered congregation. Both the church and the Word thus are

⁸WGuT, p. 20; WGaT, p. 24.

⁹Ebeling's word here is reformatörisch. No English word is really adequate; "reformatory" does not clearly bespeak the Reformation of the sixteenth century, "reformed" has come to refer only to a single branch of the Reformation movement, and "Reformers'" is at best an awkward expression. Hence "Reformation" will be used most often to refer to Ebeling's frequently-recurring word.

¹⁰WGuT, p. 22; WGaT, p. 26.

firmly grounded in history.¹¹ This leads to the definition of church history given in the title of the essay: church history is the history of the exposition of the Holy Scripture.

The third part of the essay spells out the implications of such a definition of church history, and places that concept firmly within the realm of hermeneutics. This definition determines the province of church history as that where "the witness of Jesus Christ is heard in the interpretation of Holy Scripture."¹² For the church entered history, on the first Pentecost, with an exposition of the historic Old Testament Scriptures, and it continued its existence in history with just such exposition. Second, this definition of church history determines the nature of church history as that which stands between us and the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, for it is only through that history that the witness of Jesus Christ reaches us. Indeed, "It no more gives us a direct approach to Holy Scripture, than it gives us a direct approach to Jesus Christ."¹³ And third, this definition determines the truly theological character of the discipline of church history; for that history serves the critical purpose of destroying everything which, in the course of the church's

¹¹"Daß das Wort Gottes nur jeweils gegeben ist in der immer neuen Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift und daß diese Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift nicht zu trennen ist von der Relation zu der konkreten Versammlung derer, die auf diese Auslegung hören und als Hörende eben diese Auslegung mit vollziehen, das begründet die echte in der Geschichtlichkeit des Wortes Gottes begründete Geschichtlichkeit der Kirche." Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

¹³WGaT, p. 30; WGuT, p. 25.

existence, has interposed itself between the church and Christ by becoming a kind of biblical exposition that did not point to Christ.¹⁴

Thus already in his inaugural lecture Ebeling brings to light the accents which characterize his theological thinking. The various disciplines of theology are seen as essentially united under an all-embracing concern for hermeneutics, for the historical-systematic-exegetical exposition of the Holy Scriptures.¹⁵

In 1950 Ebeling revived the Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche, together with Erich Dinkler, Hartmut Gese, Ernst Käsemann, Gerhard Rosenkranz, Hanns Rückert, and Ernst Steinbach. In October, 1949, Ebeling read a paper before the members of the editorial circle as a basis for discussion about the proposed revival of the journal. A revision of that paper appeared in the first issue, under the title "The Significance of the Critical Historical Method for Church and Theology in Protestantism."¹⁶ In this essay he offers not only a

¹⁴WGuT, p. 27; WGaT, p. 31.

¹⁵This preliminary designation of hermeneutics as the unifying factor, uniting all the theological disciplines characterizes Ebeling's later work. Ebeling's "Discussion Theses for a Course of Introductory Lectures on the Study of Theology" make quite clear his concern for the unification of the theological disciplines. There he says, "Theology is an indivisible whole because it has to do with one single, fundamentally simple thing--the Word of God which is not many things but one. The articulation of theology into different fields of study is meaningful only if each partial concern can be understood as of such a kind that the whole is latent in it." Word and Faith, translated by James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p. 425. Hereafter this work will be referred to as WF.

¹⁶Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche, XLVII (1950), 1-46. Hereafter referred to as ZThK. English translation in WF, pp. 17-61.

discussion of the significance of the historical-critical method, but also a program for the advance of theology by means of this method. Again here the unification of the various theological disciplines is advanced, again in terms of a thorough-going hermeneutics. Significantly, this argument is based upon the theology of the Reformers, as Ebeling feels it is to be understood today.¹⁷ Ebeling realizes, of course, that a simple return to the theology of the Reformers is impossible;

a mere refurbishing [Repristination] and repetition of the theology of the Reformers is as utterly impossible as the bypassing of the intervening history with its alterations in the statement of the problems and its new presentations of them. Even a theology which is ever so closely oriented towards the theology of the Reformers will be compelled to differ from it considerably, as surely as disregard of the historical difference between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries turns¹⁸ out in the end to be nothing but a piece of self-deception.

This idea is repeated in the "Preface to English Edition":

To take our bearings from the theology of the Reformers and at the same time to take modern thought seriously seems to be incompatible, or possible only by means of sorry compromises. For me, however, my vocation as a theologian stands or falls with the opposite view. For we can be evangelical theologians neither without the Reformers' understanding of the Gospel nor without thinking within the field of present-day experience of reality. . . . it can neither be a case of refurbishing the theology of the Reformers, nor can it be a question of regarding modern thought as a criterion which stands beyond question and to which we must blindly bow. My experience and conviction as a theological thinker is this: that there is no need to construct a supplementary and artificial bond between what belongs to the Reformation and to the modern age. Rather, both come properly to light only in mutual encounter, and thus when they are considered together.¹⁹

¹⁷By "Reformers" Ebeling almost always means Martin Luther. The mention of other Reformers in Ebeling's writings is exceedingly rare.

¹⁸WF, p. 18.

¹⁹WF, pp. 9-10.

To take the modern world seriously is to confront honestly the problem of history, the history which both connects and separates us in the twentieth century from the Reformers in the sixteenth century. Indeed, "Christianity is a historic phenomenon," deriving from a "definite historical past,"²⁰ and Christian theology displays "close relations to contemporary variations in the history of thought in general"--a state of affairs necessitated by its being bound to history throughout its existence.²¹ Ebeling insists that the basic problem confronting theology today is not just the question of the validity of its being bound to conform, in a sense, to the times; "it is the problem of method that in the theological situation today has entered an extremely topical and critical stage."²² In other words, the theological problems of today are focused in the question of hermeneutics. This is so, not only for the exegete (where the hermeneutical question is obvious), but also for those engaged in the other theological disciplines.

The Reformation had prepared the way for the emergence of the hermeneutic problem by its break with the prevailing understanding of revelation and its insistence upon the sola Scriptura, and this led "to the heart of the hermeneutic question, to the problem of how revelation becomes a present actuality."²³ While the Roman Catholic

²⁰ WF, pp. 28-29.

²¹ WF, pp. 26-27.

²² WF, p. 27.

²³ WF, p. 32.

understanding of the actualization of revelation emphasizes the sacrament, the sacrifice of the Mass, the Reformation insists "that the historical $\acute{\alpha}\nu\alpha\kappa\iota\varsigma$ of revelation becomes present in faith alone."²⁴

Revelation and the present are separated from each other in such a way that only one bridge remains: the Word alone--and indeed, lest any misunderstanding should arise, the Word interpreted as salvation sola gratia, sola fide. All other bridges have been broken up.²⁵

However, the Reformers' breakthrough is the very cause of the problem of methodology, of hermeneutics, today. While making of theology primarily exegesis, and historical exegesis at that, the Reformers' exposition of Scripture presupposed that the biblical picture of history and the world was a valid one; thus a historical exegesis ensured the actualization of the revelation for its own day. If, now, the modern world operates with a view of history quite different from that of the Bible, and if the exposition of the biblical Word accepted by faith is the one means of actualizing revelation in the present, then the hermeneutical problem becomes a burning one for a theology which takes its stand upon the Reformation while frankly confronting the modern world.

In Ebeling's view, the answer to this hermeneutic problem lies in the proper use of the historical-critical method. This is not to make of the historical-critical method a foolproof technical tool; rather, it means to include within that method the whole hermeneutic process.

²⁴WF, p. 35.

²⁵WF, p. 36.

That does not imply the slightest prejudice to the stringent methods of historical research and their technical application. On the contrary, the very process of taking the historical source in all its historicity (and that means in its distance from the present) and making it luminous by means of a critical examination that penetrates to the uttermost limits of its explicability, and thereby at the same time also critically correcting the prejudices of the expositor himself and making clear to him the historical conditionedness of his own pre-conceptions--that very process creates the necessary basis for a genuine encounter with the text, and thereby also for the possibility of having it speak to us. . . . the way is now open to genuinely historic, personal encounter and discussion, whereby the interpreter remains aware of the fact that the actualization he has achieved is a transformation of the historical--a transformation in which the historical distance is constantly kept in view and remains a critical corrective of the understanding of history. And then it can happen, in accordance with the well-known principle of the hermeneutic circle, that the understanding which achieves the actualization becomes the key to seeing specific matters of historical fact for the first time in their distinctiveness and peculiarity, and thus also to applying properly the technical methods of historical research.²⁶

The answer to the hermeneutic problem posed for us by the Reformation does not lie, then, simply in a return to the theology of the Reformers. Rather, the help is to be found in the basic principle from which the Reformers set out, namely, "through faith alone (sola fide)."²⁷ From the starting-point of this principle, theology is preserved from false hermeneutical "keys" while at the same time it is given a kind of "key" that makes understanding possible.²⁷

²⁶WF, p. 49.

²⁷"Only critical reflection on the decisive basic principle from which the Reformers set out can help us to perceive whether and in what way there exist in the complex dynamic field of the Reformation as a whole definite essential inner connexions with the critical historical method of modern times. . . . The sola fide of the Reformation doctrine of justification both contains a rejection of any existing ways of ensuring present actualization, . . . and also positively includes an understanding of actualization in the sense of genuinely historic, personal encounter." WF, p. 56.

The historical-critical method must be taken up in each of the theological disciplines and rigorously employed, so that theology will be kept to its proper concern, "the historic revelation in Jesus Christ," and so that it will be fully aware of the "historicalness of its own . . . theological labours."²⁸

Many of these same accents are taken up in Ebeling's 1954 essay on the problem of historicity.²⁹ This work emphasizes the necessity of proclamation for theology and the church. For if the revelation is to be actualized in the present by means of the Word heard in faith, that Word must be expounded and proclaimed. Ebeling works from Luther's insistence upon the Gospel as a preached Word, a "living voice (viva vox)," to a discussion of the relationship between Word and Scripture. And here the distinction between Law and Gospel comes into play in a preliminary way.³⁰ In Ebeling's view, to interpret

²⁸WF, p. 59.

²⁹The German title was Die Geschichtlichkeit der Kirche und ihrer Verkündigung als theologisches Problem; the English edition appears with the title The Problem of Historicity in the Church and its Proclamation, translated by Grover Foley (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, c.1967).

³⁰"The word of Scripture, considered as a written word and therefore as a word belonging to the past, is not the Word of God; in this form it would always be only Law and not Gospel. Instead, the word of Scripture is the Word of God when it is a word proclaimed in the present, a viva vox evangelii--naturally in the form of interpretation based on the word of Scripture, and yet in such a way that this word confronts us not as something written but as oral word, that is, one which is uttered here and now. Even as terms, Law and Scripture, or Gospel and oral sermon, can be for Luther synonymous concepts. In this way the point is driven home that the proclaiming of the Word of God belongs to the very essence of this Word, and

Scripture as God's Word is to interpret Scripture Christologically; and that means to discover the relation of each word of Scripture to Jesus Christ as Scripture's center. This, he maintains, is the Reformation's understanding of Scripture, and it is the one way to interpret Scripture relevantly today.³¹

The next "milestone" essay to come from Ebeling's pen is "Wort Gottes und Hermeneutik," which appeared in 1959.³² Since it is the most explicit statement on the subject, this essay will form the basis of the detailed analysis of Ebeling's hermeneutic theology.³³

Finally, Ebeling's essay on theology and proclamation, in which he dissociates himself from Bultmann on various points, must be considered.³⁴ Although the main portion of the essay consists of a consideration of the question of the "historical Jesus," the first two sections of the essay, those on the tension between the scientific study of theology and the church's proclamation, and the tension between historical and systematic theology, are especially important.

therefore that interpretation also belongs to this essence (because of the Word's necessary foundation in the testimony of the Scriptures). Scripture is therefore the Word of God not as scripture per se but as proclaimed and interpreted scripture." Ibid., pp. 14-15.

³¹Ibid., pp. 69, 70-80.

³²ZThK, LVI (1959), 224-51; English translation in WF, pp. 305-332; The New Hermeneutic, pp. 78-110.

³³Infra, Chapter IV, pp. 51-80.

³⁴Theology and Proclamation, translated by John Riches (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, c.1966). Hereafter this work will be referred to as TP.

There is apparent in this work a concern over the seeming lack of connection and interdependence between scientific theology and the practical matters of the church's proclamation. Neither aspect of the theological task seems able or willing to answer to the demands of the other. The present situation demands the activity of both; it also makes the task of both difficult. Yet, "Theology without proclamation is empty, proclamation without theology is blind."³⁵ For, just as proclamation is churchly in the sense that it makes the church the church, so also theology must by its very nature be scientific; the phrase "scientific theology" is a tautology.³⁶ Neither theology nor proclamation dare exist without answering to the other; they are united in that both are ways of responding to God.

The tension between theology and proclamation, according to Ebeling, grows out of the apparent duality of historical and systematic theology. Such a duality, however, ought not exist. Indeed, strictly speaking, "historical theology" and "dogmatic theology" are both tautologies, for theology, in order to be truly theology, must be both historical and scientific.³⁷ The only permissible distinction between historical and dogmatic theology grows out of

³⁵TP, p. 20.

³⁶TP, p. 21.

³⁷TP, pp. 22-31.

the two-fold significance of traditio³⁸ as traditum, that which is handed on, and as actus tradendi, the action of handing on. Historical theology has to do primarily with the traditum as such, with the "handed-downness" of the traditio. Dogmatic theology, on the other hand, seeks to deal adequately with the traditio itself; it amounts to the carrying out of the actus tradendi.³⁹ By unifying historical and dogmatic theology in this way, Ebeling would free the theologian from the error of traditionalism (presenting mere traditum); instead, he can carry out the actus tradendi, the proper task of both "theology" and "proclamation."⁴⁰ Ebeling thus once more affirms the unity of all the theological disciplines under the aegis of hermeneutics, that is, the total task of bringing the Word of God to expression in the contemporary situation.

Another significant aspect of Ebeling's theological endeavors has been his involvement and interest in what James M. Robinson has called "the new quest for the historical Jesus."⁴¹ It would be

³⁸Ebeling prefers to use the Latin forms of these words, because he believes them to be more free from the negative and misleading connotations of the German Tradition, and because they better express the difference between the that, the how, and the what of tradition.

³⁹TP, p. 25.

⁴⁰"The traditum can only fulfill the purpose for which it was handed down if it is taken up into the actus tradendi, i.e. if the written text is transformed into the 'event of the Spirit' of the spoken word." Ibid., p. 27. See also Ebeling's article, "Tradition VII. Dogmatisch," Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart, edited by Kurt Galling (3rd edition; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1962), VI, cols. 976-984.

⁴¹For an overview of the "New Quest," its participants, goals, and problems, see James M. Robinson, A New Quest of the Historical

beyond the scope of the present study to discuss the "new quest" in detail; indeed, it is this writer's conclusion that Ebeling's role in the "new quest" is by no means a major aspect of his theological work. Nevertheless, his concern for the historical as a fundamental category for the understanding of reality leads him to support the "new quest," to have contributed a few essays to that quest, and to have insisted upon its necessity.⁴² The quest is necessary, he says, because, without a historical basis in Jesus for the primitive Christian kerygma, the kerygma is doomed to be mere myth; likewise, if the quest should reveal that all that can

Jesus (London: S.C.M. Press, 1959). See also Gerhard Stephan, "Der Streit um den historischen Jesus innerhalb der Bultmann-Schule," Kirche in der Zeit XX (November 1965), 492-504. Ebeling's publications on the subject include "Jesus and Faith" and "The Question of the Historical Jesus and the Problem of Christology," WF, pp. 201-246, 288-304; "The Witness of Faith" and "The Basis of Faith," The Nature of Faith (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), pp. 44-71, hereafter referred to as NF; and TP [see note 34 above].

⁴²"I think that it is much rather the necessity of such a [new] search [for the historical Jesus] from the point of view of hermeneutics which has proved decisive. The search for the historical Jesus is a search for the hermeneutic key to Christology." TP, p. 55.

"Yet it is specifically theological to think conscientiously, even as a theologian. [That is, it is theologically necessary to engage in the new quest for the historical Jesus.] This means that whoever feels inescapably bound to an historical way of thought--and this is true of all modern men, no matter how much they may try to avoid it--must, even if he is a theologian, meet such an obligation by taking historical phenomena seriously as historical. This obligation is theological, regardless of the particular results it may yield for theology. For whatever happens it will be seen as a weakness on the part of a theologian if he fails to meet such an obligation." TP, pp. 62-63.

be known about Jesus is the mere fact of the existence of an otherwise unknown person by that name,⁴³ the kerygma would again prove to be mere myth. Ebeling maintains that, because the kerygma speaks about Jesus, theology must make inquiry into the person who bore that name; also, since the kerygma itself is a historical phenomenon, it, too, needs historical interpretation, both to show its relationship to Jesus and to point up the role that Jesus plays in the kerygma. The quest is by no means to be understood as a search for historical supports for the Christian faith; that would contradict the very nature of faith.⁴⁴ Rather, Ebeling sees the quest as a necessary part of the hermeneutics of Christology; it is the attempt to show that the explicit Christological proclamation of the early church does in fact have a basis in the historical Jesus. In terms

⁴³It is Bultmann's contention that one cannot get behind the primitive kerygma to create an image of the historical Jesus; all that is possible or necessary is the mere fact that (the bloße Daß) Jesus existed. See TP, p. 57.

⁴⁴"Doch da, wo geglaubt sein will, ist der Glaube letztlich allein, ohne alle Stützen, sonst wäre er nicht Glaube, und ist nur noch vom Unglauben verfolgt als seinem Widerspiel." Was heißt Glauben? (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1958), p. 18.

"Now of course as far as the historical quest for Jesus is concerned there are obviously certain things which it would be quite pointless to try to prove. . . . Messianic consciousness says nothing about actual messiahship. The resurrection of which the kerygma speaks, that is an eschatological resurrection and not merely a temporary reanimation, is by definition not an historical fact. An historical proof of the fact of Jesus' Sonship would obliterate the distinction between Sonship of God as a phenomenon in the history of religions and the kerygmatic sense which it has when predicated of Jesus. And apart from the impossibility of making historically valid judgments about Jesus' own attitude to his death, knowing his attitude to it would still not relieve me of the responsibility of deciding how I myself stand in relation to it." TP, pp. 56-57.

of Ebeling's hermeneutical theology, this is to say that the key to understanding the earliest Christian proclamation is to see it as the proclamation of that very thing which came to expression in the historical Jesus, that is, in his works and behavior.⁴⁵

In simplest terms, what came to expression in the historical Jesus is faith.⁴⁶ But this is simply another way of saying that what came to expression in Jesus is God. For faith by its very nature⁴⁷ has to do with God. Thus, the task of a Christology that takes seriously the quest for the historical Jesus is to show how in the Jesus of history God came to expression in such a way that faith must always take Jesus into account as its root and basis.⁴⁸

⁴⁵"We should not underestimate the importance of the opportunity afforded by the synoptic tradition of establishing a hermeneutic criterion for the primitive christian tradition by determining the basic traits of the words and behaviour of Jesus. Nevertheless the point of such a hermeneutic enquiry into the historical Jesus would be completely lost if one allowed one's biographical or legal interests to become so dominant that the stress was firmly laid on particular words and types of behaviour to the exclusion of a proper consideration of the authority which is witnessed to in the tradition, i.e. to the exclusion of that which came to expression in Jesus. . . . Understood in this way, the Pauline and Johannine literature can be seen to be dominated by a genuine tradition of that which came to expression in Jesus himself (e.g. in the Pauline doctrine of freedom), and this means--contrary to a superficial understanding of the historical--that it is cominated by a tradition of the 'historical' Jesus (objective genitive) seen as the basis of the church (even if in this it scarcely mentions the historical Jesus)." TP, pp. 100-101.

⁴⁶See the essay, "Jesus and Faith," WF, pp. 201-246.

⁴⁷See Was heit Glauben?.

⁴⁸Yet, Ebeling specifically rules out the possibility of conceiving of Jesus as an object of faith. "Since we have to do with the Person of Jesus himself, we are not speaking of an object of faith, but about the witness of faith who becomes the basis of faith." NF, p. 62.

Since, in Ebeling's view, the significance of the historical Jesus lies in the fact that in him God was brought to expression, this, in connection with Ebeling's word-oriented theology, means that the following statement is the "sum of all Christological predications: Jesus--the word of God. In him God came. Jesus made God intelligible."⁴⁹ Jesus brought God on the scene, proclaimed the nearness of the reign of God, and, by awaking faith, became the "basis of faith."⁵⁰ As the witness and basis of faith, as the word-event in which God came to expression, Jesus is also the basis of that Christological kerygma which is the true word-event that brings God to expression and thereby brings about faith also in the present time. "The appearing of Jesus, and the coming to faith of him to whom the appearance is imparted, are therefore one and the same";⁵¹ so also, the word-event in contemporary proclamation is one and the same as the appearing of Jesus and one's coming to faith in him:

For faith establishes a relation to Jesus himself. Christian faith is not faith in the apostles, and through them indirectly also faith in Jesus; but it is faith, by means of the witness of the apostles, in Jesus himself.⁵²

⁴⁹TP, p. 78.

⁵⁰"What does the 'basis of faith' mean? Certainly not a support which relieves us in part of the need for faith. Rather, the basis of faith is that which lets faith be faith, which keeps it being faith, on which faith, that is to say, ultimately relies. . . . It is Jesus as the witness of faith in the pregnant sense of the author and finisher of faith." NF, pp. 70-71.

⁵¹NF, p. 69.

⁵²NF, p. 70.

Such concern for the historical Jesus, of course, forces one to confront the question of the resurrection; that is to say, since the resurrection is not a historical event in the normal sense of the word, how does a Christology that takes the historical Jesus for its basis account for the place of the resurrection in the primitive Christian kerygma? Ebeling says, on the basis of 1 Cor. 15:3-8, that "the message of the resurrection directs us not to some nebulous and distant mythical realm, but to a sharply circumscribed place in history."⁵³ Thus Ebeling refuses to dismiss the resurrection as mere mythology; he seeks to show that the resurrection of Jesus, in marking the transition from the implicit Christology of the historical Jesus to the explicit Christological kerygma of the early church, points to a definite event in history. However, the resurrection is not to be construed as some kind of historical prop for faith. Rather,

The best help for understanding this [the resurrection] is to abandon any effort to form an image or ideas of it. That Jesus is risen from the dead does not mean that he returned to this earthly life as one who has death ahead of him once again. But it means that he, the dead one, has death (not just dying, but death) finally behind him, and is finally with God, and for this reason is present in this earthly life.⁵⁴

Faith, therefore, does indeed take the resurrection into account.⁵⁵

⁵³NF, p. 65.

⁵⁴NF, p. 71.

⁵⁵"Faith in the Risen One must therefore be understood as binding us to a physiological conception of the Resurrection, or we must admit the possibility that the tomb was empty for other reasons, and that the discovery accidentally coincided with the appearances of the Risen One (to rule out other fantasies from the beginning). In that case one should have to believe in the Risen One in spite of the empty tomb, and without letting oneself be troubled by this enigmatic and ambiguous fact." NF, p. 68.

The necessity and validity of the "new quest for the historical Jesus" is therefore, for Ebeling, not to create historical props for faith, but rather to demonstrate the basis in the historical Jesus for the Christological assertions made about him in the Christian kerygma. It is to take seriously the authority of the word-event manifested in the person of Jesus and thus to show that, as the basis of the church, Jesus and the faith he brought to expression come to provide the basis for present-day proclamation. In all of this the word-event is central,⁵⁶ for it is only in the word-event which has its basis in Jesus that faith can be awakened today.

Before going on, now, to discuss in detail the nature of the hermeneutic task as Ebeling construes it, and thus to place the Law-Gospel Polarity correctly in his theology, it is necessary to go back to his dissertation on Luther's hermeneutics and sketch Ebeling's interest and continuing involvement in Luther research. Indeed, only by taking Ebeling's Luther-research into account can we adequately account for the shape of his theology.

⁵⁶"Jesus as the occurrence of authority, as the Gospel in person, is the basis of the church. The church which has issued out of his authority is the continuing presence of that authority. The church which invokes him by calling on his name is endowed with an authority which is only its own authority in so far as it remains the authority of Jesus. . . . So the church shares the same basic characteristics as the authority of Jesus. It has nothing but the Word; its recognition of the liberating authority of the Word has the character of serving submission--just as Jesus' dying was the fulfillment of his authority." TP, pp. 99-100.

CHAPTER III

EBELING'S LUTHER STUDIES

Ebeling's involvement in the study of Luther's theology was referred to above¹ as a constant and influential factor in the development of his own theological position. A significant portion of his published works deals directly with research into various areas of Luther studies, and his other writings make frequent reference to the Reformer. The genuineness and importance of Ebeling's orientation toward Luther is clear, not only from a survey of his published titles, but also in explicit comments he makes about himself. For example, in the Preface to the English edition of his first collection of essays, Ebeling discusses his debt to Luther:

To take our bearings from the theology of the Reformers and at the same time to take modern thought seriously seems to be incompatible, or possible only by means of sorry compromises. For me, however, my vocation as a theologian stands or falls with the opposite view. For we can be evangelical theologians neither without the Reformers' understanding of the Gospel nor without thinking within the field of present-day experience of reality.²

Ebeling's dissertation, completed in 1938 and published in 1942, began a series of publications dealing with the Reformer.³

¹Supra, Chapter II, p. 8.

²Word and Faith, translated by James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), pp. 9-10; hereafter referred to as WF. See above, Chapter II, p. 13 for more from the same paragraph.

³The dissertation is published as Evangelische Evangelienauslegung: Eine Untersuchung zu Luthers Hermeneutik (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1962), hereafter referred to as Ev. Ev. It was originally published in the series Forschungen

That work is an analysis of Luther's interpretation of pericopes from the Gospels, on the basis of his sermons and postils. Ebeling's concern throughout the work is the hermeneutical question,⁴ and he turns to Luther in order to learn from him the beginnings of the answer to that question. Ebeling occupies himself with the actual development of Luther's hermeneutics, rather than with Luther's explicit statements on how the exegetical and hermeneutical task is to be carried out. In order to trace this development, Ebeling selects those works of Luther that have to do with the Gospels; this

zur Geschichte und Lehre des Protestantismus (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1942).

Other specifically Luther-oriented studies include the following: "Die Anfänge von Luthers Hermeneutik," Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche, XLVIII (1951), 172-230, hereafter referred to as ZThK; Frei aus Glauben (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1968); "Geist und Buchstabe," Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart, edited by Kurt Gallig (3rd edition; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1958, II, cols. 1290-1296, hereafter referred to as RGG³; "Gewißheit und Zweifel. Die Situation des Glaubens im Zeitalter nach Luther und Descartes," ZThK, LXIV (1967), 282-324; Luther: Einführung in sein Denken (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], c.1964); "Luther II. Theologie," RGG³, IV, cols. 495-520; "Luthers Auslegung des 44. (45.) Psalms," Lutherforschung Heute, edited by Vilmos Vajta (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1958), pp. 32-48; "Luthers Auslegung des 14. (15.) Psalms in der ersten Psalmenvorlesung im Vergleich mit der exegetischen Tradition," ZThK, L (1953), 280-339; "Luthers Psalterdruck vom Jahre 1513," ZThK, L (1953), 43-99; "Luthers Reden von Gott," Der Gottesgedanke im Abendland, edited by Albert Schaefer (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, 1964); "The New Hermeneutics and the Early Luther," Theology Today, XXI (April 1964), 34-46; "Das Problem des natürlichen bei Luther," The Church, Mysticism, Sanctification and the Natural in Luther's Thought, edited by Ivar Asheim (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, c.1967), pp. 169-179. Several of the essays in WF and in The Word of God and Tradition, translated by S. H. Hooke (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), must also be included here.

⁴"Daß wir die hermeneutische Frage stellen müssen, hat darin seinen Grund, daß uns darüber Klarheit mangelt, wie Christus durch sein Wort gegenwärtig ist." Ev. Ev., p. 9.

choice is intended to counter any tendency to see in Luther a one-sided emphasis on the Pauline literature.

At the outset of his study, Ebeling questions the frequently-advanced idea that Luther's hermeneutical development was already complete in 1517, with the abandonment of the "four-fold" sense of Scripture.⁵ On the contrary, the persistence of allegorical exegesis even beyond 1529 suggests that the development of Luther's hermeneutics continued well past the first flowering of evangelical theology in the late teens of the sixteenth century. Keeping this in mind, Ebeling seeks to ascertain the starting point of Luther's understanding of the Gospel, and then to trace the development of Luther's hermeneutical conclusions. This he accomplishes by tracing the use of allegorical exegesis on a year-by-year basis until 1529; from this study Ebeling concludes that Luther gradually--and noticeably--gave up allegorical exegesis in favor of an increasingly literal interpretation. However, the presence or absence of allegory is not an essential aspect of Luther's concept of "evangelical Gospel-exposition."⁶ In no case does Luther disavow allegory as such; and nowhere does Luther withdraw any of his previous allegorical

⁵This point of view was advanced by Karl Holl, "Luthers Bedeutung für den Fortschritt der Auslegungskunst," Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte (sechste, neu durchgesehene Auflage; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1932), I, 552, and by Reinhold Seeberg, Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte (Leipzig: A. Deichert'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung D. Werner Scholl, 1933), IV, Part I, 84.

⁶Ev. Ev., p. 87.

interpretations simply because of any fundamental rejection of allegory in principle. Rather, Luther appears to have held that allegory of a kind was always a possibility. The use or rejection of allegorical exegesis was always dependent upon the situation. In theological discourse, allegory was to be abandoned, as it gradually also was in preaching; only in meditations does allegory continue to play a significant role for the mature Luther.⁷

Since therefore, Luther continued to make use of allegory, albeit in a narrowly restricted way, Ebeling proceeds to investigate the relationship of Luther's exposition of the Gospels to the traditional exposition of the Gospels, to determine to what extent Luther proceeds independently, or at least to what extent he represents a decisive turning point in the history of hermeneutics. In Ebeling's view, that which made Luther's exposition of the Gospels unique was what he earlier and in another context had called "a new comprehension of the Word of God (eine Neuerfassung des Wortes Gottes)."⁸ This new comprehension has to do quite explicitly with the subject of the present investigation; that is, the understanding of the Law-Gospel Polarity of the Word of God. It was by means of a "new comprehension of the relation of the Law and the Gospel" that Luther was able first of all to put allegorizing exegesis into a new light and to make it subservient to the Gospel.⁹ Another way

⁷Ev. Ev., p. 88.

⁸Ev. Ev., p. 11.

⁹Ev. Ev., p. 177.

of stating this same newness in Luther's approach to the Word of God is what Ebeling calls "thinking from faith as the point of departure" instead of from works.¹⁰ He also calls it "striving for a clear demonstration of the relation of the Law and the Gospel both in the question of justification and in the question of sanctification."¹¹

Although it is the Law-Gospel Polarity which gives a fundamentally unique emphasis to Luther's hermeneutics, something theologically even more fundamental is involved. Ebeling points this out, as one of the principal results of his comparison of Luther's exposition of the Gospels with the traditional exposition. For that point from which it is possible to understand Luther's uniqueness is, simply, Jesus Christ. Luther has not simply read the Gospels through the glasses of the Pauline view of justification (although he does, indeed, do that, too). "Christ alone (solus Christus)" is the issue, and not merely a doctrine of justification. And from that exclusive focus upon the incarnate Christ grow all the other "basic" themes that emerge in Luther's exposition of the Gospels.¹²

¹⁰Ev. Ev., p. 178.

¹¹Ibid. See also pp. 200, 238; and note especially page 200, footnote 301: "Das Thema 'Gesetz und Evangelium' spielt im Grunde in allen Allegoresen eine große Rolle"

¹²"In Luthers Auslegung ist mehr geschehen, als daß er mit der Brille der paulinischen Rechtfertigungslehre die Evangelien gelesen und interpretiert hat. Ohne Zweifel ist das auch der Fall. Aber das, worauf es ankommt, liegt tiefer. Man begegnet wohl der Terminologie paulinischer Rechtfertigungslehre, aber nicht in dem Maß, wie es entsprechend dem "Paulinismus" Luthers zu erwarten

What is involved is a new understanding of what divine revelation is all about, and that means an understanding that summarizes all under the Head, Jesus Christ. Implicit in this solus Christus, then, is all that comes to characterize Luther's theology and Luther's hermeneutics--including especially the distinguishing of Law and Gospel.

Although his new comprehension of the Word of God led to the gradual surrender of allegory, Luther did not immediately draw out this and other consequences of his discovery. Rather, it was in the course of his controversies with Rome and with the Enthusiasts that he was forced to take those steps; and this, of course, carried Luther's hermeneutical development far beyond the so-called beginnings of the Reformation in 1517-1519.

The conflict with Rome led to the more complete development of Luther's insight into the problem of the "senses" of Scripture.

wäre. Nun ist allerdings die Frage, wieweit überhaupt die Rechtfertigungslehre die hinlängliche Basis ist, um darauf die Ganzheit der Theologie Luthers zu entfalten. . . . Auf jeden Fall ist der durchgehende scopus von Luthers Evangelienauslegung nicht die Rechtfertigungslehre, sondern Jesus Christus allein. In diesem "allein" ist nun aber die besondere Charakteristik angedeutet, die dieser christologischen Auslegung Luthers eigen ist. Die Auslegung geht auf den fleischgewordenen und gekreuzigten und als solchen erhöhten Christus, also auf den vor der Welt verborgenen Christus. Die Verborgenheit der Offenbarung ist, wenn man überhaupt das wesentliche an Luthers Evangelienauslegung gegenüber der Tradition auf einen Begriff bringen will, das, was alles in ihr konstituiert. Aus ihr folgen notwendig die großen Themen, auf die immer wieder Luthers Auslegung hinausläuft und die man in der traditionellen Auslegung vergeblich sucht: Das Verhältnis von Glaube und Liebe, Gesetz und Evangelium, Reich Christi und Reich der Welt" Ev. Ev., p. 271.

There is no twofold, much less a fourfold, sense of Scripture, he insists. The literal sense is the spiritual sense, and the spiritual sense is the literal sense. Only the Holy Spirit can lead one to the spiritual sense; an exegetical method cannot.¹³ But even this development did not force Luther to cut himself off completely from allegorizing. For the issue with Rome was not allegory itself, but the question of the basis and method of allegorizing.

It was finally in the controversy with the Enthusiasts, as that reached its climaxes in 1524 and 1525 in the conflicts with Karlstadt and Münzer, and in 1529 at the time of the Marburg Colloquy, that Luther developed his principle of interpretation "vom Glauben her" with noticeable effect in his sermons. Ebeling feels that Luther's hesitation to employ allegorical interpretation in his sermons during the late 1520's was the result, not so much of abandonment in principle, but of Luther's disavowal of the Enthusiastic practice of turning the literal sense into unevangelical nonsense by means of contorted tropological exegesis.¹⁴ Ebeling concludes that Luther's farewell to allegory came, not in reaction to the medieval past, but in polemic against the beginnings of "modern" thought, as he encountered that in the Enthusiasts.¹⁵

¹³Ev. Ev., p. 311.

¹⁴Ev. Ev., p. 357.

¹⁵"Luther hat die Allegorese nicht preisgegeben im Kampf gegen mittelalterliches Denken, auch nicht in Verteidigung gegen modernes Denken, sondern im Kampf gegen modernes Denken. Weder die Tradition noch das autonome moderne Denken waren Wegbereiterin

Having traced the historical development of Luther's hermeneutics, Ebeling concludes with a chapter on the internal connections that bind Luther's hermeneutics together. In a discussion of material and method, Ebeling spells out the interrelationship between exegesis and hermeneutics in Luther's exposition of the Gospels. Christ alone (solus Christus), the Christ to whom the Scriptures witness as crucified, is the basis of the Gospels and therefore also of the Gospel. Really relevant exegesis, therefore, is evangelical exegesis, and that necessarily means exegesis that grows out of the evangelical understanding of the Incarnation. As Ebeling sees it, the Incarnation is one of the major theological presuppositions of Luther's hermeneutics; the Gospels are important for the Church not as mere texts, but as witnesses to Jesus Christ, the Incarnate God.

God reveals himself in the flesh of Jesus Christ; and if God is not present in the Incarnate Christ, then God does not exist. In the Incarnate One the "hidden God (deus absconditus)" is the "revealed God (deus revelatus)," and the revealed God is the hidden God. This apparent double talk is overcome only by faith. Indeed, the Incarnation is made present (gegenwärtig) only to faith; and this, in Ebeling's understanding of Luther, leads from Incarnation to Inverbation. "The flesh of Christ is present for faith only in the Word, in the witness of the history of the incarnate Christ."¹⁶

des einfältigen, auf Allegorese verzichtenden Schriftgebrauchs im Sinn Luthers, sondern allein der Glaube an die Gegenwartigkeit des in der Schrift bezeugten gekreuzigten Christus." Ev. Ev., p. 358.

¹⁶Ev. Ev., p. 362.

The Incarnate Christ is now the "Inverbate" Christ, present for us in the Word of the Gospel as he was present to first-century Jewry in the flesh. "The fundamental structure of revelation is that it directs faith to an Invisible hidden beneath a Visible."¹⁷ For if God is present only in the flesh of Jesus Christ, then it is also true that the Incarnate Christ is present only in the Word, and therefore only to faith. But the question must now be raised: How is the Inverbate Christ present for the believer? To answer this question, Ebeling moves into a discussion of inspiration.

In Ebeling's view of Luther, the word of Scripture is a bearer of the Holy Spirit only to the extent that it is a witness to Jesus Christ.¹⁸ The union of Spirit, Christ, and Word Luther finds in the concept Gospel. With reference to Christ, the Gospel is the story and proclamation of Christ's person and work. With reference to the Word, the Gospel is that proclamation that centers in Christ. And with reference to the Spirit, the Gospel is construed as that which is "originally something that is cried out (ursprünglich ein Geschrei)."¹⁹ The concept of inspiration, then, is Luther's way of emphasizing the activity of the Spirit in making a living proclamation about Jesus Christ; the concern is not for the inspiration of a written Scripture. As Christ was once hidden behind the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth, so today Christ is hidden behind

¹⁷Ev. Ev., p. 364.

¹⁸Ev. Ev., p. 365.

¹⁹Ev. Ev., p. 366.

the Word of the Gospel--hidden, but revealed by the Spirit to faith. "The only way in which the Word comes to its positive effect is faith."²⁰ It is only faith that relates one to the proclamation of the Gospel, and not understanding or experience in and by themselves. As a matter of fact, the Gospel seeks not to be understood, but to be believed; the obstacle to understanding is thus not intellectual, but existential, being located not in man's reason, but in his sin and in his flesh.²¹ By the same token, man's ability to be on the hearing end of a Word from God is not based on his creation in the image of God but on the Incarnation of God's Son.²² Natural man's failure to comprehend the Gospel is to be blamed not on the difficulty of understanding the words of the proclamation, but upon the corrupted will of man. Though that word may be accessible to a child, it is inaccessible to one who, because he lacks faith, will not understand.²³

²⁰Ev. Ev., p. 375.

²¹Ev. Ev., pp. 377-378.

²²"Die Fähigkeit, das Wort Gottes zu vernehmen, beruht für den gefallen Menschen nicht in der Gottebenbildlichkeit oder in gewissen nach dem Sündenfall davon verbliebenen Resten, sondern in der Fleischwerdung des Sohnes Gottes. Kommt es zum Verstehen des Wortes, so ist das schlechthin ein Wunder--und nicht etwa die Maße der Nichtverstehenden!--und das heißt zugleich: Das Wort Gottes ist dem natürlichen Denken und Meinen auf jeden Fall entgegen. Man muß die Vernunft gefangen geben und blenden, um in Glauben zu verstehen." Ev. Ev., p. 379.

²³"Liegt doch das Wort Gottes in der Gestalt des Menschenworts dem Zugriff der Vernunft schutzlos offen. Ist es doch so leicht zugänglich, daß auch ein Kind es verstehen könnte. Und doch versteht es keiner! Warum nicht? Nicht weil er intellektuell

The obstacle to a man's proper response to the Gospel, then, is his sin; and that is an obstacle which, as unbelief, is to be overcome only by a proper hermeneutics, an "evangelical Gospel-exposition." The obstacle can be overcome simply because the Word of the Gospel contains the effective power, the Spirit-activated power, to awaken faith. For faith depends not on what a man brings to the Word, but upon what the Word brings to the man.²⁴ Only by means of the faith which the Word of the Gospel awakens can the Word be appropriately apprehended; then effective hermeneutics has occurred. But if this is to happen, the exegesis of the text must be a Christological exegesis: "Understanding the Word in faith is thus nothing else than the christological exposition of Scripture."²⁵

This consideration leads to the necessity of the proper distinction between the Law and the Gospel in hermeneutics. Since the presence or absence of faith is what determines the acceptance of the Word of the Gospel, then the proper distinction must be made

nicht könnte, sondern weil er nicht will, und d. h. weil er nicht glaubt. Nicht die Kompliziertheit des Stils oder der Logik, sondern die Anstößigkeit der Christologie, d. h. der dem Worte Gottes eigenen Logik des Kreuzes, macht das Evangelium aus etwas scheinbar Selbstverständlichem zu etwas schlechthin Unverständlichem." Ev. Ev., p. 380.

²⁴"Die Beziehung von Glaube und Wort im Prozeß des Verstehens und der Auslegung ist nicht eine vom Subjekt auf das Wort, sondern vom Wort auf das verstehende Subjekt gehende. Der Glaube bringt nichts neues zu dem Wort hinzu, sondern ist das Wirksamwerden des Wortes als das, was es zu sein beansprucht: als Gottes Wort. Korrespondiert dem Worte nicht der Glaube, so ist es nicht nur nicht geglaubt, sondern auch nicht verstanden. Ev. Ev., pp. 382-383.

²⁵Ev. Ev., p. 383.

between believers and unbelievers in the carrying out of the hermeneutical task. The circumstances of the listening subject must determine the manner in which the Word of the proclamation is presented. Since not every word of Scripture strikes every man in the same way in every situation, the task of properly distinguishing Law and Gospel serves the purpose of bringing the right kind of word to man in a particular situation.²⁶

Proper exegesis--directed not at understanding but at faith--is "a dividing, separating, critical and polemical function."²⁷ "For that reason the real key to the Holy Scripture is the distinction of the Law and the Gospel."²⁸ And what does it mean to make that distinction? It means "to distinguish a two-fold function (usus) of the Word of God."²⁹ But this distinction is not made

²⁶"Trifft doch keineswegs jedes Gebot der Bibel jeden Menschen zu jeder Zeit in jeder Situation in gleicher Weise, sondern 'eines gehet mich nicht an, betrifft mich nicht, Das ander betrifft mich.' Gehen doch auch die Verheißungen der Bibel nicht jeden in jeder Lage in gleicher Weise an und andererseits tadelnde Stellen gerade uns, die wir uns deren Gericht so gern dadurch entziehen, daß wir sie auf irgendwelche nicht anwesende Dritte beziehen. Es gehört zur rechten Unterscheidung von Gesetz und Evangelium, daß beides an jeden einzelnen zu seiner Zeit ergeht, als strafendes Wort an die vom Gesetz nicht angefochtenen, als tröstendes Wort an die vom Gesetz angefochtenen Sünder." Ev. Ev., pp. 396-397.

²⁷Ev. Ev., pp. 427-428.

²⁸"Darum ist der eigentliche Schlüssel zur heiligen Schrift die Unterscheidung von Gesetz und Evangelium." Ev. Ev., p. 429.

²⁹Ev. Ev., p. 431.

by the exegete; the Holy Spirit performs that function.³⁰ Since, then, the distinction between the Law and the Gospel has to do with faith or unfaith, with life or death, it is clear that the distinguishing activity will be carried out in serious conflict with Satan, who labors constantly to make the Law into the Gospel and the Gospel into the Law and, by thus destroying the distinction, to destroy the Gospel. And Satan's twofold abuse of the Word must be countered by the twofold use of the Word in the proclamation of the Law and the Gospel.³¹

Earlier, Ebeling had pointed out that Luther did not proceed from a fundamental hermeneutical principle to new exegetical insights, but from exegetical discoveries to a hermeneutical principle. The use of the Law-Gospel Polarity as the key to the Holy Scripture was the outgrowth of exegetical endeavors and not a prior hermeneutical insight. It is a methodological development of the distinction between the two kingdoms--and for that distinction, according to Ebeling, Luther finds an exegetical basis in Matt. 6:24,³² Growing as it does out of the distinction between the two kingdoms, the Law-Gospel Polarity works its way out in yet another distinction, that between the faithful man as Christian and as secular person.³³

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ev. Ev., p. 432.

³² Ev. Ev., p. 428.

³³ "Die Entfaltung der Unterschiedenheit von Gesetz und Evangelium muß durch eine weitere grundlegende Unterscheidung für die Auslegung noch gefördert werden. Wie wirkt sich die

This distinction comes into play in the practical working out of the exegetical task; or, stated more precisely as the distinction between person and office, it becomes the practical principle for the interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount.³⁴ The movement, then, is from the exegetical discovery of the distinction between the two kingdoms, through the hermeneutical and methodological distinction between the Law and the Gospel, to the practical distinction between person and office. But we are confronted by a version of the hermeneutical circle; the exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount depends for its accuracy upon a methodological distinction which, in turn, depends upon that very exegesis.³⁵

unterschiedliche Predigt von Gesetz und Evangelium unter dem Wider- einander des Reiches Christi und des Reiches der Welt an dem einzelnen Christen aus, der trotz seiner Zugehörigkeit zum Reich Christi durch die Taufe und Wiedergeburt doch auch durch die leibliche Geburt bis zu seinem Tod zum Reich der Welt gehört? Diese besonders an der Auslegung der Bergpredigt aufbrechende Schwierig- keit muß durch eine neue Unterscheidung geklärt werden: durch die Unterscheidung von Christ und Weltperson." Ev. Ev., p. 433.

³⁴"Als Grundregel für die Auslegung der Bergpredigt gilt darum die Feststellung, daß Christus hier nicht vom und zum Amt der Obrigkeit (in jeder Gestalt) redet, sondern allein von den einzelnen Personen." Ibid.

For example, Jesus' command not to kill applies in its radical form to me as an individual; but as one in an office, as a soldier or a policeman, I may be required to kill. The role of the "office" is made clear as Ebeling continues:

"Die 'weltliche Person' ist nicht ungebundene Person, sondern vielmehr die an das Amt, an den Mitmenschen, an Gottes Gebot gebundene Person. Der Christ als Christ ist dagegen der Mensch abgesehen von seinen Beziehungen zur Welt, allein angesehen in seiner Beziehung zu Christus." Ibid.

³⁵Ev. Ev., p. 434.

The proper distinction between the Law and the Gospel is a necessary methodological consideration; it is for the sake of the solus Christus that the Law-Gospel Polarity is taken into account in the hermeneutic process. Eveling concludes that, for Luther, the logic of hermeneutics is simply the logic of christology.³⁶ Proper exposition of the Gospels is therefore proper exposition of Christ himself; and, in Ebeling's understanding of Luther, it is Christ himself who properly interprets himself. He has interpreted himself in the history of his life and death and resurrection, in his presence in his body, the Church, by means of the Word of the Gospel, in the daily justification of the sinner through the working out of his baptism in faith, and in his final self-revelation at the last day. The history of Christ says all that needs to be said about the history of church and individual and world.³⁷ Through the Word of the Gospel Christ interprets himself to the believer. Only Christ matters, and Christ matters completely. "Scripture ought not be interpreted in any other way than that man may be nothing and Christ alone everything."³⁸

³⁶Ev. Ev., p. 452.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸"Scriptura non debet aliter gedeut werden, quam quod homo nihil sit, et solus Christus omnia." Ev. Ev., p. 454; the quotation is from Luther, Werke (Kritische Gesamtausgabe; Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1899), XV, 527. Hereafter, references to this edition to Luther's works will use the abbreviation WA.

We have discussed Ebeling's dissertation in detail for two reasons: it is basic to his understanding of Luther, and it is basic also to his entire approach to hermeneutical theology. The two key issues in Luther's theology for Ebeling are, as we have seen, Luther's understanding of hermeneutics and Luther's insistence upon the centrality of the Law-Gospel Polarity. The close relationship between these two points is crucial--for Luther, for Ebeling, and for the concerns of the present investigation.³⁹

Ebeling's other Luther studies are largely discussions of specific problems or of particular works of the Reformer. However, because of the breadth of its scope, the series of lectures given to students of all faculties at Zurich in 1963⁴⁰ must be given special attention. In these lectures Ebeling gives expression to what he considers to be the real importance of the Reformer for the tasks of theology today.

Basic to Luther's theological method, according to Ebeling in these lectures, is a feeling for antitheses and distinctions. He announces as his aim that of following the "tension" in Luther's

³⁹Speaking of the development of the Law-Gospel Polarity in Luther's "early" hermeneutics, Ebeling says, "the one, plain, grammatical sense is the truly theological one which includes within itself the duality of law and gospel in its orientation to the substance of Holy Scripture; or, to say it more exactly, the basic task of theological hermeneutics occurs in the distinction between law and gospel" (italics added). Theology Today, XXI, 44. The Law-Gospel Polarity thus emerges as the fundamental rule for a theological hermeneutics.

⁴⁰The lectures were published under the title, Luther. Einführung in Sein Denken (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], c.1964), hereafter referred to as Luther.

thought--a tension that seems to vary between sharp opposition and peaceful compromise.⁴¹ He observes that Luther's thought progresses in a series of "diverse but mutually related polarities."⁴² The titles of the ten lectures in this series are indicative of the wide range of polarities which Ebeling discerns in Luther's theology.⁴³ But central, in Ebeling's conception of Luther's theology, is the Law-Gospel Polarity, with the immediately related distinctions between letter and spirit and between the two kingdoms playing a closely supporting role. Many of the motifs and connections between the various ideas are already familiar from our overview of Ebeling's dissertation. Using the documents from Luther's earliest years of theological labor, Ebeling works with those texts in which the distinction between letter and spirit is quite frequently discussed; the Law-Gospel Polarity is to be understood as a development of the distinction of letter and spirit.⁴⁴ And this, in turn, is related to Luther's insistence upon a "single sense" in

⁴¹Luther, p. iii.

⁴²Luther, p. 16. Ebeling's use of the term "Polarity" here is, to my knowledge, unique.

⁴³The chapter titles are "Philosophie und Theologie," "Buchstabe und Geist," "Gesetz und Evangelium," "Der zweifache Gebrauch des Gesetzes," "Person und Werk," "Glaube und Liebe," "Reich Christi und Reich der Welt," "Christperson und Weltperson," "Freiheit und Unfreiheit," "Verborgener und offenbarer Gott."

⁴⁴In his dissertation, Ebeling maintains that the Law-Gospel Polarity grew out of the exegetically-based discovery of the distinction between the two kingdoms. Here in the lectures of 1963 he says that the Law-Gospel Polarity is a development of the letter-spirit distinction. The former speaks of the biblical grounds, the latter of the terminological precursor of the Law-Gospel Polarity.

Scripture. The single, literal sense is indeed the very spiritual sense that others had sought to separate from the literal; for Luther, the literal sense is the spiritual, and the spiritual is the literal.⁴⁵ For it is but a short step in Luther's theology from the distinction between letter and spirit to the Law-Gospel Polarity; Ebeling suggests that the latter was implicit in Luther's earlier formulations and that the distinction of the Law and the Gospel, between that which demands and that which promises and gives, is really continuous with what Luther represented with his former "letter and spirit" terminology.⁴⁶

What is the distinction between the Law and the Gospel in Luther's theology?⁴⁷ According to Ebeling, Luther's distinction

⁴⁵Luther, p. 117.

⁴⁶"Er löste sie ab durch die darin beschlossene Unterscheidung von Gesetz (als dem, was fordert) und Evangelium (als dem, was verheißt und schenkt). Im Interesse theologischer Klärung wurde die Unterscheidung von Gesetz und Evangelium ausdrücklich zur maßgebenden Terminologie erhoben. Dieser sprachliche Wandel, der sich in gleitendem Übergang vollzog, bedeutet sachlich keinen Bruch, sondern die Ausreifung und Sicherstellung dessen, was sich schon in der Frühzeit angebahnt hatte." Luther, p. 120. See also RGG³, IV, col. 507.

⁴⁷It is necessary to remember that the Law-Gospel distinction is just that--a distinction. When Luther makes the Law-Gospel Polarity central, it is a distinction, a polarity, that is made central. Luther is not, Ebeling would insist, absolutizing a single main thought, like love or the kingdom of God, or even the doctrine of justification through faith. These are all merely ideas or concepts; but it is the actual distinguishing of the Law and the Gospel that is made central. In fact, Ebeling suggests that the Law-Gospel distinction is actually more basic to Luther's theological method than the doctrine of justification through faith; he maintains that Luther must be understood as saying that the doctrine of justification

between the Law and the Gospel does not present us with an alternative, an either/or situation; nor is the distinction a case of addition, the Gospel being added to the Law, and the two being distinguished in merely quantitative fashion. Rather, the distinction presents the theologian with the demand to reconcile two opposites in such a way that the Law does not presume upon the role of the Gospel and the Gospel does not seek to take over the role of the Law.⁴⁸ Clearly, to deal with that kind of antithesis calls for more than a merely theoretic insight, a distinction made once-for-all. Rather, it is an ongoing activity; Ebeling calls it a "noun of action (nomen actionis)."⁴⁸ The pattern for this activity of distinguishing is not to be found in the processes of logical definition-making; rather, it is in the waging of a kind of guerrilla warfare in which the fighting is bitter and hopelessly entangled because of the lack of any clearly-defined fronts; or it is in the bringing of a legal suit in a highly complicated case in which

is correctly held only "wenn sie identisch ist mit dem, was die Unterscheidung von Gesetz und Evangelium als Grundanweisung theologischen Denkens, das heißt aber als entscheidender Gesichtspunkt theologischer Urteilskraft meint." Luther, p. 124.

⁴⁸"Durch die Forderung rechter Unterscheidung ist, wie es scheint, eine Aufgabe gestellt, welche schwieriger ist als ein bloßes Trennen oder ein bloßes Verbinden, nämlich zugleich einen Gegensatz durchzustehen, der den Charakter einer Todfeindschaft hat--so daß das Gesetz das Evangelium tötet und das Evangelium das Gesetz--, aber auch--ich wiederhole: zugleich--eine Feindschaft in Ordnung zu bringen, das heißt beides dadurch ins rechte Verhältnis zu bringen, daß das Gesetz nicht den Anspruch erhebt, Evangelium zu sein, und das Evangelium nicht die Rolle des Gesetzes zu übernehmen versucht." Luther, p. 126.

conflicting legal claims are made.⁴⁹ As Ebeling understands it, the distinction is best described--and here he is adopting a term that is characteristic of his theology--as an event, a happening (Geschehen). The distinction between the Law and the Gospel is not a mere theological definition or principle; it is the event, the ongoing activity, of Christian proclamation. Ebeling says it this way:

The distinction of the Law and the Gospel is not discharged by a theological definition; it is best kept in progress. In the same way, the whole discipline of theology is itself not an enterprise that reaches a goal. Theology--in the specific sense of Christian theology--makes sense only for the sake of the proclamation. . . . Only if we have something to say for Jesus' sake, under appeal to him, in his name (and that means with an authority received from him), does it make sense to engage in the theological endeavor. And the distinction of the Law and the Gospel is the nerve (Nerv) of theology just because it has to do with the correct Christian Word.

Christian proclamation--that is the happening of the distinction of the Law and the Gospel. . . . The substance of Christian proclamation is really the accomplishing of the distinction of the Law and the Gospel; and for that reason it is also the carrying-out of a battle-event (Kampfgeschehen) in which the distinction of the Law and the Gospel is constantly at issue and becoming an event.⁵⁰

"Event (Ereignis)" and "happening (Geschehen)" are the words, as we shall see in the following chapter, with which Ebeling regularly describes the Christian proclamation. That he should use these words here to describe the Polarity of the Law and the Gospel is evidence of his understanding of that Polarity as something

⁴⁹Luther, pp. 127-128.

⁵⁰Luther, p. 128.

essentially related to the proclamation of the Christian Good News. It is so essential, in Ebeling's view, that he can speak of the result of the failure to make that distinction as "misfortune (Unheil)."⁵¹ Now, although the distinction is made for the sake of the Gospel, the Law nevertheless continues to be necessary. It would be a mistake if, while seeking to emphasize the cruciality of the Gospel in the Law-Gospel Polarity, the Law were to be excluded from consideration. For the purity of the Gospel does not depend on its being independent and disconnected from the Law; an isolated Gospel would be no Gospel at all. Rather, the Gospel comes into action precisely where the Law has done its work, where there is Law from which the Gospel can be distinguished. And to complete the reciprocal relationship, only when the Gospel comes into action does the Law really become known as the Law.⁵²

Ebeling finds Luther engaged in distinguishing between the Law and the Gospel also in other areas of theology besides that of proclamation. For example, the tensions that the Christian encounters in his life within the two kingdoms are to be resolved only with recourse to the event of distinguishing the Law and the Gospel.⁵³

⁵¹"Dann ist aber dies, daß sich die Unterscheidung von Gesetz und Evangelium ereignet, nicht etwas Beiläufiges und Zufälliges am Verkündigungsgeschehen, sondern das, was darin eigentlich geschehen soll." Luther, p. 128. It is when this really happens that the Word works faith and brings salvation to a man.

⁵²Luther, p. 129.

⁵³"Die Probleme sind immer wieder zurückzuführen auf die Grundunterscheidung von Evangelium und Gesetz, Gerechtigkeit des Glaubens und Gerechtigkeit der Werke." Luther, p. 237.

Again, Ebeling finds a discussion of "the natural" in Luther an impossibility without reference to the Law-Gospel Polarity. Luther's understanding of the Gospel, he says, makes it possible for one to overcome the tendency to over-evaluate or under-evaluate "that which is natural (das Natürliche)"; only with the right understanding of the Gospel is creation really understood as creation and redemption as redemption. And for that understanding one needs the interpretative aid of the distinction of the Law and the Gospel.⁵⁴

The Law-Gospel Polarity also comes into play in Ebeling's own constructive theological discussions. It becomes operative in his definition of faith;⁵⁵ it is determinative for the distinction between theology and philosophy;⁵⁶ it is essential for understanding

⁵⁴"Dazu bedarf es des spezifisch reformatorischen Interpretationshorizontes: der Unterscheidung von Gesetz und Evangelium. Erst dann kann theologisch richtiggestellt werden, was bei der eben vollzogenen groben Konfrontation verzerrt erscheint und zu Mißverständnissen Anlaß gibt: inwiefern nämlich gerade im Zeichen der *particula exclusiva* das Menschsein des Menschen ernst genommen ist und inwiefern es sich bei der Befreiung zum Natürlichen nicht um eine naturalistische Reduktion auf den Menschen "in puris naturalibus" handelt (um dieses nominalistische Schlagwort in etwas anderer Nuance zu werwenden), sondern um eine Weltlichkeit, die daraus entspringt, daß Gott ernst genommen wird, und die darum in vollem Einklang steht mit dem Satz: 'In Christo fiunt omnia spiritualia.'" "Das Problem des Natürlichen bei Luther," The Church, Mysticism, Sanctification and the Natural in Luther's Thought, pp. 173-174.

⁵⁵The Nature of Faith (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), p. 169.

⁵⁶"Theologie und Philosophie," RGG³, VI, cols. 827-828; also "Verantworten des Glaubens in Begegnung mit dem Denken M. Heideggers --Thesen zum Verhältnis von Philosophie und Theologie," ZThK, LVIII (1961), Beiheft 2, p. 122.

the proper relationship between Scripture and the proclaimed Word;⁵⁷ it determines the difference between the medieval Roman Catholic, the Enthusiastic, and the Reformation's ideas of church discipline;⁵⁸ again, the distinction between Law and Gospel plays an essential role in any attempt by the Church to make itself understood by modern man;⁵⁹ in his collection of sermons on the Lord's Prayer, Ebeling makes use of the Law-Gospel Polarity in his discussions of the will of God⁶⁰ and of Christian forgiveness.⁶¹ In addition to all of these, the Law-Gospel Polarity likewise plays a crucial role in Ebeling's understanding of the relationship between Scripture and tradition.⁶²

In all of this, it is clear that Ebeling sees Luther as his mentor in the task of "understanding the Gospel as addressed to contemporary man."⁶³ He insists that the Reformation is primarily a hermeneutical event, and he finds in Luther's correlation of the Word of the Gospel and the faith of the Christian the guiding ideas for responsible theologizing today. It is for the sake of

⁵⁷The Problem of Historicity, translated by Grover Foley (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, c.1967), pp. 14-15.

⁵⁸Kirchenzucht (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag, c.1947), p. 15.

⁵⁹"Hauptprobleme der protestantischen Theologie in der Gegenwart," ZThK, LVIII (1961), 133.

⁶⁰On Prayer, translated by James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, c.1966), p. 77.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 99.

⁶²"Tradition VII. Dogmatisch," RGG³, VI, col. 982.

⁶³WF, p. 11.

"word and faith" that the Law-Gospel Polarity is to be observed.⁶⁴

In all of these areas, and for all of these reasons, Ebeling concludes that for Luther's theology, and for his own as well, the distinction between the Law and the Gospel is "the basic formula of theological understanding."⁶⁵

The following chapters take up an examination of the specifically hermeneutical dimensions of that distinction.

⁶⁴Ebeling quotes Luther: "Die Herrlichkeit und Macht des Reiches Christi ist so verborgen, daß sie nicht erkannt werden kann, wenn sie nicht durch das Wort der Verkündigung dem Gehör offenbar wird; denn vor den Augen erscheint das äußerste Gegenteil, nämlich Schmach, Schwachheit, Niedrigkeit und äußerste Verachtung bei allen Glaubenden." [WA IV, 450] Again: "Weil aber in Worten durch den Glauben die nicht-offensichtlichen Dinge verborgen sind, deshalb hat, wer die Worte hat, durch den Glauben alles, obschon verborgen." [WA IV, 376] Quoted in Luther, p. 116.

⁶⁵RGG³, IV, col. 507.

CHAPTER IV

EBELING'S HERMENEUTICAL THEOLOGY IN DETAIL

It is now possible, having traced the broader outlines of Ebeling's theology and his continuing involvement in Luther research, to examine in detail the specifically hermeneutical aspect of his theological work. For the purposes of the present study, the essay "Word of God and Hermeneutics"¹ invites special consideration, for it is a basic presentation of Ebeling's hermeneutical theology. Following Ebeling's sequence of topics in that essay, we shall examine first of all his understanding of the concept "Word of God"; then we shall trace his discussion of hermeneutics; and finally we shall examine his understanding of the relationship between Word of God and hermeneutics, noting that this relationship contributes materially to the understanding of the two terms, and observing the special role that the Law-Gospel Polarity plays in Ebeling's theology.

The Problem of the Definition of the Word of God

In the initial section of his essay, while he does not spell out in detail his understanding of the Word of God, Ebeling insists

¹The original German is "Wort Gottes und Hermeneutik," Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche, LVI (1959), 224-251; hereafter this journal will be referred to as ZThK. The English translation used in the present study appears in Word and Faith, translated by James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, c.1963), pp. 305-332. Further references to this volume will use the abbreviation WF.

This essay is also made one of the focal essays in the symposium The New Hermeneutic, in New Frontiers in Theology, edited by James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr. (New York: Harper and Row, c.1964), II, 78-110.

that, whatever else may be said by way of definition, the concept of the Word of God has to do with something that happens.² Here we encounter the term which has probably become the most familiar catchword in Ebeling's theology: word-event.³ The source for his use of the term word-event is to be seen in Bultmann, who found in the connection between Jesus and his word a reason to speak of the word of Jesus as an event commensurate with his person.⁴ In Ebeling's view, the "event" of the Word is the concern for proclamation, or the movement from text to proclamation. The interpreter's task, happening as it does in time, can be described in completely neutral fashion as an event. From this it would appear that Ebeling's initial concern in speaking of the Word as an event is to underscore the fact that we have to do with the Word only in time, in

²WF, p. 311: "Whatever precise theological definition may be given to the concept of the Word of God, at all events it points to something that happens, viz., to the movement which leads from the text of holy scripture to the sermon ('sermon' of course taken in the pregnant sense of proclamation in general)."

³The German is Wortgeschehen. On a few occasions Ebeling uses the nearly parallel term Sprachereignis.

⁴Ebeling quotes Bultmann's Glauben und Verstehen I, 274: "that the person of Jesus is contained without remainder in his word, and this means too, that his Word is an event" Theology and Proclamation, translated by John Riches (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, c.1966), p. 166, hereafter referred to as TP. A further idea of what Ebeling, following Bultmann, means by "event" can be seen in the following statement: "If we wish to speak of God's reality concretely, and that means with regard to history, then we can only speak of God's act. So in the That of God (or as one can also say in Bultmann's terminology, in the eschatological event) the different elements are combined; it is an event, it cannot be grasped, it cannot be proved, it can only be communicated by the Word, and it can only be accepted by faith." TP, p. 68.

history. Words, Ebeling maintains, are not timeless; they are time-bound. An individual can relate to the past and to the future only through language. And by "word" Ebeling does not mean merely an individual vocable, but a statement, a sentence, a combination of words that make up a statement--and, incidentally, therefore take up time.⁵

The other aspects of Ebeling's understanding of word-event can be made clear only in relation to his discussion of the centrality of hermeneutics. We must therefore sketch out what Ebeling means by hermeneutics, so that we may then determine his understanding of the relationship between Word of God and hermeneutics, and thereby determine why in Ebeling's view hermeneutics is so important for theology.

⁵Ebeling discusses the relationship between word and time in the series of lectures published under the title God and Word, translated by James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, c.1967): "The basic unit of meaning in language is the sentence, which pieces together a subject in the medium of time. If a man utters not only a single vocable--unless of course it is an exclamation, and, even then, as such it implies a temporally determined sentence--but rather says a word, then he makes a statement of time. Word as spoken is always temporal word." "Word takes place as a temporal event. Thus to word there belongs the situation from which it arises, into which it comes, and which it changes." "It is solely through language that I can have a relation to past and future, that past and future are present to me, that I can go back behind my present and stretch out ahead of it." "When we speak of 'word,' we normally mean not the vocable--the atom of a specific linguistic system--but the totality of a statement. On the contrary, we have in mind word as an event, and thus word as inclusive of its relationship to historical contexts, i.e., to the situation in which it is answered for." Pp. 18, 19.

Ebeling's Understanding of Hermeneutics

The attention which Ebeling gives to hermeneutics as central for his theology is apparent even at first reading of any of his essays. Since, however, by the term "hermeneutics" Ebeling means something quite different from that which the term has traditionally meant, one must be careful not to restrict the meaning of Ebeling's statements about hermeneutics merely to the realm of biblical interpretation. Rather, hermeneutics embraces the entire theological task; it is the over-arching concern of everyone who claims to be a theologian.⁶ Whatever the precise definition of hermeneutics to

⁶James M. Robinson, in his introductory essay in The New Hermeneutic, speaks of Ebeling's hermeneutics as a "new theology": "The new hermeneutic is a new theology, just as were dialectic theology and Ritschlianism before it. Indeed it is Ebeling's conviction that theology itself is hermeneutic, for it consists in translating what the Bible has to say into the word for today." The New Hermeneutic, p. 67.

Ebeling himself maintains that hermeneutics is fundamental: "Für die Theologie . . . ist das Problem der Hermeneutik von fundamentaler Bedeutung." Luther. Einführung in sein Denken (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], c.1964), p. 102.

Ebeling's emphasis on hermeneutics leads him, in the articles "Theologie" and "Theologie und Philosophie" in Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart, edited by Kurt Galling (3rd edition; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1962), VI, cols. 754, 782, to begin each article with a section that discusses the topic in its hermeneutical context; only after stating the basic hermeneutical point of departure does he go on to spell out the historical and/or conceptual aspects of theology and its relationship to philosophy. (Hereafter this encyclopedia will be referred to as RGG³.)

It should also be noted that Ebeling does not regard his hermeneutical approach to theology as merely a matter of methodology: "Denn 'Hermeneutik' ist, recht verstanden, radikaler Ruf zur Sache der Theologie." Theologie und Verkündigung (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1962), p. 136; italics added.

which one finally comes, the beginning point for an understanding of Ebeling's idea of the term's meaning is this: hermeneutics has to do with understanding.⁷ The problem in religious language today is that the word-event, which we have seen Ebeling tentatively identifying as the event of the movement from text to proclamation, is hindered in a variety of ways for modern man, whom Ebeling describes as "the victim of linguistic estrangement from his tradition and linguistic confusion among his contemporaries."⁸

The hermeneutics of which Ebeling speaks differs from the customary view of hermeneutics, he says, in at least three areas: (1) there is no distinction between sacred and profane hermeneutics in his view, (2) word is regarded not as an obstacle but as a means for understanding, and (3) no distinction is to be allowed between exegesis and hermeneutics.

Ebeling rejects any distinction between a special religious hermeneutics and the general principles of hermeneutics (or understanding) which obtain in other disciplines. The traditional distinction between "sacred hermeneutics (hermeneutica sacra)" and

⁷Ebeling regards "understanding" as the concept which characterizes the European philosophy of language today, in contradistinction to the Anglo-Saxon emphasis upon linguistic analysis. His hermeneutical theology, then, is an attempt to wrestle with the problems of religious language. "Under the influence of general philosophical views of language, these problems are being intensively discussed today, in Europe mainly from the point of the hermeneutic approach, in the Anglo-Saxon realm primarily from the standpoint of linguistic analysis. . . . The typical leading concepts are 'understanding' on the one side and 'verification' on the other." God and Word, p. 8.

⁸Ibid.

"profane hermeneutics (hermeneutica profana)" is to be done away. Hermeneutics is a unitary discipline, embracing the methodology, not merely of the individual theological disciplines, but of theology as a whole and of other disciplines which seek to aid understanding.⁹

Secondly, Ebeling regards as erroneous the usual assumption which finds the need for hermeneutics or interpretation in the assertion that verbal statements generally pose a problem for understanding. Ebeling's view is this: "The primary phenomenon in the realm of understanding is not understanding OF language, but understanding THROUGH language."¹⁰ It is not the word that is the object of understanding; rather, "the word is what opens up and mediates understanding, i. e. brings something to understanding. The word itself has a hermeneutic function."¹¹ The word-event, then, aims to be an aid to understanding; it is not itself an obstacle to understanding. As a result of this, hermeneutics or interpretation is required only when the word-event is somehow

⁹WF, p. 316. Elsewhere, Ebeling speaks of hermeneutics as "das einende Wesen der Theologie"; he claims that it is anything but a partial discipline, a realm of special concern, or a favored theological hobby-horse: "Es will vielmehr auf etwas hinweisen, was eo ipso zur Theologie gehört und bei jedem Theologietreiben wirksam ist." The traditional hermeneutica sacra, Ebeling says, was destined to die out because it was "eine pseudotheologische Hermeneutik"; the failure and error of hermeneutica sacra in relation to the developments of profane hermeneutics, he says, forced theology to its current serious reflections on hermeneutics. "Hermeneutische Theologie?," Kirche in der Zeit, XX (November 1965), 486, 488.

¹⁰WF, p. 318; italics Ebeling's.

¹¹Ibid.; italics Ebeling's.

hindered. The need for hermeneutics is directly proportionate to the prevailing hindrance to understanding.¹² If the word itself has a hermeneutic function, then the object of hermeneutics is the word-event itself; the continuing predominance of proclamation is constantly kept in mind.¹³ This consideration leads to the realization that, if hermeneutics has to do with the word-event, then it has to do with that which the word-event aims to accomplish, namely, the understanding of reality.¹⁴

The third area in which Ebeling counters the common view of hermeneutics relates to the distinction between exegesis and

¹²"For hermeneutics is of course not a departure from the linguistic realm in order to understand language, but a deeper penetration into the linguistic realm in order to understand by means of language. . . . How radically we have to consider the hermeneutic problem depends on the extent to which lack of understanding arises." WF, p. 319.

¹³In their report on the 1962 Consultation on Hermeneutics at Drew University which first introduced Ebeling and Fuchs to dialog with American theologians, John B. Cobb, Jr. and Robert W. Funk have this to say: "Hermeneutics, on this view, embraces the whole theological task. Hence hermeneutics is the overarching concern of every seminary professor; each professor differs from his fellows only insofar as there are aspects of the hermeneutical process to which he makes special contributions. Preaching is thus made the capstone and norm of theological scholarship, and departmentalization is overcome in principle." "Consultation on Hermeneutics," Drew Gateway, XXXIII (Spring 1963), 125.

¹⁴"In that hermeneutics addresses itself directly to the word, it addresses itself directly to the reality that comes to understanding through the word." WF, p. 320. Elsewhere, Ebeling points out that hermeneutics, as he conceives it, is concerned for the right happening of the word-event; and, since the word itself has a hermeneutic function and seeks to open understanding, the task of theology is to be characterized as the aim to make possible the proper hermeneutic function of the word. Kirche in der Zeit, XX, 486.

hermeneutics that is characteristic of the traditional view. Whereas hermeneutics has been viewed as the discipline which provides the ground rules for the carrying out of the exegetical task, Ebeling allows no such distinction. If the word itself has a hermeneutic function, and if hermeneutics is the theory of words, then, he says, hermeneutics, "in order to be an aid to interpretation, must itself be interpretation."¹⁵ The question that must now be asked, of course, is this: What is to be interpreted? As Cobb and Funk rightly point out, that which is to be interpreted is not the text, but reality itself--the human reality of the man who is addressed by the word.¹⁶ How this is so will become clear as we move on to examine the relationship Ebeling sees between the Word of God and hermeneutics.

The Relationship between the Word of God and Hermeneutics

The final section of Ebeling's essay, "Word of God and Hermeneutics," provides what Ebeling calls "a few pointers . . . to bring us to the basic problem of theological hermeneutics."¹⁷ These "pointers" will indicate the nature of the connection which Ebeling believes exists between the Word of God and hermeneutics. He discusses this relation in three steps: (1) the relation

¹⁵ WF, p. 321.

¹⁶ Drew Gateway, XXXIII, 124; see also WF, p. 431.

¹⁷ WF, p. 322; italics Ebeling's.

between general and theological hermeneutics, (2) the relation between word and Word of God, and (3) the relation between text and sermon.

Recalling the point made earlier in his essay, namely, that the word itself has a hermeneutic character and that hermeneutics is the theory of words, Ebeling now suggests as a corresponding proposition the idea: "theological hermeneutics is the theory or doctrine of the Word of God."¹⁸ Since, however, there is some doubt about the compatibility of the concepts Word of God and hermeneutics, Ebeling feels that proposition he has just made is in need of careful development. Since, as we have seen above, hermeneutics in general is definable as the theory of words, or the theory of understanding, and since words are the source and means of understanding, then it must follow that the Word of God have ascribed to it hermeneutical significance for theology and that theological hermeneutics have, as the source and means of understanding in its realm, the Word of God. Therefore, far from being inimical to each other, the concepts Word of God and hermeneutics are essentially related. The role of hermeneutics in theology, then, is that of providing a theological doctrine of understanding, or a doctrine of theological understanding; and this is just another way of speaking of the doctrine of the Word of God.

¹⁸WF, p. 323; italics Ebeling's.

At this point Ebeling endeavors to sharpen up his definition of the Word of God. It is of utmost importance, he insists, that we remember that the Word of God "does not mean any special, supernatural Word . . . but true, proper, finally valid word."¹⁹ And, just as the Word of God is essentially no different from word in its more general conception, so also the concept "God" does not signify any separate, special reality, but rather reality itself. In its relationship, then, with nontheological hermeneutics, theological hermeneutics finds itself in basic agreement over rather wide areas. However, when the hermeneutic question is raised in its most radical dimension and reaches the ultimate ground of understanding, theological hermeneutics must find itself in a kind of conflict with all non-theological hermeneutics, in order to maintain the truth that "God's Word is the ultimate ground of understanding."²⁰ When the claim to truth is made on the basis of God's Word, that claim is absolute.

In order to make these statements about the relationship between theological and general hermeneutics, Ebeling had found it necessary to touch on the relationship between the Word of God and word-in-general; this relationship now requires further elucidation. Ebeling calls it a "cardinal error in theology" when God

¹⁹WF, p. 324. See also Ebeling, The Nature of Faith, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), pp. 84-95, 182-191.

²⁰WF, p. 324. God's Word must be conceived of as the ultimate ground of understanding "because it is here in the last analysis that word is encountered as word and understanding as understanding."

is spoken of as merely a part of reality, and therefore something additional to the rest of reality, as if God and the world were two separate entities and their relationship "one of mutual supplementation or of mutual competition."²¹ In Ebeling's view "God cannot be spoken of in theology without the world thereby coming to expression as event, and the world cannot be spoken of in theology without God thereby likewise coming to expression as event."²² This cardinal error is regarded by Ebeling as the ground of a misunderstanding that is detrimental to hermeneutical theology, namely, that view of the Word of God which regards it as "a separate class of word alongside the word spoken between men, which is otherwise the only thing we usually call word."²³ In this sense, God's Word is not really word in the same sense as the "normal, natural, historic word" that takes place between men. In this view, which necessarily speaks of a kind of translation from "God's language" into normal human language, one has to reckon with certain distortions and inaccuracies; and the idea of "accommodation" is said to be the basis and excuse for these shortcomings. But Ebeling

²¹ Ibid.

²² WF, p. 324-325. Ebeling thus views God and world as aspects of the whole of reality, not as supplementary parts of reality, as if either were less than wholly reality. This point is developed further in the essay "Existenz zwischen Gott und Gott," where Ebeling maintains that a man's experience of the world is a modus of his experience of God; existence coram mundo and coram Deo is described as existence "between God and God." Further, theology, as speech about God, is described as "um-faßendes Reden von Gott und vom In-der-Welt-Sein des Menschen." ZThK, LXII, 87-88.

²³ WF, p. 325.

insists that such a division between heavenly word and earthly word is a gross misunderstanding.

When the Bible speaks of God's Word, then it means here unreservedly word as word--word that as far as its word-character is concerned is completely normal, let us not hesitate to say: natural, oral word taking place between man and man.²⁴

To speak in this fashion about the "ordinary" character of the Word of God is not thereby to deny validity to the Bible's occasionally radical contrast between the Word of God and the word of man. But here, Ebeling maintains, the point of contrast is not the verbal or spoken character of the word but the real speaker of that word. What God speaks is truth; but man is always liar.²⁵ The point of this contrast between God as truthful and man as liar is, according to Ebeling, "whether the word-event is one that is misused and corrupted by man, or whether it is one that is sound, pure, and fully realized."²⁶ Ebeling goes on to say that a sound, pure, and fully realized word-event is one which "brings wholeness and gives life."²⁷ But this view of the contrast between God's Word and man's word is apparent in its theological implications only when one refuses to regard the Word of God and the word of men as separate or contrary. In fact, it is the very concept "word"

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Rom. 3:4.

²⁶ WF, p. 325. At this point Ebeling seems to be saying that God's Word is what is real and true; and, vice versa, what is real and true is God's Word. This "reversible equation" appears to be a basic part of Ebeling's understanding of the nature of the Word of God.

²⁷ WF, p. 326.

that links God and man together.²⁸ In this connection, and drawing upon the distinction between the Greek and the Hebrew understandings of word and reality,²⁹ Ebeling casts his lot with the Hebrew understanding of "word" as not timeless, but historic: "Word is, taken strictly, happening word."³⁰ It is not enough to answer the question of the meaning of a word; meaning must be taken together with the effect of the word. Word must accomplish something if it is really to be word; thus the content and the power of words are not to be separated. It is for this reason that Ebeling speaks of the word as an event. He is not concerned with the mere statement of intrinsic meaning, for that is only an abstraction; genuine word (and therefore Word of God, which is word at its most genuine) is said to "happen," to effect something, to come to pass.³¹

Of course, word is meant as a means of rational intercourse, for that it must be. But more appropriate, in Ebeling's thinking,

²⁸"The full theological bearing of this difference, however, can come to light only when word is really taken as word, and when it is clear that God and word are no more contradictory than man and word, but on the contrary it is 'word' that unites God and man." Ibid.

²⁹See Thorlief Boman, Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), especially pp. 58-69.

³⁰WF, p. 326.

³¹"It is not enough to enquire into its intrinsic meaning, but that must be joined up with the question of its future, of what it effects. For ultimately the questions as to the content and the power of words are identical. Word is therefore rightly understood only when it is viewed as an event which--like love--involves at least two. The basic structure of word is therefore not statement--that is an abstract variety of word-event--but appraisal, certainly not in the colourless sense of information, but in the pregnant sense of participation and communication." Ibid.

is that view of word which says "word serves understanding."³² When the word-event happens "rightly," it serves to illuminate a man's existence,³³ for since word is that which shows the speaker for what he is, then, Ebeling says, the real purpose which word is meant to serve is "that man shows himself as man."³⁴ It is man's destiny to show himself as man; therefore word is necessary for man's existence as man. Thus man's very existence is "a word-event which has its origin in the Word of God and, in response to that Word, makes openings by a right and salutary use of words."³⁵ Elsewhere Ebeling speaks of reality or of existence as linguistic, as word-bound.³⁶ He speaks of the task of proclamation as "addressing

³²WF, p. 327.

³³In a parenthetical remark here Ebeling says, "and that naturally always means: existence in association with others." Such a reminder of life as life in society would give the lie, it seems to this writer, to the criticism of Joseph Haroutunian, who insists that a major failure in Ebeling's theology is his insistence on the individual, to the exclusion of any meaningful awareness of a man's existence in relation to others. See Haroutunian's review of Word and Faith in Theology Today, XXI (April 1964), 114-116. While it is true that Ebeling does not emphasize the interpersonal aspects of "word and faith," it is not true that he is an individualist who pays no attention to the Christian's relation to others. See also Ebeling's article "Tradition VII. Dogmatisch," RGG³, VI, cols. 976-984.

³⁴WF, p. 327.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶"Denn nicht die Wirklichkeit in abstracto, sondern die den Menschen angehende, und zwar auf Wahrnehmung [sic] seiner Zeitlichkeit und deshalb auf die Unterscheidung zwischen uti und frui hin angehende Wirklichkeit--und eben das meint: die Wirklichkeit als sprachliche --ist der Ort, an dem das Reden von Gott verständlich zu sein beansprucht." "Der hermeneutische Ort der Gotteslehre bei Petrus Lombardus und Thomas von Aquin," ZThK, LXI (1964), 302. Ebeling

one's listeners in such a way that they begin to see their situation as determined by the ground of the christological kerygma and to see in what way it is determined."³⁷ On the negative side, man's failure as man, man's sin, is likewise linguistic; it is a failure in the right use of words, a failure to speak word that is "true, necessary, salutary, and remedial." It is, in fact, a failure to speak the Word of God, which Ebeling here defines as "the word which, because it accords with man's destiny, corresponds to God, that is, for the word by means of which one man can speak God to another, so that God comes to man and man to God."³⁸ Man's sin, therefore, is his failure to speak the true and valid Word of God, and his salvation is to be expected solely from the right happening of the word-event, that is, from the speaking of the true and valid Word of God.

maintains that the word accomplishes its purposes only in laying claim to and in enlightening the present reality; indeed, that is why it has been handed down as God's Word, namely, to illuminate reality. See also Kirche in der Zeit, XX, 487.

³⁷TP, p. 53. Ebeling links the concepts of word, reality, and hermeneutics in this way: "the very word as such is of hermeneutical importance and is able to illumine, to bring about clarity, and to give life. The hermeneutical task can only consist of the fact that we devote ourselves to the service of the word-event in such a way that the word becomes truly word, and that it occurs as pure word in the fullness of its power." "The New Hermeneutics and the Early Luther," Theology Today, XXI (April 1964), 46.

³⁸WF, p. 327.

Ebeling's discussion of the effect of an authentic word-event, namely, "bringing God to expression,"³⁹ leads him to speak of word as promise. And in this connection Ebeling speaks of the Law-Gospel Polarity. For the Word is, primarily, promise:

It is most surely promise when it refers to something that is not present but absent--and that, too, in such a way that in promise the absent thing so to speak presents itself; that is, when in word the speaker pledges and imparts himself to the other and opens a future to him by awakening faith within him.⁴⁰

When, therefore, the speaker of the word is God, or at least when God is brought to expression by the word, then we have to do with what Ebeling calls Word of God or "the conjunction of God, word,

³⁹We give just two examples of Ebeling's use of the phrase "to bring to expression": "Theology ceases to be theology if it is no longer concerned to bring God to expression, and so to make the claim to speak the truth in the sense of the simply necessary." "We have to think again what we mean by 'God' when we say 'the Word of God', and we have to do this by reflecting on the event-character of the Word, or alternatively on the word-character of the event, in which God comes to expression, in which God makes himself understood." TP, pp. 24, 75-76.

We have here adopted the translation used by James Leitch in Word and Faith, who explains his choice thus: "The somewhat peculiar sense in which Professor Ebeling uses this phrase is not easy to render exactly in English, and the links with other related terms are also more obvious in German than English can make them. The phrase itself--zur Sprache kommen (bringen)--means literally 'to come (bring) to speech,' and is normal German for 'to come (bring) up for discussion.' Here, however, 'speech' is used not in the sense of the thing being spoken about, but in the active sense of the thing itself speaking. One might perhaps say in English 'to come (bring) on the scene'--especially when it is remembered that an actor comes on the scene in order to say something. The rendering 'come (bring) to expression,' which has been adopted throughout this book, is an attempt to indicate more directly the important association with words and language." WF, p. 294 note 1.

⁴⁰WF, p. 327.

faith, future as the prime necessity for the good of man's human nature."⁴¹ These four terms--God, word, faith, and future--are the single coherent complex that is characteristic of Ebeling's theology of the Word of God. When God speaks a word that awakens faith, a meaningful future is given to the man for whom such a word happens.

We are led then to the question: Where and how does such a word-event take place? Ebeling answers, "This word-event takes place, Christians confess, in the gospel."⁴² To speak of the Gospel, however, necessitates that one speak also of the Law. For the word-event proceeding from God, or, in other words, the Word of God, strikes a man as either the Law or the Gospel. The foolish, faithless man perceives that Word as killing Law. As authentic word-event (and that means as the word that brings a man's reality to expression) the word-event will expose the foolish, faithless man for what he is; it compels his assent to the Law's accusation that he is indeed faithless. But in just this way the word-event as the Law stands in the service of the word-event as the Gospel. It is above all as the Gospel that the Word of God seeks to come to expression; for God's Word is a word that "makes man human by making him a believer."⁴³

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ebeling defines "believer" as "a man who commits himself to God as constituting his future and who therefore does not fail

The third "pointer" to show the problem of theological hermeneutics emerges in a discussion of the relation between text and sermon, the question of how Scripture becomes the text of a sermon. The aim of the text, Ebeling says, is that it be preserved, read, and handed on, and that it be so in the interest of proclamation. The text aims simply to be proclaimed. Not any and every text of Scripture, however, is thereby the text for a sermon. For what is to be a sermon text must operate in the service of the proclamation of the Word of God. It would therefore be more correct to say that Word of God is to be proclaimed, rather than to say that the text is to be proclaimed.⁴⁴ The concepts Word of God and text are therefore not coextensive; indeed, Ebeling labels "absurd" the designation of a transmitted text as God's Word.⁴⁵ Properly understood, a text is a record of proclamation that has taken place; assuming that it was right proclamation, the text has to do with a past occurrence of the Word of God. Since, then, the aim of a text is to be preserved, read, and handed on, the aim of a Scripture

his fellowmen in the one absolutely necessary and salutary thing, viz., true word." WF, p. 328, altered here for the sake of English sense.

In the essay under consideration, Ebeling makes only the brief reference to the Law and the Gospel which we have just traced. Other essays develop in much greater detail the ideas he only suggests in the present context. For the present we shall follow Ebeling's argument to its conclusion; with his entire train of thought in mind we can then discuss in greater detail his understanding of the Law-Gospel Polarity.

⁴⁴"It is not texts that seek to be proclaimed. Rather, it is God's Word that is to be proclaimed, and that is one single Word, but not Words of God, not a variety of different texts." Ibid.

⁴⁵WF, p. 329.

text, as the record of past proclamation, is not only the continuance and reinterpretation of past proclamation, but further proclamation, proclamation that is in agreement with and under appeal to that text. Ebeling therefore describes the process from text to sermon in this fashion:

Proclamation that has taken place is to become proclamation that takes place. This transition from text to sermon is a transition from Scripture to the spoken word. Thus the task prescribed here consists in making what is written into spoken word or, as we can now also say, in letting the text become God's Word again.⁴⁶

Textual interpretation in the interest of preaching, then, is interpretation of the text as word. With that statement, according to Ebeling, we are returned to the midst of the hermeneutic problem; the movement from text to sermon is a hermeneutic process, a part of the hermeneutic problem that the text as text poses. For if the aim of the text as past proclamation is the occurrence of proclamation in the present, then we are face to face with the hermeneutic problem in the very midst of our attempt to move from text to sermon. The task of proclamation sets the hermeneutic problem into its sharpest focus.⁴⁷

By means of what he regards as the analogous case of legal hermeneutics, Ebeling describes what he means by the problem of

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ "The problem of theological hermeneutics would not be grasped without the inclusion of the task of proclamation; it is not until then that it is brought decisively to a head at all. And that, too, because the biblical texts would not be rightly heard unless they were seen to present us with the task of proclamation." Ibid.

hermeneutics in relation to the task of proclamation. In legal matters the question is one of the relation between the legal sources and the task of giving legal decisions in the present, that is, the way in which traditional legal sources point the way to legal decisions in the present and thus illuminate the understanding in a complex modern legal case. To be sure, one could stop at a purely historical understanding and thus reproduce the intent of the past legal decision. But, insofar as those legal sources are still in force, they are to be examined with regard to the light they may shed upon the present legal case. The texts themselves demand historical interpretation, but their application in the present case is never independent of that. The historical understanding serves merely to clarify and guide the process of decision-making in the present. The legal text is not only the record and source of past legal decision, "but as the source of past legal decision it becomes the source of legal decision in the present." This is to say that "the man who has no interest in giving legal decisions will be a poor legal historian. And the man who does not trouble himself with historical interpretation jeopardizes the purity of his legal decisions in the present."⁴⁸ The hermeneutic problem might therefore be characterized as the problem of the relationship between historical understanding and present understanding, or the problem of how "interest in the past unites with interest in the future."⁴⁹

⁴⁸ WF, p. 330.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Returning to the realm of theological hermeneutics, Ebeling draws from his analogy in legal hermeneutics the following implications for our understanding of the task of theological hermeneutics. The task of the sermon is not merely exposition of the text, when exposition means the concentration on historical understanding. But, of course, historical understanding is a necessary part of, or prelude to, proclamation in the present. For to understand a text historically is to understand it "in its historical givenness as proclamation that has taken place."⁵⁰ Historical understanding must be a part of the sermonic effort if the sermon's appeal to the text is to be valid; and to that extent exposition of the text is also contained in the sermon. However, because the sermon is intended mainly to be proclamation in the present, and not merely exposition of the text as past proclamation, that means that "the sermon is EXECUTION of the text." That is to say, the sermon executes or carries out the aim of the text; the sermon proclaims what the text proclaimed. The text, which by means of exposition has attained understanding, now serves as an aid to bring to understanding that which the sermon is about, namely, "the present reality 'in the sight of God (coram Deo).'" Thus the text achieves its real aim when it serves as an aid to the understanding of present reality and experience.⁵¹ The real hermeneutic

⁵⁰WF, p. 331.

⁵¹Ibid. Ebeling continues with another brief statement of what he understands by the term "Word of God": "Where that [the

problem, then, is the problem of the connection "between exposition of the text as proclamation that has taken place and execution of the text in proclamation in the present." As an answer to the question posed by this problem, Ebeling aligns himself with Bultmann and his associates in proposing "the concept of existentialist interpretation."⁵² By existentialist interpretation Ebeling means

understanding of present reality by means of the execution of a text in present proclamation] happens radically, there true word is uttered, and that in fact means God's Word." See above, page 62, note 26.

Ebeling makes much the same point in the following statement, which links "Word of God" with word-event: "For God's Word does not mean any word, but pure word, pure address, and this means authoritative word, word which creates faith. Its 'content' is completely exhausted by its 'event' (coming to pass) and its 'event' is its 'content'--which can be made explicit!" TP, p. 73.

James M. Robinson, a highly sympathetic critic of Ebeling, agrees that for Ebeling, Word of God equals pure language, pure word; he says: "Language is most authentic when it communicates in both senses, that is, when what it says and what it does coincide. Hence God's Word need not be conceived of as only roughly analogous to language, but rather, in this authentic sense, is language. When the witness to faith leads to faith, that is, when men's words (or actions which speak louder than words) bring God to one who hearkens, this occurrence of language is God's Word. The difference in man's word and God's word is simply that in God's word God, not man, has his say, and hence God, not man, is communicated." "Neo-Liberalism," Interpretation, XV (October 1961), 489.

⁵²WF, p. 331. "Existentialist" is used by translator James Leitch to reproduce the German existential, meaning that which relates to the nature of existence or our understanding of it. The German existentiell, reproduced with the English "existential," means complete personal involvement. Leitch provides the following examples: "an 'existential statement' (existentiell) is one that in some way vitally involves the speaker's personal existence and gives expression to it. An 'existentialist interpretation' (existential) of such a statement is one that interprets it in terms of the real truth of existence as such." WF, p. 331, note 1.

"interpretation of the text with regard to the word-event."⁵³

Concern for the word-event, in Ebeling's opinion, will serve to direct historical exposition towards the fulfillment of its real task of occasioning proclamation in the present. And in the connection between historical exposition and present proclamation by means of existentialist interpretation lies the inner hermeneutic connection between text and sermon.

Ebeling then concludes with a two-stage definition of "the hermeneutic principle." First of all, defining the hermeneutic principle as "the word-event itself," Ebeling recalls what he said earlier, namely, that hermeneutics is the theory of words, and that theological hermeneutics is the theory or doctrine of the Word of God; and "for that very reason there can also be doctrine of the Word of God only as theological hermeneutics."⁵⁴ If, then, one seeks a statement of the hermeneutic principle in terms of the sphere in which the word-event takes place, Ebeling suggests the formula: "The hermeneutic principle is man as conscience."⁵⁵ His sudden introduction of the term "conscience" into the discussion is supported by an appeal to a statement in Luther's Lectures on Galatians of 1531, where "in the conscience" is seen to be synonymous with the adjective "theological":

⁵³WF, p. 331.

⁵⁴WF, p. 332.

⁵⁵Ibid.; italics Ebeling's.

This is the freedom with which Christ has set us free, not from some human slavery or tyrannical authority but from the eternal wrath of God. Where? In the conscience. This is where our freedom comes to a halt; it goes no further. For Christ has set us free, not for a political freedom or a freedom of the flesh but for a theological or spiritual freedom, that is, to make our conscience free and joyful, unafraid of the wrath to come.⁵⁶

Summary

Before going on to examine in detail the place of the Law-Gospel Polarity and the significance of Ebeling's assertion that the hermeneutical principle is "man as conscience," we shall do well to summarize this chapter's examination of Ebeling's hermeneutical theology.

In Ebeling's view, the Word of God, with which theology has to deal, must be defined as an event, as something that happens, as something that is itself creative of a new situation. In speaking of the Word of God, Ebeling quotes with approval from an ordination sermon delivered by Carl Michalson: "That's what the word does--it doesn't point to a thing but creates a situation."⁵⁷ God's Word

⁵⁶Lectures on Galatians, 1535, translated and edited by Jaroslav Pelikan, in Luther's Works (American Edition; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, c.1964), XXVII, 4 [italics not in original]. Ebeling quotes Luther's Latin notes thus: "Est libertas a lege, peccatis, morte, a potentia diaboli, ira dei, extremo iudicio. Ubi? in conscientia, Ut sic iustus sim, quod Christus sit liberator et reddat liberos, non carnaliter non politice, diabolice, sed theologice i.e. tantum in conscientia." WF, p. 332. We shall have occasion to discuss the conscience as the locus of theology below in connection with the Law-Gospel Polarity.

⁵⁷God and Word, p. v.

is not to be differentiated from man's words in the sense of some qualitatively different kind of word which only by accommodation could find expression in human speech; rather, God's Word comes to expression precisely in normal human words. Whether a word can be called God's Word or not depends on the nature of that word's event; God's Word gives life, but man's word does not.⁵⁸ Of course, the Word of God stands in a particular relation to the Holy Scriptures; but certainly not, in Ebeling's view, in a simple one-for-one equation. Scripture can be spoken of as the Word of God only in the sense of a text which by means of faithful exposition becomes a source for God's Word in proclamation today.⁵⁹ As the pure word-event, the proclamation of God's Word occasioned by the biblical records is not to be thought of as an obstacle to understanding

⁵⁸The difference between God's Word and human words, seen in this way, may, however, be shown as an "opposite," but only in a limited sense: "God's Word is the radical opposite of man's word from the standpoint whether the speaker is God, who alone is verax, or man, who is mendax (Rom. 3:4), and accordingly whether it is a life-giving or a killing word-event. But from the standpoint of the manner of its encounter, God's Word as word is identical with the natural, human, spoken word." "Discussion Theses for a Course of Introductory Lectures on the Study of Theology," WF, p. 428.

⁵⁹"The confessional statement, 'Scripture is the Word of God,' can be rightly understood if the full breadth of the hermeneutic task is also included in the explanation of this way of speaking. But it is dangerously confusing, if the hermeneutic problem is left out of account. It cannot of course be corrected by asserting some form of intermingling of God's Word and man's word, but only by affirming that God's Word by its very nature is not a written, once-upon-a-time word, but one that is orally spoken and happens. It is not the Bible text, but the proclamation, that is God's Word in the strict sense. In so far as the proclamation is dependent on the text, the exposition therefore serves towards the text proving itself a Bible text, i.e. becoming the source of God's Word." WF, pp. 428-429.

but rather as a means toward understanding; and that which gets interpreted and understood is not so much the text as it is the reality that confronts a man.⁶⁰ Thus the text of Scripture serves the necessary function of occasioning the Word of God in contemporary proclamation,⁶¹ so that one can say that the Word of God "exists" only to the extent that it "happens" in faithful, text-bound proclamation.⁶²

Ebeling's understanding of the nature of hermeneutics relates quite closely to the foregoing view of the Word of God. Hermeneutics is not just the rules of biblical exegesis, but is the entire theological task of translating the biblical message into the modern age, of aiding the process of understanding the present reality "in the sight of God (coram Deo)." As the theological theory of

⁶⁰"Denn Wort Gottes enthebt nicht des Verstehens, sondern eröffnet Verstehen. Und kirchliche Lehre verbietet nicht theologische Verstehensbemühung, sondern fordert dazu heraus und leitet dazu an. Unverstandenes Wort Gottes ist nicht als Wort Gottes vernommen. Kirchliche Lehre, die nicht Theologie in Gang setzt, wäre nicht Bezeugung, sondern Verdunkelung des Wortes Gottes." Wort Gottes und Tradition (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, c.1964), pp. 158-159. See also TP, p. 28: "For the Word which once happened and which has been recorded in the form of a text as an event which has occurred, must with the help of the text again become Word, and so come into being as the expounding Word."

⁶¹"Das Wort des Glaubens . . . ist . . . in seiner als Schrift fixierter Ursprünglichkeit aufzusuchen: doch so, daß aus Vergangenheit Gegenwart wird, aus dem zum Text gewordenen Wort wieder zum Wort gewordener Text." "Zeit und Wort," Zeit und Geschichte: Dankesgabe an Rudolf Bultmann zum 80. Geburtstag, edited by Erich Dinkler (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1964), p. 352.

⁶²Ebeling insists that genuine word, that is, God's Word, happens only under appeal to the Scripture, which "als Text gewordenes Wortgeschehen die Verheißung hat, daß der Text autorisierende Quelle neuen Wortgeschehens wird." Kirche in der Zeit, XX, 487.

understanding, hermeneutics must aid the word-event by removing obstacles to understanding. In common with other followers of Bultmann, Ebeling insists that it is not so much the text that gets interpreted but rather the reality with which one who is addressed by the word presently has to do. Hermeneutics thereby becomes the unifying factor for all aspects of the theological endeavor.⁶³ Not only does hermeneutics serve to unite the various theological disciplines, but it also summons theology to focus on that which is absolutely necessary for theology--and that means the word-event.⁶⁴ Operating between the poles of the biblical text and the present reality, hermeneutics bends the efforts of both historical and dogmatic theology toward the task of bringing God's Word to expression; theology as hermeneutics is "the language school of proclamation."⁶⁵

⁶³"The theological disciplines are one from the hermeneutic standpoint. The dualism of method in the competition between historical and systematic theology results from a faulty grasp of the hermeneutic problem. The consideration which is now being given to hermeneutics serves towards the understanding of the unity of theology by overcoming the mutual isolation of the theological disciplines." "Discussion Theses for a Course of Introductory Lectures on the Study of Theology," WF, pp. 426-427.

⁶⁴Ebeling can predicate of both "hermeneutisch" and "Theologie" the same statement: "Theologie [or hermeneutisch] ist das, was zum Wahrnehmung von Wortverantwortung anhält und hilft." Kirche in der Zeit, XX, 486. A few pages later, he says, "Hermeneutische Theologie will zu dem einen helfen, daß man nur das theologisch sagt, was man verantworten kann, und alles, was man sagt, auch theologisch verantworten kann." Kirche in der Zeit, XX, 490.

⁶⁵"If on the one hand dogmatic theology is not a mere historical representation of the traditum as such, but the observation of the cause of theology in the actus tradendi; and if on the other hand dogmatic theology is not primarily concerned with the texts as witness to the Word which came to pass, but with the word-event

We might state Ebeling's concerns in this fashion: theology must be hermeneutical theology because what man needs is that pure word-event by means of which God is present for a man and by means of which man can understand his present reality "in the sight of God (coram Deo)"; man's destiny as man can therefore be realized when the Word happens rightly for him.⁶⁶

The right happening of the Word, pure word-event, is the Gospel. For this reason, as we shall see in the next chapter, the distinction (or polarity) of the Law and the Gospel is of crucial significance for hermeneutics, and therefore for theology, and therefore for man's salvation. This distinction serves to insure the right happening of the Word that has been handed down throughout the history of the church; it therefore has direct relevance for proclamation based on the biblical records.⁶⁷

itself, then we can see the real breadth of the task of hermeneutics. For the sake of the texts, and this does not simply mean for the sake of preserving them, but in order to put them into effect, to carry them out, dogmatic theology is directed to reality; and for the sake of reality (and this means speaking to it in such a way that one corrects it and shows it in its true light), dogmatic theology is directed to texts which have been handed down. It does not recite words that have already been spoken, but brings God's Word to expression. It is the language school of proclamation." TP, pp. 30-31.

⁶⁶ Supra, p. 67, note 41: "The conjunction of God, word, faith, future [is] the prime necessity for the good of man's human nature." WF, p. 327. Also: "'Word' is what links and binds God and our reality." WF, p. 351.

⁶⁷ "Nicht eine Lehre, ein Gesetz, ein Offenbarungsbuch, sondern die Person Jesu selbst als Autorisation von Evangelium, von Geschehen vollmächtigen Wortes des Glaubens ist Inbegriff dessen, was zu überliefern ist, und entsprechend der Heilige Geist als Gottes

The distinction between text and sermon which then results is simply the distinction between the record of past proclamation and the event of present proclamation, for a biblical text aims not simply to be preserved, but to be preserved for the sake of proclamation. The sermon, then, is not merely exposition in the historical sense of telling what the text meant, but it is execution in the sense of proclaiming that Word whose proclamation the text records--and that, for Ebeling, is always an interpretation of the present reality "in the sight of God (coram Deo)."⁶⁸ It is in just this sense that Ebeling calls for "existentialist interpretation," by which he means interpretation that has to do with the real truth of one's present existence.

Ebeling concludes his essay with the suggestion that the hermeneutical principle must be "man as conscience." If, according to the quotation from Luther with which he closes the essay, "in the conscience" means the same as "theologically," then the hermeneutical principle is simply the search for that which is genuinely theological, for the stuff that really matters for theology. It is a call to focus on that Word by which alone man can come to a

Präsenz im glaubensschaffenden Wort der Verkündigung. . . . Dem rechten theologischen Verständnis der Tradition in dem Ineinandergreifen des Problems der Hermeneutik und des Problems des Kirchenrechts dient das reformatorische 'Sola Scriptura,' indem es dafür sorgt, daß die Unterscheidung von Text und Auslegung und darum auch von Jesus Christus und Kirche erhalten und so das Wortgeschehen des Evangeliums wirklich 'Überlieferung' bleibt." "Tradition VII. Dogmatisch," RGG, VI, cols. 982-983.

⁶⁸Supra, p. 71, note 51.

correct understanding of his present reality "in the sight of God (coram Deo)"; and that means the pure word-event of the Gospel, for which the distinction (or polarity) of the Law and the Gospel is necessary. It is that subject to which we turn in the following chapter.

CHAPTER V

THE PLACE OF THE LAW-GOSPEL POLARITY IN EBELING'S HERMENEUTICAL THEOLOGY

Introductory Comments

The two preceding chapters closed with the assertion that the Law-Gospel Polarity plays a central role in Ebeling's theology. The following examination will show the Law-Gospel Polarity as a central critical principle in Ebeling's hermeneutical theology, serving the purpose of keeping both theology and proclamation focused on their proper task. In that role, the Law-Gospel Polarity stands in close association with numerous other basic theological concerns.¹

Whether or not the term "polarity" is a proper one to designate the relation between the Law and the Gospel in Ebeling's theology is not perfectly clear at the outset. Ebeling can speak of the Law and the Gospel as "antithetic words,"² as an "antithesis,"³ as a "contradictory antithesis,"⁴ as contradictory in the sense of "conflicting powers and legal claims"⁵--all of which speak of a

¹Supra, Chapter III, pp. 47-49

²Evangelische Evangelienauslegung: Eine Untersuchung zu Luthers Hermeneutik (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1962), p. 429.

³Ibid., p. 430.

⁴Luther: Einführung in sein Denken (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, c.1964), p. 161, hereafter referred to as Luther.

⁵Luther, p. 161, n. 6.

relationship that is more of an opposition than a polarity. On the other hand, Ebeling regularly uses the terms Law and Gospel together and sees one term making sense out of the other. He can speak of the Law and the Gospel as a unity,⁶ as belonging together,⁷ as having a close relationship to each other,⁸ as both being the "concrete demand of the word."⁹ It seems advisable, therefore, in order to account for moments of both unity and distinction in the relationship of the Law and the Gospel, to use the word polarity.¹⁰

⁶"The Word of God and Church Doctrine," The Word of God and Tradition, translated by S. H. Hooke (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, c.1968), p. 168. Hereafter this volume will be referred to as WGaT. The German original, Wort Gottes und Tradition (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964), will be referred to as WGuT.

⁷Ibid.

⁸"Reflexions on the Doctrine of the Law," Word and Faith, translated by James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p. 254. Hereafter, this volume will be referred to as WF.

⁹The Nature of Faith, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), p. 169. Hereafter, this volume will be referred to as NF.

¹⁰For similar reasons, we shall be adopting the term "polarity" also in our discussion of Luther's view of the relationship of the Law and the Gospel; infra, Chapter VI, p. 120.

On only one occasion, to the present writer's knowledge, does Ebeling use the word "polarity" to describe the relationship of the Law and the Gospel; see Luther, p. 16.

Ebeling sees the mutuality of unity and distinction as a recurring element in theology and finds in the Law-Gospel Polarity a basic and typical example of this: "That unity and distinction do not represent rival points of view, but that the conception of the distinction is the correct conception of the way in which they belong together, is an aspect of the problem which is to be met with repeatedly in theology: for example, in the doctrine of Law and Gospel, in Christology, and especially in the relation between God and Man." WGaT, p. 168.

In another context, Ebeling suggests that the doctrine of the two kingdoms, the "simul justus et peccator" idea, and the

As much as possible, this chapter will work with Ebeling's constructive essays, leaving out of consideration here his specifically Luther-oriented works, where the separation between what Ebeling says about Luther and what Ebeling himself says would be almost impossible. The following chapter, then, will examine Luther's use of the Law-Gospel Polarity, preparatory to an evaluation of Ebeling's faithfulness to Luther. However, in view of the material significance of Ebeling's study of Luther, and in view of his frequent use of Luther throughout his own constructive writings, Ebeling's Luther-oriented essays cannot be left completely out of consideration. In fact, fairness to Ebeling demands this, especially in view of his self-description in the preface to Word and Faith: he takes seriously the Reformer's theology as having contemporary relevance.¹¹

Ebeling's Law-Gospel Methodology

We can examine Ebeling's use of the Law-Gospel Polarity, and also see his preoccupation with theological methodology, by paying special attention to the essay, "Reflexions on the Doctrine of the

Law-Gospel Polarity are all related as various designations for the Creator/creature relationship. These distinctions or polarities are related and interdependent, not simply as synonymous designations for the same reality, but on the basis of a deeply theological interrelatedness "for the sake of the Gospel." WF, p. 399.

¹¹In the Preface to the English Edition of WF, Ebeling describes himself as one who seeks to fulfill the task of theology by taking his bearings from the theology of the Reformation while taking the contemporary world seriously; WF, pp. 9-10.

Law."¹² Ebeling begins this essay, characteristically, with some preliminary formal and methodological concerns. Basic to a discussion of the concept "Law" is the whole question of the manner in which theological concepts in general are formed; and that means a return to the fundamental concern of hermeneutics, namely, an orientation to the two poles of language and reality.¹³ Theology must do its work with a view to this linguistic/existential nexus; its special concepts (like Law) must be formed from that same point of view. Only rarely, however, does theology have an opportunity to use special, uniquely theological terms; for the most part it uses terms that are common to other disciplines or even to every-day life. Such is the case with the concept Law. Here as elsewhere, theology cannot adopt such common terms uncritically but must, as Luther said, give the terms "a good bath."¹⁴ That task cannot be

¹²WF, pp. 247-281.

¹³Supra, Chapter IV, pp. 60-65.

In the essay under consideration, Ebeling writes: "To deal with concepts in a responsible manner is to know oneself bound to two cardinal points: attentiveness to the history of language and openness towards the reality that confronts us. Here we are touching on the basic structure of the hermeneutic task, for which the two-fold relation, to linguistic expression and to the object therein expressed, is fundamental. And of course seeking agreement about concepts is in fact a fundamental matter of hermeneutics. Now, the two cardinal points I have just distinguished belong for hermeneutics inseparably together in a relation of reciprocal interaction. The fact of reality's confronting me and the manner in which it does so are conditioned by the language spoken to me. And again, the understanding of language spoken to me, together with my own ways of using language, are conditioned by the way in which reality confronts me and the manner in which I let myself be confronted by it." WF, p. 248.

¹⁴"It is chiefly a case of giving precise definition as theological concepts to words which are also used elsewhere, in

avoided; theology cannot retreat from it merely to repeat biblical vocabulary, both because of the wide range of the biblical terms and because not even a verbatim repetition of biblical phraseology would eliminate the need for interpretation. The biblical concept of the Law simply does not exist, and the way in which language and reality confront the individual makes even a verbatim repetition of a biblical quotation already an interpretation.¹⁵ With regard to the problem of the Law, great care and precision is called for, especially because the concept of the Law has "a total theological relevance" for the "law-to-Gospel relationship."¹⁶ A clear and precise formulation of the concept Law is essential, for the Law is basic to the essence of theology.

everyday life as in other sciences. Luther here laid down the basic principles: 'Omnia vocabula fiunt nova, quando e suo foro in alienum transferuntur.' . . . 'Omnia vocabula fiunt nova, quando transferuntur ex philosophia in theologiam.' . . . 'Si tamen vultis uti vocabulis istis, prius quaeso bene purgate, give them a good bath.'" WF, p. 249. Ebeling here quotes from Luther, Werke (Kritische Gesamtausgabe; Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1926), XXXIX, i, 231, 229. Hereafter, the Weimar edition of Luther's works will be referred to as WA.

¹⁵"We know very well today that there are two reasons why the task of forming theological concepts cannot be dispensed with simply by taking over the usage of the Bible--first, because the Bible itself contains wide linguistic differences, so that e.g. the biblical concept of law simply does not exist, and second, because linguisticity is the same as historicity, and therefore the hermeneutic distinction between text and exposition arises at once, even when we think we are only repeating what we were taught." WF, p. 251.

¹⁶"It is only in the law-to-Gospel relationship that the concept of law becomes a problem for theology and the doctrine of the law therefore also acquires that total theological relevance which we have in view in our approach to the question." WF, p. 254.

Ebeling then seeks to outline an understanding of the Law on the basis of Luther's distinction between the Law and the Gospel. Here Ebeling is not simply discussing Luther's teaching on the Law and the Gospel; he is aiming, by means of Luther's distinction, at an evangelical concept of the Law for the present time. But that is no small problem; some serious changes in the prevailing view of reality have occurred since the sixteenth century. There is less thought about guilt and sin, and more about anxiety, loneliness, and the meaninglessness of existence. To talk about the forgiveness of sins and justification would seem to have been far easier at the time of the Reformation than at the present time.¹⁷ Although the essay under consideration here purports to be a discussion of the concept of Law, it is clear that Ebeling will be satisfied only with a concept of Law that grows out of and satisfies the demands of the Law-Gospel Polarity.

Despite Luther's dependence on, and appeal to, Paul, it is clear that the contrast between the Law and the Gospel simply does

¹⁷"Today, it is said, man is less haunted by his sin and guilt, but is faced in a more general sense by anxiety, loneliness, and the threat of meaninglessness. A concentration on the forgiveness of sins and justification before God is held to presuppose the assurance of a law which is intelligible and unconditionally valid. But this is precisely what modern man is said to have lost. The law itself, we are told, has become questionable, and man sees himself at the mercy of a life without law, or--and this comes to the same in the end--abandoned to the tyranny of an unintelligible law." On Prayer, translated by James W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, c.1966), pp. 98-99.

not appear in so many words in the Pauline epistles.¹⁸ As a pair of contrasting terms, Law and Gospel were apparently first used by Marcion.¹⁹ Any association with Marcion, however, is only terminological; conceptually, Augustine is the father of "Law and Gospel," although Augustine's terms were "letter and spirit" (the terms that were used through the Middle Ages). Yet Luther gradually abandoned the Augustinian terminology in favor of "the Law and the Gospel"--though not, surely, by a return to Marcion.²⁰

How is one to explain Luther's relationship to the Pauline epistles? Luther is performing an accurate interpretative function, says Ebeling, preserving the Pauline emphasis on the active power of the Spirit.²¹ Luther is not simply collecting, quantitatively,

¹⁸"It is undoubtedly correct that the Reformers' contrast of lex and evangelium is at all events not found stated explicitly in Paul, however tremendous the significance which the concept νόμος has for him and however much he, too, uses εὐαγγέλιον with a definite stamp that seems essentially in complete agreement with the Reformers' concept of Gospel." WF, p. 255.

¹⁹WF, p. 255.

²⁰Hans Schmidt's charge that Ebeling is a Marcionite is quite inappropriate. Ebeling is no more a Marcionite than Luther was. See Hans Schmidt, "Das Verhältnis von neuzeitlichem Wirklichkeitsverständnis und christlichem Glauben in der Theologie Gerhard Ebelings," Kerygma und Dogma, IX (1963), 100, n. 109.

In the essay under consideration, Ebeling insists that "the terminological association with Marcion must not create any delusions as to the fundamental material difference" WF, p. 256.

Schmidt seems over-anxious to make Ebeling out to be a despiser of the Old Testament--a suggestion for which Schmidt adduces no conclusive evidence.

²¹Ebeling would translate δυνάμει as 'constitution,' "in order to bring out the fact that it is a case of a power which determines absolutely the reality it affects. That is also why

the varied terminology of the Apostle (Christ, faith, grace, and spirit are Paul's usual antitheses to the Law), but is performing the interpretative function of describing what the terms refer to "in the light of its historic effective principle."²² That principle, Ebeling says, is the "event of proclamation"--a "decisive Pauline standpoint,"²³ significant for its "power to awaken faith."²⁴

Paul compares the two διαθήκαι not really in regard to their content, but in regard to their power, their effect. Whereas the law cannot give life, cannot bestow the Spirit, but on the contrary in fact kills, the καινή διαθήκη is the act of the life-giving Spirit himself; and πίστις has no other meaning." WF, p. 257.

²²WF, p. 257.

²³Ebeling's appeal here is to Rom. 10:17, "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ"; and to Gal. 3:2,5, "Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law, or by hearing with faith? . . . Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?"

²⁴"Its use [i.e., Luther's use of evangelium for Paul's 'new covenant' as the antithesis to 'law'] could be appropriate at all events only if it were clearly grasped--as in fact it undeniably was in the original Reformation theology--that the Gospel is that proclamation which creates faith and imparts the Holy Spirit--as it is very well expressed in the 7th Schwabach Article: 'For the attainment of such faith or the bestowing of it on us men, God has ordained the preaching office or spoken word, namely the Evangel, through which he causes such faith and its power, profit and fruit to be proclaimed, and also uses the same as a means to bestow faith and the Holy Spirit, as and where he will. Apart from that there is no other means nor method, way or path to acquire faith.' The Reformers' employment of evangelium as an antithesis to lex would then of course not serve as a mere collective term for the varied terminology of Paul, but would perform an interpretative function, namely, that of describing the reality of the καινή διαθήκη so to speak in the light of its historic effective principle. And the latter happens to be--here the Reformation grasped a decisive Pauline standpoint--the event of proclamation. Let us recall only Rom. 10:17, ἡ πίστις ἐξ ἀκοῆς, and the phrase ἀκοὴ πίστεως Gal. 3:2,5. The καινή διαθήκη

The Apostle summarized the various antitheses to the Law under the label "new covenant"; Luther chose "Gospel" to summarize and interpret those antitheses. Ebeling regards Luther's choice as both insightful and enduringly valid. The evangelical theologian would thus avoid what Ebeling calls the Enthusiastic and Roman Catholic distortions of the ultimately eschatological factor in Paul; he would be open to the promise character of the Law's opposite.²⁵

Ebeling concludes:

There is therefore good reason not to follow out the occasional pointers in Paul towards an expanded application of the concept of Law to the New Covenant, but to make the concept of Law by means of stricter theological definition into as precise as possible an instrument by which to acquire a theological grasp of the decisive point in Paul's doctrine of the Law.²⁶

has its existence determined by the act of a proclamation whose absolute peculiarity and therefore also its distinctive mark over against the law, is the power to awaken faith, to confer the Holy Spirit." WF, pp. 257-258.

²⁵"The Reformers' use of the concept Gospel therefore serves, rightly understood, towards an anti-enthusiastic interpretation of Paul. The rightness of that can of course only be tested by considering which interpretation is demanded by the eschatological factor in Paul. In the Catholic view the eschatological character of the *καινή διαθήκη* is interpreted as a new period in history (the age of the church), in the Reformers' view as the realization of true historicalness through being determined by the end of history. It seems to me characteristic of these two interpretations of the eschatological factor that the Gospel is interpreted on the Catholic side as lex, on the Reformers' side as promissio. The latter, it is true, contradicts the traditional schema promise/fulfillment, and seemingly also the Pauline distinction of *ἐπαγγελία* and *ἐπαγγελίον*, but should surely serve the very purpose of keeping open the eschatological character of *ἐπαγγελίον* and *πίστις*." WF, p. 259.

²⁶WF, p. 260.

What then is the "decisive point" about the doctrine of the Law in the Law-Gospel Polarity, and what understanding of the Gospel emerges as a result? A possible point of confusion must immediately be cleared up; that is, the divine origin, the "of God-ness," of the Law must be grappled with, especially in view of the fact that Luther could equate the contrast between God's word and man's word with the contrast between the Law and the Gospel. It is not a question, however, of the Law being a human word and therefore a false or secondary word and the Gospel of salvation being a new, divine kind of Law which saves simply because it is divine and therefore true. On the contrary, it is a question of being freed from Law by an effective good word from God.²⁷ The Law is indeed God's Law, but not as mere code; rather, to call it God's Law is to recognize it as an effective, binding, killing force:

Looked at from the proper angle the interesting thing is not the mere ideas the law contains but the execution of it--not the content it has but so to speak the content it does not have: the fulfilment which is still outstanding. For that

²⁷"When Luther sees in the 'verbum hominis' and the 'traditiones huius mundi' the bane of the church, and in the 'verbum dei' on the other hand the 'primum et maximum ecclesiae beneficium,' then he obviously means in fact that the 'verbum dei' is the remedy against the said bane of the church only in view of its being Gospel, but not by any means that a revealed divine law has to take the place of these human laws and traditions. The abrogation of these human precepts takes place not through the obedient fulfillment of divine precepts, but through the faith-creating Gospel. For it is not a matter of replacing a false law by the true, revealed one, but of men's consciences being freed from the law by the Gospel. . . .

"The law cannot be given adequate theological treatment until it has been made clear how far it is in fact a case of the law of God. That however is a thing whose full depth can be recognized only in the light of the Gospel, i.e. of Christ as the τέλος τοῦ νόμου." WF, p. 270.

reason the law, when it is really fulfilled is no longer law in the proper sense. To be sure it continues to exist, but it has ceased to be an unfulfilled law and as such a power of destruction. If it is fulfilled, then that in fact means its proper function is also fulfilled and done with. Because, indeed, in the man who is a believer it no longer has an object on which to work as law. Be it noted: it is not the law itself that is dead, but man is dead to the law; and for that very reason the law has nothing more to do, because the task for which it exists is done. Thus Paul cannot speak of the Law at all as a thing in itself, but only in respect to the man to whom it is given and to whose reality it belongs one way or another: if a change occurs in man's relation to the Law, then precisely therewith a change occurs also in the nature of the law.²⁸

All of this holds true not just in terms of the Mosaic Law and not only for the Jews, but for every man. The Law is more than merely the Mosaic law; it is that force which "touches and binds the conscience."²⁹ Although Luther spoke of the universality of the Law both in terms of "natural law" and in terms of everything that binds the conscience, Ebeling regards the conscience as a far more effective way of speaking about the universality of the Law today.³⁰

²⁸WF, p. 272.

²⁹WF, p. 276. A little later, Ebeling says, "It is an undeniably correct criterion when Luther allows validity as 'law' in the theological sense only to what touches and binds the conscience. It is precisely in that that it proves its binding character. What does not touch man's conscience, what does not concern him unconditionally as charge and commitment, is not law as it must be understood in interpreting the Pauline doctrine of the law. . . . I can be legitimately confronted by a thing as law and claimed by it as such only when it is that in which I myself am involved and which has therefore been with me all along, has always claimed me, because it belongs inseparably to my existence." WF, pp. 276-277.

³⁰At this point it is almost impossible to separate Ebeling's own work from his use of Luther. Ebeling means to be adopting Luther's insights completely here; and, as far as this writer can determine,

Following Luther, Ebeling understands conscience in a sense quite different from the popular image of a little voice inside a man that tells him what to do and what not to do.

The decisive question put to the conscience is concerned not with its knowing but with its hearing. For conscience is the question "Where?" knocking at man's door, and by conscience that question is decided to the effect: in prison or in freedom.³¹

Reduced to its most basic dimension, conscience is not something a man has, but what a man is; it is not an organ in man, but his identity as man.³² Conscience is the decisive thing about man--not just where man makes decisions, but where there is decided what man truly is; it is not a place in man but the place of man.³³ Expressed in terms of Ebeling's conception of the "linguisticity" of existence, conscience is

he is not using Luther unfairly. Compare Rudolf Hermann, Zum Streit um die Überwindung des Gesetzes (Weimar: H. Böhlau Nachfolger, 1958), and Günter Jacob, Der Gewissensbegriff in der Theologie Luthers (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1929).

³¹WF, pp. 277-288. On Ebeling's understanding of conscience, see the essay, "Theological Reflexions on Conscience," WF, pp. 407-423, on which essay we draw in the following paragraphs.

³²"To call conscience an organ (even a vitally necessary organ) in man misses the basic fact that conscience is a matter of the coming to expression of man himself. Strictly man does not 'have' a conscience, but he is conscience. He is . . . the being who is answerable. As conscience man is call and answer at the same time. Hence in explaining the concept of conscience the distinction of subject and object is not applicable, since here the point at issue is the selfhood of man as identity of subject and object. For that reason it is likewise inappropriate to interpret conscience as an authority over against man." WF, p. 417.

³³WF, p. 384.

the point where the nature of man's linguisticity comes to light. For the phenomenon of conscience is bound up both with the aspect of speaking and with that of hearing. What has here to come to expression and find a hearing is what concerns man in his selfhood, and therefore (since man's selfhood has the structure of being ahead of oneself) concerns him in regard to his future and hence conclusively and unconditionally. For the conscience has to do with the ground of the linguisticity of existence.³⁴

Relating this to the concept of Law, Ebeling says of the conscience:

What we are concerned with in conscience is not a legal code, not individual instructions on this or that, but man as a whole--and hence not an authority where morals are concerned, but the defining of man's place where the decision is made on his personal being that lies beyond morality. . . . The conscience would then have to be understood as the coming together, being present together, of man, the world and God.³⁵

As the place of man where God, world, faith, and future meet, conscience is simply man as he stands coram Deo, stripped of all his works and of all the dignity of his position "before the world (coram mundo)" (for conscience is not what man does or has, but what he in essence is).³⁶ Thus, in another context, Ebeling calls conscience "the place where God and the world meet as it were in a mathematical point. . . . For as conscience man stands between God and the world."³⁷

Since conscience deals not with knowing but with hearing, it may be spoken of as man's hearing or as man's "word-bound-ness"

³⁴WF, p. 409.

³⁵WF, p. 411.

³⁶WF, p. 402.

³⁷WF, p. 356.

(Worthaftigkeit).³⁸ If man is word-bound, then the decisive factor is what word man hears. (Although Ebeling does not use this example, the idea is much like that of the Latin word oboedientia; the quality of man's obedience is determined by what the word is ob which a man is audiens.) Speaking in another context about Jesus' word, Ebeling says that Jesus' authority, as perceived by his listeners, consisted in the convincing way in which his words got into the hearers' heart and conscience.³⁹ Mere talk will not suffice; but the word will. The place of man is therefore determined by that word on which he, as worthaftig creature, haftet.

³⁸"Die Zweiheit des Wortes kann Luther als die von Gottes Wort und Menschenwort kennzeichnen: 'Sooft Gottes Wort verkündigt wird, macht es fröhliche, weite, sichere Gewissen Gott gegenüber; denn es ist das Wort der Gnade, der Vergebung, ein gutes und wohltuendes Wort. Sooft aber Menschenwort verkündigt wird, macht es ein betrübtes, enges, ängstliches Gewissen in sich selbst, denn es ist das Wort des Gesetzes, des Zornes, und der Sünde, indem es zeigt, was man nicht getan hat und wieviel man tun sollte' [WA II, 453]. Hier kommt zunächst sehr scharf heraus, inwiefern dem Wort der Charakter eines Geschehens von letzter Entscheidungsgewalt zukommt: insofern nämlich, als es dasjenige ist, was den Menschen an seiner empfindlichsten Stelle, an seinem innersten Nerv, nämlich da berührt und trifft, wo über ihn entschieden wird, wie er letztlich und das heißt vor Gott dran ist. Luther bezeichnet dies als 'Gewissen' und meint damit nicht, wie im gefolge idealistischer Gewissensinterpretation, eine selbständige, den Menschen unabhängig machende Stimme in seinem eigenen Inneren, also den Grund der Autonomie des Menschen, vielmehr dies, daß der Mensch letztlich Gehör ist, also Getroffener, in Anspruch genommener, einem Urteil Unterworfenener, und daß eben deshalb seine Existenz davon abhängt, welches Wort ihn erreicht und im Innersten trifft: [Gesetz oder Evangelium]." Luther, pp. 131-132.

³⁹"Da ist nicht leeres Gerede, sondern ein Wort, welches das vermag, was allein das Wort vermag, sofern es volles, wahres Wort ist: ins Herz, ins Gewissen zu treffen, dahin, wo über den Menschen als Menschen entschieden wird. Weil allein das Wort das Gewissen erreicht, wird durch das Wort über die Freiheit des Menschen entschieden." "Das Grund-Geschehen von Kirche," Monatschrift für Pastoral-Theologie, LI (1962), 2.

Since, as was pointed out above,⁴⁰ it is the word-event that opens up a future for man, it is therefore in the conscience that the word opens up that future. That must mean, of course, that prior to such a future-opening word-event, man as conscience has no future. To miss the promise of a future means death, or a "bad conscience."⁴¹ Left on his own, man suffers a "suicidal dividedness," for the conscience cannot confer the independence and freedom it calls for.⁴² Man is driven to despair by a conscience

⁴⁰Supra, pp. 66-67.

⁴¹"For the conscience, since it has to do with word, has to do with futurity and ultimate validity, with what has to be awaited, is still to come, but is yet already heralded and promised. The correlate which goes with that is of course the possibility of missing and losing the promise, and thus the experience of wrath. Since the conscience has to do with futurity, it has also in its negative mode to do precisely with the lack of a future, with death: so that the conscience that has become one with lack of a future and with death exercises fatal power itself, whereas the conscience that accepts the promise of a future is made alive and as such itself becomes a life-giver." WF, p. 413. See also WF, p. 422 (note 42 below).

⁴²"The interpretation of the Word of God in relation to conscience and of conscience in relation to the Word of God takes place in view of the bad conscience as the suicidal dividedness of man. Although conscience is the call to independence and responsibility, to truthfulness and therewith to freedom, yet it cannot confer all these things. Indeed, conscience cannot even make them conclusively intelligible as the things to which it really calls us. . . . Conscience can do no more than define man as a divided being, hold him fast in his dividedness, his self-contradiction--hold him so completely fast that man does not even perceive the true ground of his self-contradiction but rather (hounded by conscience and therefore fleeing from conscience) veils it behind religions and world-views that are supposed to justify man and soothe his conscience. Even here conscience summons to truth. By driving the homo peccator more and more to desperatio, to praesumptio, or else to dullness and indifference, it makes man more and more his true self . . . which of course means, into untruthfulness to himself, the power of which lies in the fact that it is not recognized as such." WF, p. 422.

that cannot liberate him but always binds him to himself instead of binding him to God. Left to his own resources, man is uncertain and insecure--or falsely secure, which amounts to the same thing.⁴³

In another context, Ebeling speaks of the relation of conscience and uncertainty and sin in the following terms:

The true root of uncertainty lies in the fact that man feels the uncertainty of his own inability to determine and control himself. In the most profound sense uncertainty is man's unwillingness to face up to the truth about himself, is his disunity with himself, is the lie about his own existence. Uncertainty is of the very nature of sin, which is, in Paul's words, the sting of death.

The question of certainty has its seat in the conscience.⁴⁴

The question of salvation, then, is answered in terms of certainty for the conscience; this happens, as the Reformers taught, by means of the word,⁴⁵ and that means the Gospel (for which the Law-Gospel

⁴³"The conscience which drives to despair is certainly true to the extent that it holds man fast to himself and drives him into the narrows of his own self; yet decidedly not true to the extent that it does not liberate, does not bring man into the open spaces [Weite] of God--which is the same as to say into the nearness [Nähe] of God." WF, p. 422.

⁴⁴Theology and Proclamation, translated by John Riches (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, c.1966), pp. 86-87.

⁴⁵"Reflecting on the concept of conscience should help towards the understanding of a basic characteristic of the Reformers' theology, viz. that salvation is communicated (in the full sense of appropriation) solely by word. The most astonishing thing about the Christian understanding of salvation as interpreted by the Reformers is this identification of word-event and salvation-event. If it is from preaching that the faith comes which alone justifies and is thus itself the gift of salvation, then that implies a singular understanding of the event of salvation as a linguistic event." WF, p. 409.

Polarity is necessary).⁴⁶ By providing an external basis for certainty, the Gospel removes man from the uncertainty of bondage under the Law and gives him the faith that grounds his existence outside himself, in Christ.⁴⁷ For the word-event of the Gospel is nothing else than the presence of Christ for us (pro nobis) in the word.⁴⁸ The man of faith is no longer under the Law but "in Christ."⁴⁹ Salvation may therefore be defined simply as a good

⁴⁶"What is the nature of the word-event in which perdition and salvation come to expression and thereby to a decision? If we are taking our bearings from the conscience, then the distinction of the word-event into law and Gospel must become plain. . . . From the theological point of view this way of speaking is rightly understood only in relation to the conscience. For the Gospel is the radical transposition of man which takes place in the conscience and by which he comes, as one under the law, to stand 'supra legem.'" WF, p. 410.

⁴⁷"Jesus, the Word which frees men's consciences for faith and for love, overcomes all idols and concepts of God at the same time as he disarms the radical uncertainty or indifference which holds the godless in thrall. . . . The confidence and certainty of faith is something radically different from man's self-assurance; it means that I seek the ground of my certainty extra me; it means the certainty and confidence in God which is first offered to us by Jesus." Theology and Proclamation, pp. 84-85.

⁴⁸"Directly connected with sola scriptura is the certainty of faith, which adheres to the Word of the Gospel that gives assurance to the conscience. Where faith is concerned, there can be no appeal to any other authority on the question of certainty; on the contrary, it is faith that gives a man certainty through Christ before God. . . . It [sola scriptura] focuses attention on the fact that Jesus Christ exists pro nobis in the Word, and on the reality of our being in Christ extra nos through faith." WGaT, p. 137.

⁴⁹"It is not a change in the contents of the law, but so to speak a change in the position of the law, that frees the conscience, i.e. the fact that the law is assigned the place that belongs to it, which is in point of fact not to dominate the conscience--a change of position which is merely the complement of a change in man's own position: from the ἐν νόμῳ to the ἐν Χριστῷ εἶναι." WF, p. 278.

conscience,⁵⁰ or as the making alive of a dead man.⁵¹ Thus, salvation and life and faith are all aspects of the certainty which the Gospel gives to the conscience; from that Gospel comes what Ebeling calls "the certitude that certifies the conscience (die das Gewissen gewißmachende Gewißheit)."⁵²

⁵⁰"This problem is so to speak the narrow way that leads to the right understanding of what the Christian message means by salvation--the eschatological nearness of God in time, and there-with the event that acts on the conscience by word: the word-event that sets man as a word-event to rights, the identification of man with himself in past and future, fides as bona conscientia." WF, p. 419.

⁵¹"It all depends on whether we are able today in ways that are convincing, that affect the conscience, i.e. liberate and make alive (and that includes salutary mortification!), to communicate the Gospel, i.e. the faith which is truly bona conscientia. Therein lies the greatness of our task: Erigere et excitare conscientias nihil aliud est quam suscitare mortuos. Itaque Ecclesia plures vivificat per verbum vocale, quod habet, quam Christus ipse suo ministerio. Sicut inquit (Joh. 14.12): Qui credit in me opera quae ego facio, faciet, et maiora horum faciet. [WA XLIV, 546]" WF, p. 422.

⁵²"Gewißheit und Zweifel. Die Situation des Glaubens im Zeitalter nach Luther and Descartes," Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche, LXIV (1967), 313, 325.

Variations on this characteristic expression of Ebeling include the following:

"Die Gewißheit des Glaubens, die an dem die Gewissen gewiß machenden Wort des Evangeliums haftet" WGuT, p. 132; see WGaT, p. 137.

"Ein das verzweifelte Gewissen gewiß machendes Verstehen des Evangeliums als Evangeliums" "Luther II. Theologie," Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart, edited by Kurt Galling (3rd edition; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1960), IV, col. 497.

"Glaube also its gutes Gewissen. Und dieser das Gewissen gewiß und das heißt: gut machende Glaube macht . . . die Werke gut" Luther, p. 191.

"Das durch das verheißende Wort des Glaubens gewiß gemachte Gewissen" Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche, LXIV, 316. See also Luther, p. 105.

Why Ebeling suggests that "the hermeneutical principle is man as conscience"⁵³ is now clear: a theology, and a view of reality, that is so thoroughly bound to the Word, can fulfill its function only in that place where the Word is heard, namely, in the conscience,⁵⁴ where the place of man is decided.⁵⁵ The hermeneutical principle is "man as conscience" because what matters about the biblical text and the proclamation of the Word of God is how it affects the conscience.⁵⁶ In the two closing paragraphs of the section on "Kerygma and Historical Jesus" in Theology and Proclamation Ebeling shows clearly how he sees the relationships between the essence of theology, hermeneutics, conscience, and the Law-Gospel Polarity:

⁵³WF, p. 332.

⁵⁴"Theology is fulfilling its true task when it interprets as the Word of God that which has been transmitted to it as the Word of God, that is, with reference to that Word-event through which conscience encounters full authority. This direction of attention to the fundamental event in which the subject of theology as the Word of God is apprehended by faith, determines the thoroughness of theology as a hermeneutic activity." WGaT, p. 163.

⁵⁵"Den Ort der Erfahrung dieser Freiheit nennt Luther Gewissen. Die Freiheit des Christen versteht er nicht als Willensfreiheit, sondern als Gewissensfreiheit. . . .

"Für Luther ist Gewissen primär das innere Gehör des Menschen, sozusagen der empfindlichste und entscheidende Nerv seines Personseins, wo sich entscheidet, was bei ihm ankommt, sich durchsetzt und über ihn Macht gewinnt, und zwar so, daß es die Gestalt eines Urteils hat, das ihn selbst trifft: nicht bloß was er tun soll oder was er getan und nicht getan hat, sondern vor allem und eigentlich was er ist, wo er ist, wohin er gehört. So verstanden, kann das Gewissen gute oder böse Geister beherbergen, Gott oder dem Teufel gehören und ist tatsächlich das Schlachtfeld von beiden." Frei aus Glauben (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1968), pp. 16-17.

⁵⁶"The question which is ultimately appropriate to the biblical text is, how it affects the conscience. The hermeneutic principle of proper exegesis of holy scripture is therefore man as conscience." WF, p. 428.

Now if Jesus is known as the Word which brings certainty, this means that we come to know him as the Gospel and the basis of faith. The fact that Jesus brings certainty also involves him eo ipso in a relation to the law. For in that he becomes the basis of faith, in that he is the Gospel with which we are confronted, giving us certainty of salvation, he meets us in our own situation, in uncertainty which is the essence of sin. Jesus verifies the reality which confronts us. He makes us certain of our relation to it. He shows us the law into whose power we have fallen, in its true light. For part of man's dilemma is his confusion with regard to the law to which he is subjected. We are to come to know Jesus as the Word which makes us certain; but this will only bring us certainty of our salvation as freedom from the law--i.e. it will only give us the Gospel--if we at the same time come to a clear knowledge of the reality which confronts us, by becoming acquainted with an interpretatio legis which condemns and takes hold of our conscience. We can only speak of the certainty of faith through the Gospel which sets our conscience free, in the same breath as we speak of the certainty of the law which condemns our conscience (i.e. the certainty of sin). It is for this reason that in our search for the situation in which the christological kerygma can be understood, we shall have to concentrate on the encounter with the man Jesus who became subject to the law in order to free its subjects. If we did not encounter in Jesus both the law and the Gospel alongside each other, if we did not encounter him as the Word which brings a double certainty, then at best we could see the christological kerygma as a mythological description of a gift which leads us into the realm of fantasy; we could scarcely see it as a hymn of faith to the God who seeks us out in this our reality, who lets himself be found in this reality, and who thus offers us his salvation from the cross in the word of life in repentance.

The difficulty of preaching today leads us to the fact that man has so far fallen victim to the law that he no longer even has any idea of it. How should certainty of salvation have any meaning for him, if he is not certain of the law to which he is subject? This is the real core of our theological task. How can we find the basis of a Word, no matter how modest, which is certain and which brings certainty? What is it that can assert an unconditional authority over men today, including of course ourselves? It is essential that we should follow the urgent dictates of conscience as a guide for the Jesus whom we confess as Lord. If Jesus encounters us as the Word which brings certainty, then the truly remarkable thing about this, which can be neither replaced nor superseded by anything else, is that by distinguishing between the law and the Gospel he gives certainty for the certain distinction between God and man.⁵⁷

⁵⁷Theology and Proclamation, pp. 79-81.

If, then, theology is concerned with the two poles of language and reality, and if man's innermost "nerve," his conscience, is the place of man, then man can be in the right place only when he is properly related both to reality and to the Word, and he can be properly related there only when he has faith. Seeing faith as related to both conscience and word, Ebeling speaks of faith as having to do with the wholeness of man's humanity.⁵⁸ Faith is man grounding his existence outside himself,⁵⁹ and thus finding his future opened up to himself. Having to do with man's future, faith corresponds to the word, for it is the way in which a man properly relates to that word that opens his future by awakening his faith.⁶⁰ Faith is man's certainty in the face of temptation, and it is his

⁵⁸"Das, was das Wort 'Glaube' besagt, entspricht so sehr dem, worauf das Gottsein Gottes abzielt und wodurch eben darum das Menschsein des Menschen heil wird, man könnte auch sagen: es entspricht so sehr dem, was Jesus in Person darstellt und wozu er gekommen ist, daß im Glaubensbegriff das Ganze der neutestamentlichen Verkündigung impliziert ist." Was heißt Glauben? (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1958), p. 11.

⁵⁹"Glaube ist nicht ein partieller Akt, sondern das Sichgründen der Existenz außerhalb ihrer selbst.

"Er ist nicht eine Tätigkeit neben anderen. . . . Vielmehr geht es im Glauben um das Personsein des Menschen. . . . Und zwar ist der Glaube das Aushalten der radikal gestellten Frage nach dem Grund der Existenz. Grund der Existenz ist das, was ihr Zukunft eröffnet und was darum Mut zur Existenz verleiht. Glaube hat es darum wesentlich mit Zukünftigkeit zu tun." Ibid., p. 15.

⁶⁰"Deshalb korrespondiert der Glaube dem Wort, und zwar dem schlechthin Zukunft eröffnenden und darum Glauben erweckenden Wort." Ibid., p. 16.

Compare also the title of Ebeling's first volume of collected essays, Word and Faith.

genuine life in the face of death.⁶¹ This variety of expressions is necessary, in order to cover the many things that must be said about faith; Ebeling is aware that a simplification or perfect systematizing of faith is impossible, for, since faith is the basis for real life,

it can have no finished model that is to be realised and imitated as the uniform type of a Christian. There must be perpetual readiness to hear the concrete demand of the word, the law and the gospel, which demands and communicates faith. Only in such terms can we speak aright of faith.⁶²

We have at this point actually come full circle, back to the concrete word of the Law and the Gospel, in terms of which alone one can speak rightly about faith and conscience and word and theology and reality. There remains only to make a few observations about the Law-Gospel Polarity, and then to show how Ebeling makes use of that Polarity as a hermeneutical principle in a variety of areas of theological endeavor.

While the Gospel exists only where the genuine word-event creates faith, the Law is everywhere; for "the law is primarily and properly factual reality."⁶³ To preach the Law is simply to bring

⁶¹"Er [Glaube] ist darum auch nicht bloßes Mittel zur einstigen Erlangung von etwas ganz Anderem, Nochausstehendem. Vielmehr ist der Glaube selbst unüberbietbare Gewißheit mitten in der Anfechtung, wahres Leben angesichts des Todes. Denn der Glaube ist das In-Aktion-treten dessen, worauf sich der Glaube verläßt, und darum ein Partizipieren . . . an der Allmacht Gottes . . ." Was heißt Glauben?, pp. 16-17.

⁶²NF, p. 169.

⁶³WF, p. 278.

to light the things that are already present for man. And it is already present to a man even before it is proclaimed to him, in the form of the question that asks him "where?"

It would then be the task of a detailed doctrine of the law to show how this question mark that is branded upon man sets in motion the whole reality that concerns man and brings to expression, thereby summons to the interpretation of reality, and then crystallizes also in positive laws.⁶⁴

The Law is therefore not a static reality, not mere code, but word-event that brings to expression the reality that confronts a man. Whereas the decisive question about man was not what he does but what he is, the decisive question about the Law is what it does, not what it is. The Law's effect or function has a priority over its essence; one could say that its essence is its effect. Law is essentially unfulfilled Law or accusing Law.

It is lex non impleta, for as lex impleta it would no longer be lex. It is essentially lex accusans, "Lex non damnans est lex ficta et picta sicut chimaera."⁶⁵

Therefore, if the Law is to be understood properly (that means theologically), it must be brought to expression in preaching. But that binds it inextricably with the proclamation of the Gospel, the proper task of preaching; for only in the light of the Gospel and only for the sake of the Gospel can the Law be brought to expression in preaching--else the Gospel comes to be misunderstood

⁶⁴WF, pp. 278-279.

⁶⁵WF, p. 279. Ebeling here quotes Luther's comment from the Antinomian Disputations, WA XXXIX, i, 358.

as the Law.⁶⁶ In fact, the proper proclamation of the Gospel requires the proclamation of the Law according to its usus theologicus, its accusing function.⁶⁷ Since proper proclamation of the Gospel depends on the proclamation of the Law as accusation against man, a clear distinction between the two is necessary, if the Gospel is in fact to be heard as good news.

To proclaim the Gospel understandably as the Gospel--that is the goal of the use of the Law-Gospel Polarity. The theology of the Word can not be a merely formal concern buried in the prolegomena to dogmatics; rather, via the Law-Gospel Polarity, the Word must be properly related, in proclamation, to faith--and that, too, not

⁶⁶"The law in its proper usus theologicus . . . however little it can be confined as an actual event to the preaching, can be brought to expression as such only in the light of the Gospel and for the sake of the Gospel in the preaching. For the sake of the Gospel the law must come to expression, if the Gospel itself is not to be misunderstood as law. The Gospel would lose its meaning if it did not have an eye to the law. For the sake of the intelligibility of the preaching of the Gospel--and that means at the same time, for the sake of the concreteness of the Gospel--the law belongs in the preaching of the Gospel. For the homo peccator belongs in the preaching of the Gospel. The peccator, however, according to Luther is the materia legis. Hence it can be stated as a valid basic rule for our subject: 'Si vis disputare de lege, materiam legis accipe, quae est peccator.' [WA XXXIX, i, 535]" WF, p. 281.

⁶⁷"Das entscheidende Problem in bezug auf das Gesetz besteht aber darin, zu erkennen, was heute eigentlich der sogenannte usus theologicus legis bedeutet, und d.h.: theologisch zu erfassen, wie das Gesetz den heutigen Menschen de facto gefangenhält und tödlich trifft. An der Verständlichkeit solcher Auslegung des Gesetzes hängt die Verständlichkeit der Verkündigung des Evangeliums. Denn die Besinnung auf die Probleme der Gegenwart zielt, wie wir sahen, strenggenommen allein darauf ab, das Evangelium verständlich als Evangelium zu verkündigen." "Hauptprobleme der protestantischen Theologie in der Gegenwart," Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche, LVIII (1961), 133.

formally but substantively, as justifying faith.⁶⁸ Such faith, of course, depends on the authentic word-event, upon the correct proclamation of the Gospel; and for that, the Law-Gospel Polarity performs the crucial function of insuring the correctness of the proclamation. In response to the question "Where is the Word of God?" Ebeling points to the event of Christian proclamation,

which in proclaiming the gospel must also bring in the law, through which, before any preaching of the gospel, men are approached by God. For the gospel is the joyful message of the fulfilling of the law, of Christ as the end of the law; so that the communication of faith is also freedom from the law. We must therefore know what the law means, if we are to be clear about what the gospel is. In order to understand the word of God, we have to learn to distinguish between the law and the gospel. For the gospel can only be preached with intelligibility and power when its relation to the law is understood.⁶⁹

⁶⁸"All that is said of the Word of God must take its bearings strictly from the distinction of law and Gospel and therefore any purely formally applied concept of the Word of God leads to hopeless confusion. . . . Everything that is said of the Word of God must be said in strictest relation to its correlate, fides--and that means to fides as fides iustificans, for we must strictly forbid ourselves to use the concept of faith in any other way than as fides iustificans." WF, p. 172.

⁶⁹NF, p. 98. See also NF, pp. 93, 94. Compare the following: "In the doctrine of the Word of God this [the right understanding of word-event] would have to be thought through on the basis of the distinction of law and Gospel. . . . The distinction of law and Gospel can be central only when 'word' is understood in ways that are not governed by the question of meaning but by the question of fulfillment. . . . It is a case of a word that affects existence itself in its existing, of a word that does not simply supply answers, but waits for an answer, gives power to answer; whereby no less is at stake than that man himself in his existence is empowered to exist as one who answers--we could even say, as an answer." WF, p. 353. See also "Kerygma," Theologie für Nichttheologen: ABC protestantischen Denkens, herausgegeben von H. J. Schultz (2. Folge; Stuttgart-Berlin: Kreuz-verlag, 1964), p. 95.

Proper proclamation depends on the correct interpretation of the text of Scripture, which in turn necessitates the application of the Law-Gospel Polarity. The Polarity thus comes to determine the proper understanding of the sola scriptura principle,⁷⁰ the nature of tradition,⁷¹ and the Church itself.⁷² Earlier Ebeling had said that "how law affects contemporary man"⁷³ is a basic

⁷⁰"The word of Scripture, considered as a written word and therefore as a word belonging to the past, is not the Word of God; in this form it would always be only Law and not Gospel. Instead, the word of Scripture is the Word of God when it is a word proclaimed in the present, a viva vox evangelii--naturally in the form of interpretation based on the word of Scripture, and yet in such a way that this word confronts us not as something written but as an oral word, that is, one which is uttered here and now." The Problem of Historicity, translated by Grover Foley (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, c.1967), pp. 14-15; see also pp. 69, 79-80; also WGAT, pp. 144-147.

⁷¹"Das Grundproblem, inwiefern überhaupt Evangelium, Glaube, Hl. Geist Sache von T[radition] sein können, erfordert rechte Unterscheidung von Evangelium und Gesetz. Einerseits ist das Evangelium in so radikalem Sinne Wortgeschehen, daß es wahre Erfüllung von 'Überlieferung' ist. Andererseits hat T[radition] als solche faktisch die unausrottbare Tendenz, zur Gesetzes-Tradition zu werden und den Charakter reinen Wortgeschehens einzubüßen, zur litera zu werden. Jedoch muß auch dies beachtet werden, daß das Evangelium, als in T[radition] geschehendes, in legitimer Weise dem Gesetz (im Sinne des usus civilis) Raum läßt beim T[radition]sgeschehen: in der Weise von Ordnungen, Recht, Erziehung, Sitte usw. Aber nur vom Evangelium her kann dieser legitime Sinn gewahrt werden." "Tradition VII. Dogmatisch," Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart VI, cols. 982-983. These sentences are typical of the entire article.

⁷²"Fides recognizes the Word of God as what it truly is, in distinction from the word of men: as promissio and not as law. That however means: the Word of God which is constitutive of the church is Gospel, not law. For only the Gospel, not the law, has the power to effect faith." WF, p. 171. See also Theology and Proclamation, pp. 100, 106.

⁷³Supra, p. 104, note 67.

theological task for today, for the sake of understanding the proclaimed Gospel as Gospel; for that reason, the Law-Gospel Polarity determines the nature of the relationship of theology and philosophy, for philosophy is simply an exposition of the Law-reality which confronts every man.⁷⁴ Ebeling says much the same thing when, speaking about the significance of Heidegger's philosophy for Christian faith, he points to the distinction of the Law and the Gospel as the basic experience of faith, on the basis of which Heidegger's thought can be regarded as an interpretation of the Law, even though it is not an interpretation of the Law that is determined by the Gospel. Because it is an interpretation of the Law, it brings man to an understanding of the reality that confronts him also as a believer. But because Heidegger's thought does not distinguish the Law and the Gospel, the interpretation of the Law

⁷⁴"Grundbedingung für ein sachgemäßes Verständnis von Th[eologie] und ihrer Unterscheidung von der Ph[ilosophie] ist die Erfassung des Evangeliums und deswegen der Unterscheidung von Gesetz und Evangelium als der eigentlichen Sache der Th[eologie]. Die Unterscheidung von Th[eologie] und Ph[ilosophie] muß darum, wenn sie überhaupt th[eologisch] interpretierbar ist, zur Unterscheidung von Gesetz und Evangelium in Beziehung gesetzt und von daher begründet werden." "Theologie und Philosophie," Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart, VI, col. 827.

"Wie . . . Th[eologie] am Ev[angelium] orientiert und von daher bestimmt ist, so ist Ph[ilosophie] (th[eologisch] geurteilt) im Banne des Gesetzes und als höchste Möglichkeit des Menschen besonders signifikantes Zur-Sprache-Kommen des Gesetzes . . . Auch und gerade da, wo sie [Philosophie] das Gesetz in gegenwärtiger Wirklichkeitserfahrung als Widerspruch zum Ev[angelium] zur Sprache bringt, dient sie, sofern sie von der Th[eologie] recht gebraucht wird, zu konkreter Interpretation des Ev[angelium]s, indem sie die Th[eologie] dazu nötigt und ihr hilft, sich auf konkrete Interpretation des G[esetz]es einzulassen." Ibid., VI, cols. 828-829.

brought to expression there needs to be reinterpreted from the standpoint of the Gospel.⁷⁵ Ebeling's critique of the philosophy of Heidegger is typical of the way in which he makes use of the Law-Gospel Polarity as a fundamental critical principle for his theology; in similar fashion, as we pointed out at the end of Chapter III,⁷⁶ Ebeling uses the Law-Gospel Polarity in numerous other theological contexts.

Summary

Ebeling envisions a hermeneutically-oriented theology, focusing on the two poles of reality and language; that is, by means of language, theology must lead a man to an understanding of the reality that confronts him, specifically that reality in the sight

⁷⁵"Theologie im reformatorischen Sinne ist an der Unterscheidung von Gesetz und Evangelium als der Grund-Erfahrung des Glaubens orientiert. Von daher wird ihr das Denken Heideggers in folgender Hinsicht bedeutsam:

a) Dieses Denken ist, weil nicht Wort des Glaubens, nicht Evangelium, sondern Interpretation des Gesetzes. . . . Als Gesetz und Evangelium nicht unterscheidendes Denken bringt es gerade nicht das Gesetz als Gesetz zur Sprache und steht so zum Glauben im Widerspruch, wie das Gesetz dem Evangelium widerspricht.

b) Ohne Rücksicht auf diesen Widerspruch zum Glauben hält der Glaube den Menschen gerade dazu an, sich auf die Überzeugungskraft und d.h. auf die Erfahrungsmacht gegenwärtiger Gesetzesauslegung in Gestalt denkender und dichtender Zeitansage prüfend einzulassen. . . . je reiner . . . der Widerspruch zum Evangelium laut wird, desto bedeutsamer ist es für den Glauben. Denn weil der Glaube vom Evangelium als der Erfüllung des Gesetzes lebt, ist er in seiner Element, wo es um die Erfahrung des Gesetzes geht." "Verantworten des Glaubens in Begegnung mit dem Denken M. Heideggers--Thesen zum Verhältnis von Philosophie und Theologie," Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche, LVIII (1961) Beiheft 2, p. 122.

⁷⁶Supra, pp. 47-49.

of God (coram deo). The hermeneutical principle, or the place where hermeneutics (understanding) takes place is the conscience, that is, the very man-ness of man, his innermost nerve, the place where what he is is decided. The conscience is the one point where everything about a man's understanding of himself and reality stands or falls. Since man is word-bound, his conscience depends for its condition on the kind of word he hears; if he hears a word of bondage, of insecurity, of death, then that is his situation; but if on the other hand it is a word of freedom and life and openness to the future that he hears, then that is man's condition. Which shall be the case depends upon whether or not the Word of God, that is, the true word-event, "happens" for him. The Law-Gospel Polarity, then, plays the absolutely crucial role of insuring the right happening of the word-event; via the distinction of the Law and the Gospel in the conscience, man can hear the word that frees and saves him. The Law-Gospel Polarity thus serves the purpose of keeping all of theology at its proper task, namely, the correct happening of the word-event. In fulfilling this role, the Polarity has a decisively critical application in broad areas of theological concern, and not simply in exegesis. When, therefore, Ebeling speaks of "man as conscience" as the hermeneutical principle, he is saying that conscience is the place or the standpoint for understanding--understanding both the Word and the reality that confronts a man. The Law-Gospel Polarity is not really "the hermeneutical principle," but is that basic bit of theological knowledge by means

of which man-as-conscience can make sense of reality. Faith is then indispensable; it is that aspect of man-as-conscience by means of which he responds appropriately to the word-event of the Gospel, experiences that Word's freeing and saving effect on him, and finds himself placed in the condition of freedom and salvation and life that is possible for one whose existence is, by faith, grounded outside himself, in the Word of the Gospel.⁷⁷

⁷⁷"Faith has its proper place where it is a case of understanding reality. And indeed, understanding reality as a whole. This wholeness is . . . the experience that at one particular point everything stands or falls together. . . . this one point at which everything stands or falls together is the conscience of man. . . . If he is there under the pressure and anxiety of despair, then that does not merely affect the whole of his own being, but he also finds the whole world dragged into his despair. If on the other hand his conscience is cheerful and confident, then not only the man himself is cheerful and confident, but the whole of reality also takes on a different shape for him. Whatever binds him in conscience, decides how reality as a whole concerns him. If his conscience is set free, then he is absolutely free and no power on earth can alter that. It is therefore better not to call conscience a place in man but--however surprising it may sound--the place of man. For in the conscience it is decided where man belongs, where he is and where he has his abode." WF, p. 384. Ebeling understands Luther as making much the same point in the 1531 Lectures on Galatians; see Luther, p. 197.

CHAPTER VI

THE LAW-GOSPEL POLARITY IN LUTHER, AND ITS HERMENEUTICAL SIGNIFICANCE

A complete and thorough-going investigation of the Law-Gospel Polarity in Luther's theology would be beyond the scope of the present study. Contemporary Luther scholars continue to examine the Reformer's works, and they continue to arrive at the occasionally bewildering variety of conclusions that have, it seems, always characterized the findings of Luther research. Even a critical survey of the relevant literature would take us beyond our present task.¹ Yet, in spite of the variety of details in the various interpretations, there is basic agreement that, with the Law-Gospel Polarity, one is dealing with a matter at the heart of Luther's theology, with a piece of theological hardware of central importance for an understanding of the Reformer's work.

Forgoing a detailed look at Luther, we shall here offer, as a set of summary theses, an outline of that understanding of Luther on the basis of which we shall be responding to and commenting about the work of Ebeling.

¹For a collection of the major essays on the subject of Law and Gospel, as well as an exhaustive bibliography, see Ernst Kinder and Klaus Haendler, Gesetz und Evangelium: Beiträge zur gegenwärtigen theologischen Diskussion, Wege der Forschung, Band CXLII (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1968).

The Nature of the Law-Gospel Polarity

1. The Law and the Gospel, whatever the precise realities designated by those terms, must be distinguished² and the difference between them--a difference as great as the separation between God and man--recognized.³ They may not be confused or mixed together.⁴

2. Both the Law and the Gospel are God's Word addressed to man, to be found in the Scriptures. However, their common origin does not diminish their distinctiveness.⁵

²In the following footnotes, Luther, Werke (Kritische Gesamtausgabe; Weimar: Hermann Böhlau & Nachfolger, 1883--) will be cited as WA, followed by volume and page numbers. Where applicable, the American Edition of Luther's Works, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, and Philadelphia: Muhlenberg/Fortress Press, 1955--) will be cited, as LW, followed by volume and page numbers.

"Whoever knows well how to distinguish the Gospel from the Law should give thanks to God and know that he is a real theologian." LW XXVI, 115; WA XL, i, 207.

³WA XL, i, 208; LW XXVI, 116. WA XVI, 367; LW XXXV, 162.

⁴In the Lectures on Galatians of 1531, Luther speaks of the Law and the Gospel as "altogether contrary doctrines" [WA XL, i, 337; LW XXVI, 208], as "diverse and distinct" [WA XL, i, 329; LW XXVI, 203], as being "as far apart as possible" [WA XL, i, 529; LW XXVI, 345]. Elsewhere he uses terms like unterscheid und von einander gesondert [WA XXXVI, 14-15], contraria [WA XI, 42], discernieren and discrimen [WA, Tischreden, V, #5518], discernere [WA, Tischreden, II, #1234]. So distinct are the two that, as to their effects on man, they "pugnant . . . acerrime inter se" [WA XXXIX, ii, 163]. In a sermon on distinguishing the Law and the Gospel, Luther says: "Wenn ichs aber recht wuste zu teilen, so hets nicht not, so kond ich sagen: Ist den nicht mehr nur ein wort das gesetze? Nein, nein, spricht das gesetz, du must her halten, Es ist geboten, Je, liebes gesetz, ists denn so gar ein prey und jnn ein ander gekocht? wir wöllen den selbigen Gott nicht haben, der nicht mehr denn gesetz geben kan, das wisse, Rür mirs nicht jnn ein ander, wir machen hie ein unterschied." WA XXXVI, 17.

⁵"The divine Scriptures deal with our sin in two ways; in one way, through the law of God, and in another way, through God's

3. The distinction between the Law and the Gospel is to be made on the basis of both content and function. Luther can in some places seem to equate the Old Testament with the Law and the New Testament with the Gospel, but that simple distinction in content is carefully qualified by the more basic functional distinction.⁶

Gospel. These are the two Testaments of God, which are ordained for our salvation so that we may be freed from sin. The law deals with sin only in order to reveal it The gospel, on the contrary, deals with sin so as to remove it, and thus most beautifully follows the law." LW XXXII, 223, 226.

"Beides ist Gottes wort, Das Gesetz odder die zehen gebot, welches von Gott durch die Engel gegeben ist, Und das Euangelion welches auch Gottes wort ist." WA XXXVI, 9.

See also WA XVIII, 682.

As Otto Hof points out, Luther has not simply lifted a pair of terms from the Bible, but has embraced a variety of biblical terms under the captions "Law" and "Gospel," and he has done so from the vantage point of the doctrine of justification: "Luthers Lehre von Gesetz und Evangelium geht also nicht einfach empirisch-positivistisch von der Bibel aus, noch weniger ist sie eine Reflexion oder gar Spekulation über das Wort Gottes (so gewiß sie aus dem Worte Gottes selber gewonnen und nichts anderes als die Exegese biblischer Texte sein will!), sondern sie ist existentiell bewegt von der Frage nach der Rechtfertigung des Menschen." Otto Hof, "Luthers Lehre von Gesetz und Evangelium," Evangelisch-lutherische Kirchenzeitung, III (1949), 132.

⁶In the above-mentioned sermon on the Law and the Gospel, Luther speaks of a distinction in form, in effect, and in content. WA XXXVI, 15.

On the seeming equation with the two Testaments, note the qualification in the following paragraph from the Bondage of the Will--a qualification which underscores the primacy of the functional distinction: "The New Testament, properly speaking, consists of promises and exhortations, just as the Old, properly speaking, consists of laws and threats. [First, the Gospel of forgiveness is preached in the New Testament.] Exhortations follows [sic] after this; and they are intended to stir up those who have obtained mercy and have been justified already, to be energetic in bringing forth the fruits of the Spirit and of the righteousness given them, to exercise themselves in love and good works, and boldly to bear the cross and all the other tribulations of this world. [The Diatribe fails to understand this, because of the] fact that it does not

4. The distinction between the Law and the Gospel (it would more accurate to speak of the distinguishing between the Law and the Gospel) is not a static, once-for-all sorting out of biblical texts, but an active doing of the distinguishing; Luther frequently emphasizes, in a variety of ways, the action of distinguishing.⁷

know how to make any distinction between the Old and the New Testaments; for it sees nothing anywhere but laws and comments [sic], by which men may be molded in good manners. What rebirth, renewal, regeneration and the whole work of the Spirit are, it does not see at all." The Bondage of the Will, translated by J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Westwood, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1957), p. 180. WA XVIII, 693.

Also, when Luther defines the Gospel for a reader of the New Testament, he offers a description that emphasizes what the Gospel does: "So you see that the gospel is really not a book of laws and commandments which requires deeds of us, but a book of divine promises in which God promises, offers, and gives us all his possessions and benefits in Christ." LW XXXV, 120.

Rudolf Hermann makes the same point: "Luther [faßt] den Begriff des Gesetzes gleichsam funktionell . . . und [bindet] ihn nicht an sein Urhebertum . . ." Zum Streit um die Überwindung des Gesetzes: Erörterungen zu Luthers Antinomethesen (Weimar: H. Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1958), p. 20.

⁷"Solches wil S. Paulus jnn die Christenheit bilden und ist zwar nach den worten und jrer art und an fruchten bald zu unterscheiden, denn es ist zweierley, nhemen und geben, schrecken und frölich machen, das gesetz foddert von uns, schrecket, Das Euangelion aber gibt uns und tröstet, Aber solchs darnach jnn usu zu scheiden, das man es dafur halt, wenn sie auff einander im gewissen stossen, das du denn die zwei recht scheiden und sagen konnest, Du wollest die zwey wort ungemengt haben und ein jedes an sein ort, In sua materia, das gesetz fur den alten adam, das Euangelion fur dein armes gewissen, Das zu thun ist sehr schwer." WA XXXVI, 22.

Günter Jacob has assembled the numerous places in the Lectures on Galatians that bear on this point: "Was die doctrina etwa als Bestimmung des Verhältnisses von lex und evangelium besagt, ist zwar leicht zu erfassen im Sinne eines allgemeinen Begreifens, aber es muß in der Situation der Anfechtung [WA XL, i, 50], in der experientia, in usu [WA XL, i, 45], dann wenn es zum 'Treffen' kommt [WA XL, i, 43, 92], in pavoribus mortis [WA XL, i, 271] angeeignet sein. In der dem Menschen durchsichtig gewordenen Situation des Todes und der Anfechtung muß es in der Tiefe der

5. The action of distinguishing the Law and the Gospel is possible only for the man of faith, that is, only with the gift of the Holy Spirit.⁸

6. Although the distinguishing of the Law and the Gospel is heavily emphasized, Luther sees the two as having an interdependence and interrelationship--a mutuality in which each exists for the sake of the other's full effectiveness. The Law drives man to the Gospel; only under the Gospel can the full severity and proper use of the Law be worked out, and the Gospel gives precisely what the Law demands, namely, a pure heart and a good conscience before God.⁹

Existenz (in corde, in conscientia) affectu ergriffen sein [WA XL, i, 72, 209, 669]. Dieses Ergreifen re, usu [WA XL, ii, 74], nicht speculative, sondern quando ad practicam kompt [WA XL, i, 261, 523], non in syllaba et litera, sed in usu et corde [WA XL, i, 263], ist sehr schwer. Es kann daher als ars bezeichnet werden [WA XL, i, 271; WA XXXIV, ii, 23]." Der Gewissensbegriff in der Theologie Luthers (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1929), p. 44.

⁸"Darumb welcher die kunst wol kan, den setze oben an und heisse jn ein Doctor der heiligen schrifft, denn on den heiligen geist mag diese unterscheid nicht verstanden werden Der heilig geist gehort zu dieser unterscheid, denn kein Papist, kein falscher Christ, kein schwermer kan diese zwey von einander scheiden, besonder in causa materiali et in objecto." WA XXXVI, 13.

"Non est homo, qui vivit in terris qui sciat discernere inter legem et euangelium. . . . Ich hett gemeint, ich kundt es, weill ich so lang und uill daruon geschriben, aber wen es an das treffen gett, so sich ich wol, das es mir weitt, weitt felet. Also soll und muß Gott der heiligist meister sein." WA, Tischreden, II, #1234.

See also Warren Quanbeck, "Luther's Early Exegesis," Luther Today (Decorah, Iowa: Luther College Press, 1957), p. 83, and Lauri Haikola, Usus Legis (Uppsala: A.-B. Lundequistska Bokhandeln, and Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1958), pp. 108; 109, n. 84; 113; 132.

⁹In seeming contradiction to his emphasis on distinction and separation, Luther can also say that the Law and the Gospel are not in conflict with each other [WA XXXIX, i, 566]; that "Lex et Evangelium non possunt nec debent separari, sicut nec poenitentia

7. The Law and the Gospel are interrelated in such a way that the absence or loss or corruption of one of the two terms necessarily means the absence or loss or corruption of the other as well. And worse than that, the corruption of either term (since a right understanding is seen as depending on properly relating and distinguishing them) yields bad theology, or, in other words, only the Law.¹⁰

et remissio peccatorum. Ita enim sunt inter se colligata et implicita." [WA XXXIX, i, 416]. The tension between separation and interdependence is described in the following: "although these two [the time of Law and the time of grace] are utterly distinct, yet they must be joined completely together in the same heart. Nothing is more closely joined together than fear and trust, Law and Gospel, sin and grace; they are so joined together that each is swallowed up by the other." LW XXVI, 343; WA XL, i, 527.

The Law drives a man to seek Christ [WA VIII, 609; LW XLIV, 302], in whom the Law is perfectly fulfilled [WA XXXIX, i, 380]. The Gospel shows how the Law's demands are to be met [WA X, i, ii, 363; LW XXXII, 226]; in fact, the Gospel gives precisely what the Law demands: "Also geben die zusagung gottis, was die gepott erfoddern, und volnbringen, was die gepott heysen, auff das es allis gottis eygen sey, Gepot und erfüllung, er heysset allein, er erfüllet auch alleyn." [WA VII, 24; see also LW XXXI, 63].

¹⁰"Aber hie ligt die macht dran, das man die zwey wort recht unterscheide und nicht jnn einander menge, sonst wird der eines verloren sein, wo anders nicht alle beide." WA XXXVI, 9.

"Denn du solt das gesetz nicht also haben, das damit das Euangelium untergehe, Du solt auch das Euangelium nicht also halten, das das gesetz untergehe." WA XXXVI, 18.

Although the Law is good, it is not so good that it cannot be misused [WA XVII, i, 122]. This happens when "sie meynen die werck durchs gesetz erzwingen sollen für Gott gelten und wollen aus weltlicher, vergenglicher gerechtikeit hymelische ewige gerechtikeit machen" [WA XVII, i, 127]. Proper sorting out is therefore essential: "Darumb stehet der rechte brauch des gesetzes darauff, das mans nicht hinein füre, wo es heraus gehöret" [WA XVII, i, 122]. An unevangelical understanding of the Law yields disaster [WA XXXIX, i, 347, theses 1-3]; "denn so bald du glauben und werck unternander mengist und nicht scheidest, ists schön verloren" [WA XVII, i, 108]. To confuse the Law and the Gospel, then, is to distort all of theology: "If I define the Law with a proper definition and keep it in its own

8. The functional distinction between the Law and the Gospel is to be made on this basis: the Law demands and accuses, binds and kills, by exposing man's sin; the Gospel promises and bestows, frees and enlivens, by mediating Christ and the forgiveness of sins. The material distinction depends on the functional: whatever fulfills these functions is to be labeled the Law or the Gospel, as the case may be.¹¹

function and use, it is a very good thing. But if I transfer it to another use and attribute to it what should not be attributed to it, I distort not only the Law but all theology." LW XXVI, 307; WA XL, i, 476. See also WA XL, i, 114, 206; LW XXVI, 54, 115.

¹¹"Lex est doctrina maledictionis, irae, peccati et mortis." WA XL, ii, 493.

"Das gesetze fodert die liebe des hertzens. . . . Das gesetze . . . verdammet uns alle miteinander." WA X, i, ii, 356.

"Das Gesetz sol das heissen, das Gottes wort und gebot ist, das uns gebeut, was wir thuen sollen, und foddert werck von uns. . . . das gesetze ist, welches auff unsere werck dringt." WA XXXVI, 13, 14.

"The law brings the wrath of God, kills, reviles, accuses, judges, and condemns everything that is not in Christ." LW XXXI, 41.

"The Law was given to terrify and kill the stubborn and to exercise the old man." LW XXVI, 6.

"All the law can do is render us naked and guilty." LW XXVI, 149; WA XL, i, 259.

"'Der buchstabe tödtet,' das ist: das gesetze würcket in dir den tod, das ist: es macht dich zu nicht, 'Aber der gaist macht lebendig,' dann wann der kompt durch das Euangelion, so ist das gesetze schon erfüllet" WA X, i, ii, 234.

"Evangelium et lex proprie in hoc differunt, quod lex praedicat facienda et omittenda, immo iam commissa et omissa ac impossibilia fieri et omitti (ideo solam peccati ministrat cognitionem), Evangelium autem remissa peccata et omnia impleta factaque." WA II, 466; LW XXVII, 183.

"Durch das gesetze wird gefoddert, was wir thun sollen, dringt auff unser werck gegen Gott und dem nehesten. Im Euangelio werden wir zur spend gefoddert, was wir entpfahen sollen." WA XXXVI, 14.

On the final point: "Quicquid ostendit peccatum, iram seu mortem, id exercet officium legis, sive fiat in veteri sive in novo testamento." WA XXXIX, i, 348.

9. Within the broader function of the Law as thus outlined, there is further to be distinguished a two-fold use of the Law.¹² The Law functions according to a civil or political use, restraining coarse evildoers by its mere presence and coercive power, and according to a theological or proper use, exposing and condemning man's sin.¹³ Even when Luther speaks of the Law as functioning also for the Christian, he sees it on occasion as given to them "insofar as they have not yet died and still live in the flesh."¹⁴

¹²The question of an explicitly stated triplex usus legis, as far as Luther's own writings are concerned, seems to be primarily a text-critical problem. Both Ebeling and Werner Elert have independently concluded that Luther did not teach a triplex usus as such. Ebeling, "On the Doctrine of the Triples Usus Legis in the Theology of the Reformation," Word and Faith (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), pp. 62-78. Werner Elert, "Eine theologische Fälschung zur Lehre vom tertius usus legis," Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte, I (1948), 168-170.

¹³"Dis ist ein brauch und nutz des gesetzes, das es die leut schrecke und straffe mit allem unglück leibs und seele, die bösheit zustewren und auswendig zu weren, da zu ist es gut, nicht das es from mache, es machet allein ein eüsserlichen schein für den leuten, das man sich der werck enthelte, ynwendig bleibt es doch damit ungeweret, Es dienet yhe da zu, das die leute fride haben können und nicht ein iglicher seinen mutwillen ube, wie er wölle." WA XVII, i, 124. See also WA XVII, i, 126-127.

For Luther's use of the term "two-fold use," see WA XXXIX, i, 460 and WA XVII, i, 134. Comments on the two uses of the Law abound in the 1531 Lectures on Galatians; see WA XL, i, 479-480, 487, 429, 529, 533; LW XXVI, 308-309, 314, 274, 345, 348.

¹⁴"Ita piis eadem [lex] est posita, quatenus nondum mortui sunt et in carne adhuc vivunt." WA XXXIX, i, 356. See also WA XXXIX, i, 374, 375, 398; WA VI, 212; WA II, 497, 498; WA XL, i, 526-527, 536; WA XVII, i, 124, 126, 131-132. It must be noted, however, that Luther's treatment of the Decalog in the Large Catechism includes a usefulness of the Law for the Christian beyond that indicated by the qualification cited here. In similar fashion, Luther can speak of the Christian as doing what the Law requires because his faith has given him the pure heart that delights in the Father's will [LW LI, 273]. The

10. Since the term Law includes whatever performs the office or function of the Law, it can designate the sum total of reality outside of faith (or Christ, or the Gospel). (However, Luther also recognizes that even words about Christ can perform the function of the Law.)¹⁵

11. In the life of the believer, only the Gospel is to be allowed to operate in his conscience; the Law is to be confined only to the discipline of the body.¹⁶

Law has now, for the Christian, been overcome, though not, of course, eliminated. Rudolf Hermann puts it this way: the Christian's freedom from the Law means "nicht sowohl dessen Streichung--sei es auch etwa nur für den Christen--als vielmehr die Überwindung der aus dem Gesetz unausweichlich folgenden Gewissensnot. Die Überwindung des Gesetzes ist nach Luther nur dem glaubenden Gewissen möglich, das aber eben durch das Gesetz geschärft worden ist. Ja, die Überwindung des Gesetzes ist nur ihm überhaupt in rechtschaffener Weise Problem. Der Jubel einer Überwindung des Gesetzes ist für Luther gerade auf Grund der Tatsache zu verstehen, daß es selber bleibt. Es ist der Jubel, daß uns das, womit wir doch täglich als mit dem Ankläger zu schaffen haben, nicht mehr schaden und verdammen kann." Hermann, Zum Streit um die Überwindung des Gesetzes, p. 14; see also p. 50.

¹⁵The Law is "quod legis officio fungitur, quod terret, quod accusat conscientias, quod ingrattitudines, libidines et peccata ostendit, sive sit in Evangelio, sive in Mose nihil refert, ubicumque tandem legatur aliquid eorum, quae arguunt peccata." WA XXXIX, i, 534-535; see also 348, 351.

"Everything apart from Christ is a ministry of death for the punishment of the wicked." LW XXVI, 313; WA XL, i, 487.

¹⁶"Also sol das gesetz allein auff die eusserliche zucht dringen und das kemmerlein, darin das Euangelium wonen sol, zu friden lassen." WA XXXVI, 23.

"Der glaube gibt mir die ein himlische predigt, welche ist das Euangelium, damit das gesetz den zuschlagenen hertzen nicht mehr anhaben sol, es hat gnug gemartert und gestöckt und sol nu dem Euangelio raum geben, welches uns Gottes gnad und barmhertzigkeit schenckt." WA XXXVI, 21.

"So mus ein mensch auff erden leben, das er auswendig mit dem gesetz gedrungen und gezwungen werde, das er nicht böses thu, aber nach dem geist ungezwungen bleibe, denn er von yhm selbs gutes thuet." WA XVII, i, 133.

12. Given the variety of Luther's expressions, and given his insistence on both separation and mutual interdependence, the term "polarity" seems best able to embrace the relationship of the Law and the Gospel in Luther's theology.¹⁷

The Place of the Law-Gospel Polarity in Theology

13. In the most general terms, distinguishing the Law and the Gospel as the two poles of the Word of God is a necessary and fundamental key to proper Christian theology, a crucial distinction, an absolutely essential theological art.¹⁸

¹⁷To this writer's knowledge, Luther does not use the word "polarity" of the relationship of the Law and the Gospel.

In his study of the place of the Law-Gospel Polarity in Luther's sermons, Gerhard Heintze seems to support the idea of a combination of separation and interdependence (though he, too, does not use the term "polarity"); his final paragraph reads: "So bleibt es für Luther im praktischen Vollzug der Predigt dabei: Gesetz und Evangelium, Zorn und Gnade, Anfechtung und Trost werden nicht im beziehungslosen Nebeneinander oder gar Gegeneinander, aber auch nicht im streng getrennten Nacheinander verkündigt, sondern in ihrer inneren Zusammengehörigkeit von Christus her und auf Christus hin. 'Nihil nisi Christus sit praedicandus!'" Gerhard Heintze, Luthers Predigt von Gesetz und Evangelium (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1958), p. 283.

¹⁸"Darumb welcher die kunst wol kan, den setze oben an und heisse jn ein Doctor der heiligen schrift." WA XXXVI, 13.

"Anyone who would know this art well would deserve to be called a theologian." LW XXVI, 342; WA XL, i, 526.

"The knowledge of this topic, the distinction between the Law and the Gospel, is necessary to the highest degree; for it contains a summary of all Christian doctrine. Therefore let everyone learn diligently how to distinguish the Law from the Gospel, not only in words but in feeling and in experience; that is, let him distinguish well between these two in his heart and in his conscience." LW XXVI, 117; WA XL, i, 209.

"Pene universa scriptura totiusque Theologiae cognitio pendet in recta cognitione legis et Evangelii." WA VII, 502-503.

Luther's complaint against Latomus is typical: "With deliberate villainy, he distorts both my statements and those of all the

14. In the service of exegesis (that is, hermeneutics in the narrower, traditional sense), the Law-Gospel Polarity serves as a biblically-derived grid for the purpose of sorting out the varied biblical data, or as a polarized lens through which to see correctly the polarized light of the Scriptures, or as the scales used to weigh the biblical documents in the proper way--thus assuring that the word one finds in the Scriptures says what God in fact wishes to be said.¹⁹

fathers, making out that what they say simply of sin is said against sin under grace, or applying what is said of the sin of the whole to, as I might say, the sin of the part. He does this because he, together with his sophists, has never recognized what grace and sin, law and gospel, Christ and man are. He who wishes to discuss sin and grace, law and gospel, Christ and man, in a Christian way, necessarily discourses for the most part on nothing else than God and man in Christ" LW XXXII, 257. See also the preface to the New Testament, LW XXXV, 360.

It should be noted, too, that the basic argument of Luther's tract "Against the Heavenly Prophets" is that Karlstadt and his cohorts have perverted the Gospel into the Law. WA XVIII, 62-214; LW XL, 79-223.

¹⁹"Hie müssen wyr wissen, was das Euangelion sey, wyr kunden sonst dißen ortt nicht vorstehen; darumb ist wol und mit vleyß tzu mercken, das gott tzweyerley wortt oder predigt ynn die welt hatt von anbegynn alltzeyt gesandt: Gesetz und Euangelion, diße tzuo predigen mustu wol unterscheyden und erkennen. Denn ich sage dyr, das außßer der schrift bißher keyn buch yhe geschrieben ist, auch von keynem heyligen, das furhanden sey, darynn diße tzuo predigt recht unterschiedlich weren gehandelt, do doch grosse macht an ligt tzu wissen [the Latin translation for the last clause reads: *quanquan clavis haec sit scripturae*]." WA X, i, ii, 155.

"Es ist keyn buch ynn der Biblien, darynnen sie nicht beyderley sind, gott hatt sie alwege beyeynander gesetzt, beyde, gesetz und tzuosagung. Denn er leret durchs gesetz, was tzu thun ist, und durch die tzuosagung, wo manß nemen soll.

"Darumb bleyb du auff dießer unterscheyd, und wilcherley buch dyr furkompt, es sey allt odder new testament, das ließ mit solchem unter scheydt, das du auffmerckist, wo tzuosagunge sind, da ist

15. In the service of man's life before God and of his understanding of that life (hermeneutics in the broader sense, much as Ebeling uses the term to refer to the whole process of understanding by means of the Word of God), the Law-Gospel Polarity serves the man of faith by insuring the address of the appropriate Word of God to himself and to his brother.²⁰

dasselb buch eyn Euangelionbuch, wo gepott stehen, da ists eyn gesetzbuch. Weyl aber ym newen testament die tzusagung mit hauffen stehen, und ym alten die gesetzbuch mit hauffen, nennet man eynß Euangelion, das ander gesetzbuch." WA X, i, ii 159.

"The understanding of this matter [Law in the New Testament] lies in recognizing and truly distinguishing the Law and the Gospel" LW IX, 179; WA XIV, 678. See also LW XXXV, 118, 121.

Earlier in the Adventspostille, Luther's comments on Matt. 23:3 make use of a Law-and-Gospel-oriented reasoning to show why the teaching of the Pharisees, since it is not Gospel, is to be dismissed [WA X, i, ii, 154-155]. By similar reasoning, Luther can say, "Universa Scriptura de Christo solo est ubique." WA XLVI, 414. See also LW XXXII, 229; LW XXXV, 123, 363-364; WA XLII, 162, 166.

On the actual use of the Law-Gospel Polarity in the hermeneutic process, see the final section of this chapter, infra, pp. 125-132.

²⁰"All this, together with what has gone before, makes this certain: he who attributes forgiveness, satisfaction for sins, and justification to anything but faith alone, and who seeks a way other than through faith--this man denies Christ and, like an apostate, throws away grace and abandons the gospel. Thus Paul cries out to the Galatians, 'You who are justified by the law are fallen from grace' [Gal. 5:4]. Vows and the works of vows are but law and works. They are not faith, nor do they issue from faith, for what else is a vow but some kind of law? In their own words they say, 'What was a matter of choice before the vow, is a matter of obligation after the vow; it is no longer a counsel but a precept.'" LW XLIV, 280.

"This situation [silence in the churches about the distinction of Law and Gospel] has produced a very dangerous condition for consciences; for unless the Gospel is clearly distinguished from the Law, Christian doctrine cannot be kept sound. But when this distinction is recognized, the true meaning of justification is recognized. Then it is easy to distinguish faith from works, and Christ from Moses, as well as from the magistrate and all civil laws. For everything apart from Christ is a ministry of death for the punishment of the wicked." LW XXVI, 313; WA XL, i, 486-487.

"If this [faith] fails or proves to be false, then everything fails. For there have always been many, as there still are, who

16. Because the Law-Gospel Polarity is a basic theological distinction with crucial significance for doctrine and exegesis and life, it is possible and even necessary to speak of the sphere or place of the Law and the Gospel as the conscience (in Luther's understanding of the term). Doctrinally, exegetically, and practically, it is the conscience of the Christian that is affected by Law and Gospel, that places a man under either the Law or the Gospel, that applies to a man the words of the biblical documents (or the Word of God).²¹

talk a lot about faith and pretend to be masters not only of the law but also the gospel, and say, as we also say: Faith is what does it, [but then they go on and say] but yet the law and good works must be added to it, otherwise faith does not avail. Thus they mingle together our life and works and Christ. This is not to teach faith purely and sincerely, but is rather faith so colored, feigned, and falsified that it is not faith at all, but a false semblance and shade of faith, because the confidence of the heart does not rest purely upon Christ as the only mercy seat, but is placed rather in our own holiness, as if this could stand before the judgment seat; wherefore before God it is quite rightly condemned and rejected, which is where it belongs." LW LI, 280.

See also WA X, i, ii, 155; LW XXXII, 230; WA, Tischreden, I, 276-277.

²¹For a thorough discussion of Luther on conscience, see Günter Jacob, Der Gewissensbegriff in der Theologie Luthers (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1929).

Luther's "Sermon von der heubtsumma Gottes gepots . . ." is an excellent example of his manner of locating the use and distinction of the Law and the Gospel in the human conscience; he says, for example, "Als das mans bey einem exempel sehe: Wenn ich yn sünde gefallen bin und widder Gottes gepot than habe, so ist das gesetz so bald da, will mir ein bös gewissen und zornigen Gott machen. Aber da gegen kömpt der glaube, helt mir Gottes wort und Christum meinen heiland fur, der mir von Gott geschenckt ist mit allem, was an yhm ist, So spreche ich durch den selbigen glauben: War ists, das ich sünde an mir habe, und das gesetz sagt, ich solle rein von hertzen seyn, kein böse gedancken noch lüst haben, ich aber anders

17. As a basic theological distinction, the Law-Gospel Polarity has applicability in these manifold areas of theology and life just because it is a key to the entire "new and theological grammar" or logic, according to which sinners are pronounced righteous "through faith," even when they are still in fact sinners, and all aspects of life in the world come under the judgment of the evangelical theologian. The Law-Gospel Polarity thus becomes a key to all of theological logic; its applications, therefore, are limited only by the scope of the theology it serves.²²

ym fleisch finde, wilchs durch und durch böse ist. Ich teile mich aber selbs auch ynn zwey stück, nemlich das fleisch und den alten Adam und den geist odder newen menschen, Im hertzen habe ich Christum durch den glauben, Damit streite ich auf zwo weise. [In terms of Law, I have a bad conscience; but in Christ, the Law cannot reach me, so I have a good conscience.]

"Weil nu Christus mein ist durch den glauben und ich widderumb sein bin, so kann mich kein gesetz beschuldigen, so wenig als Christum.

"Und ob es gleich her feret und mich angreifen wil, so werffe ich yhm solchs fur und spreche: hab ich doch alles und mehr than, den du haben wilt, und ob ich schön ym fleisch noch böse lüst habe, wende ich die augen hinauff zu Christo, der ist mein, gibt mir alles, was er hat, So ist seine reinickeit auch mein, Also kan es nichts an mir schaffen. Wenn ich aber herunter sehe, so finde ich noch viel unreinis, dazu das gesetz recht an mir hat." WA XVII, i, 114-115; see also pages 105, 111, 106, 108, 114, 118, as well as LW XXXV, 377: "All this is fully learned and experienced by our conscience, when it is really struck by the law." Also, the Lectures on Galatians (1531) abound with comments on this subject; see especially WA XL, i, 203-204, 207-210, 232, 536, 596; LW XXVI, 113-114, 116-117, 131, 349, 391.

²²LW XXVI, 267; WA XL, i, 418. Theological grammar is opposed to the normal, "moral" grammar which is evidenced by daring to come before God on the grounds of one's own righteousness; theological grammar takes the "through faith (πίστεως)" of Hebrews 11 seriously. LW XXVI, 268.

"It is a marvelous thing and unknown to the world to teach Christians to ignore the Law and to live before God as though there were no Law whatever. For if you do not ignore the Law and thus

Luther's Use of the Law-Gospel Polarity
in the Hermeneutic Process

In order to provide at least one example of Luther's application of the Law-Gospel Polarity to the task of theological understanding, we take a brief look at the two sets of lectures on Galatians, and specifically at the pericope at the beginning of the sixth chapter.²³ The choice of this pericope is made on the following grounds:

direct your thoughts to grace as though there were no Law but as though there were nothing but grace, you cannot be saved." LW XXVI, 6; WA XL, i, 43. See also LW XXVII, 6; WA XL, ii, 6.

Elsewhere in the lectures, Luther speaks of Paul as "following a splendid order [logic] of the Spirit" [LW XXVI, 186]; according to this logic, "the same deed and word is a blessing in the mouth of Paul, but in the mouth of another it is a curse" [LW XXVI, 188].

Compare the following from the "Theses on Faith and Law": "The Scriptures must be understood in favor of Christ, not against him. For that reason they must either refer to him or must not be held to be true Scriptures.

"As, for example, 'keep the commandments' must be understood as with Christ commanding, plainly, keep them in Christ or in faith in Christ.

"'Redeem your iniquities by showing mercy' naturally, in Christ and in faith in him, otherwise, your mercy will be sin.

"For that reason the Epistle to the Hebrews most learnedly prefixes 'by faith' to all the deeds of all the saints." LW XXXIV, 112.

The presence of the Gospel and its proper appreciation by the theologian makes him a judge even of the Fathers, who, Luther says in one place, were often guilty of moralizing because they failed to grasp that sainthood is a gift, as the Gospel makes clear. WA XIII, 242-243.

"Now that the light of the Gospel is gleaming, all the ways of life in the world are under our certain and infallible judgment." LW XXVI, 213.

²³ WA II, 598-611 and WA XL, ii, 135-165. Quotations are taken from LW XXVII, 106-129 and LW XXVII, 381-401.

(1) Here Luther is not speaking formally about the application of a hermeneutical principle but is actually putting one into practice; we can therefore examine what he does, and not merely what he says should be done. (2) The possibility of comparing the two sets of lectures, written as they were in two different situations against two different antitheses and published fifteen years apart, affords an extra dimension for seeing how Luther operated. (3) Luther's terminology here makes his method a bit more obvious than it is in other places.²⁴

In both sets of lectures Luther begins by identifying the problem to which the Apostle was speaking; in the present pericope, as throughout the epistle, that problem is the vainglory (kenodoxia) of those who, "after they have been led back from the letter to the spirit, despise the weaker ones and vainly glory in themselves."²⁵ He paraphrases Paul in describing the anti-Gospel character of the situation in the Galatian churches:

[they] are not yet able to distinguish between the sound judgment of faith and the works of the Law, since, because of scruples of conscience, they are not willing to desist from the works of the Law and do not trust sufficiently in the righteousness of faith alone.²⁶

²⁴The fact that the lectures do not come from Luther's own hand but from students' lecture notes does not devalue our examples; the point here depends, not on specific terminology, but on the shape and thrust of the entire argument.

²⁵LW XXVII, 381.

²⁶LW XXVII, 381-382.

Or, again, in 1531:

This was the surest possible sign that neither the teachers nor the pupils were living and walking by the Spirit but were following the flesh and performing its works; that is, they had lost the true doctrine, faith, Christ, and all the gifts of the Spirit, and were worse than heathen.²⁷

From this, Luther proceeds to look at his contemporary situation and to find the analogous problem in his own day. We note that this situation differs in 1531 from what it was in 1519. In 1519

Luther says:

Thus today, too, there is a large throng of those who are weak, even among the very learned, and are miserably tormented by a conscience under pressure of human laws and do not have the courage to trust solely in faith in Christ. But the boys and effeminate men who are ruling in the church do not make any concessions at all to our weaknesses. No, with boisterous violence they put forth their tyranny as soon as you do not give the answer they want. "Therefore you are a heretic, a heathen, a schismatic," they say.²⁸

The ultimately anti-Gospel dimension is further described in the words, "They make the cross of Christ of no effect in themselves, and the love they have is inactive, is snoring, and is carried on their shoulders."²⁹

In 1531 Luther finds the spirit of vainglory to be especially prevalent among the Enthusiasts who have been charging him with a lack of love because of his refusal to yield to Zwingli in the matter of the Lord's Supper at Marburg in 1529. "In our own times we have seen with what implacable hatred the fanatical spirits have been

²⁷LW XXVII, 99.

²⁸LW XXVII, 382.

²⁹LW XXVII, 392.

inflamed against us because we refused to yield to them and to approve their errors."³⁰ While they sought "concord in love," Luther sought concord in faith, in the Spirit. "For if you lose this, you have lost Christ; and once you have lost Him, love will not do you any good."³¹

The basic problem in both 1519 and 1531 is vainglory as a distortion of the Gospel; only the specific form of the manifestation differs.

Having noted the real problem which the text, along with the entire Epistle, addresses (that is, the vainglory of the Judaizing teachers who upset the weak Galatians and turned them from the freedom of the Gospel to the bondage of the Law), Luther has come to observe his own situation in the same terms, using Paul's insights to illuminate the sixteenth century problems and to expose them in their anti-Gospel dimensions.

Then Luther applies Paul's kind of solution to the problems which he has come to diagnose only at the hand of Paul's diagnosis of the first-century Galatian situation. In 1519 it came out this way:

But what else does it mean to be spiritual than to be a child of the Holy Spirit and to have the Holy Spirit? . . . When our conscience accuses us, He protects us in the presence of God and comforts us by giving a good testimony to our conscience and to our trust in the mercy of God. He excuses, extenuates, and completely covers our sins.³²

³⁰ LW XXVII, 104.

³¹ LW XXVII, 107.

³² LW XXVII, 388.

These comments, like those in 1531, depend directly upon his preceding discussion of the words "walk by the Spirit" at the end of the fifth chapter. In 1531 Luther comments that only when by faith in Christ the Spirit rules in the heart can any righteousness exist; and, in fact, when the Spirit does rule, righteousness does completely exist. To walk by the Spirit is simply to take hold of Christ by faith.³³

So far we have described; we must also explain. Luther comes to make contemporary theological judgments under appeal to this pericope, not by simply addressing Paul to the situation of 1519 or 1531, but by looking at his own times from the same point of view and in the same way in which Paul looked at his. For Luther here the major hermeneutic leap is not the historical one, but the one that covers the distance from unfaith to faith, thus enabling his perceptive analysis of the contemporary scene--seeing both medieval sophistry and Enthusiastic fanaticism as resting on attempts at salvation by works of the Law. Luther is observing, evaluating, criticising, and prescribing a remedy for the sixteenth century situation by means of what can only be called an application of the Law-Gospel Polarity to the task of theology. Conversation between Paul and Luther is possible because, at the deepest level, they are really in the same situation. Hermeneutics, or understanding, is possible just because at that deep level of standing coram Deo under the forgiving verdict of the Gospel, the situation of the

³³LW XXVII, 73-74.

first, the sixteenth, or even the twentieth, centuries is the same. And it is through the looking-glass of the Law-Gospel Polarity that we can discern the point of contact between a Galatians pericope and the "today" of either the sixteenth or the twentieth century.

The Law-Gospel Polarity has, for Luther, more than just the above-mentioned critical and prescriptive function. He goes so far as to maintain that part of the rule of the Gospel is actually to establish the essential connection between Paul's day and his own. "Only now," when the pure Gospel is proclaimed and heard can Paul's words be fully understood.³⁴ In a sense, then, part of the similarity, part of the point of contact between Paul's day and Luther's is the very presence and proclamation of the Word of the Gospel. The very fact that the Gospel is preached at all is what makes for continuity from Paul to Luther.

An analysis of the 1531 Lectures on the fifth chapter of Galatians³⁵ helps to put Luther's Law-Gospel hermeneutics into the following perspective: Luther is reading Paul, and he is reading the world, or theological situation, around himself. The success of his theological method lies in his perceptive analysis of both. While one may be tempted to look on the hermeneutical task as that of making a first century document leap across the years to speak to the situation of the sixteenth or twentieth century, Luther

³⁴LW XXVII, 123. See also note 22 above: LW XXVI, 213.

³⁵LW XXVI, 1-149. The analysis forms a part of the writer's essay "Luther's Theological Method: Four Samples of His Use of Scripture" (unpublished B.D. thesis, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, 1965).

demonstrates that there is little of that kind of leaping to be done. At least, that task is no more difficult in the case of the biblical documents than for any other first-century writing. Paul and Luther--or Paul and I, or Luther and I--can converse because at the deepest level, at the most central point, we are really in the same situation coram Deo; and that is a situation to be described and analyzed in terms of the Law-Gospel Polarity. The gap needing to be bridged is not the one of historical distance, nor that of cultural and linguistic difference, but that between faith and unbelief, between the new life in Christ and the perverse insistence of man to live the old existence. The gaps of history, language, and culture become secondary in importance when the faith-unbelief gap is bridged in perceiving both Paul's times and my own via the Law-Gospel Polarity. Hermeneutics, or understanding, is possible just because Paul and I have so much in common; theologically, that means the realities of sin and grace, judgment and forgiveness, Law and Gospel. The history of Paul's times is thus a part of the history of all subsequent times of the church. I can learn from Paul, or make theological sense out of Paul's letters, because Paul and I are part of the same (new) humanity, part of the same church, part of the same action of God. Thus I find that the gap that I thought existed between Paul and me is bridged when, with Luther, I am able to perceive what my own self, my own times, my own theological reality, are really like. And that means that I find myself in much the same world and situation as that of Paul.

If that theological gap is to disappear, there must be some guidelines, some signposts along the way, to help me to "read" both Paul's and my own times correctly. For Luther, those guidelines, those signposts, are to be found in the Law-Gospel Polarity. Luther's understanding of Paul was born in an awareness of that Polarity, and his understanding of the whole of theology grew up in terms of that Polarity. It is therefore by looking at the current scene and at current theological realities through the lens of the Law-Gospel Polarity that one comes to achieve, as Luther would have it, genuine theological understanding. That is clear from the whole argument of Luther's Lectures on Galatians. It is because of the Gospel that he maintains the bondage of the will; it is because of the Gospel that he holds that not one jot of Moses applies to Christians;³⁶ it is because of the Gospel that works must be removed from the realm of justification; it is because of the Gospel that Christians can do truly good works; it is because of the Gospel that Christians can live in the forgiveness of sins. And that Gospel, if it is to be heard correctly, necessitates the application of the Law-Gospel Polarity.

³⁶"Eyn Unterrichtung wie sich die Christen ynn Mosen sollen schicken," WA XVI, 363-393; English translation by E. Theodore Bachmann, "How Christians Should Regard Moses," LW XXXV, 161-174.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUDING COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS

Our investigation of Ebeling's use of the Law-Gospel Polarity in hermeneutics has shown extensive similarities with Luther's theology, inviting the conclusion that Ebeling is essentially faithful to Luther in this aspect of his theology.

Yet it must be noted immediately that Ebeling tends to operate more formally than Luther, with greater attention to methodological matters. Ebeling is concerned to show how the theological task is to be discharged; indeed, he regards his formal concerns as the actual discharge of that task. For the job of theology-as-hermeneutics is the assigning of proper functions to the specific subdisciplines within theology, leading them to proper and fruitful interaction, and serving the concrete proclamation of the word of the Gospel in the pulpit. By contrast, Luther appears to have developed his methodology and formal concerns "in the heat of battle," growing out of the exigencies of sermonizing in the pulpit and lecturing in the classroom.

Summary of Ebeling's Position

Our study of Ebeling's use of the Law-Gospel Polarity in hermeneutics suggests that his position is at bottom this:

1. Systematic theology, the unifying element in the whole of the theological endeavor, stands at the hermeneutical center of theology. It is an element in all the sub-disciplines of theology

and thereby serves to govern the interrelationship of those sub-disciplines and to direct theology's attention toward its principal function of aiding the church's proclamation.

2. Systematic theology makes use of the Law-Gospel Polarity of the Word of God (that is, it distinguishes between the Law and the Gospel) as the basic principle of Christian theology, a pre-understanding (though textually derived) by means of which the theologian sees to it that the proclaimed word is authentic word-event, that is, that the word-event happens in such a way that it awakens faith and thereby frees a man and opens up a future for him.

3. The Law-Gospel Polarity provides the essential direction of the hermeneutical task. That task is not simply the removal of obstacles to the understanding of the record of past word-events in the biblical texts, but rather the understanding, by means of a present occurrence of the word under appeal to the biblical text, of the reality that presently confronts a man as he stands before God (coram Deo).

4. The place of hermeneutics, and therefore the place of operation for the Law-Gospel Polarity, is the human conscience, that is, man in his essence as man, and that means man as one open to question, dependent on a word, and dependent for life or salvation on a basis outside himself.

5. The theologian must therefore take into account the nature of contemporary man's understanding of reality. This understanding, for Ebeling, proceeds out of a concern for the historical (and that

necessarily means linguistic) nature of reality. In this sense Ebeling follows Bultmann's call for existentialist interpretation.

6. Since the Word of God, or simply the Word, is an event (something that happens), the Law-Gospel Polarity is also an event. Ebeling is concerned with the activity of distinguishing the Law and the Gospel and not simply with the once-having-been-made-ness of the distinction, or with the setting up of a static polarity. Like Luther, Ebeling sees the Law and the Gospel as both antithetic and interrelated. While on the one hand he can stress the separation of the Law and the Gospel to the extent of calling them opposing words of God, he can on the other hand speak of the Law and the Gospel as at least as closely related as they are in Luther's description of them as a "mathematical conjunction." For Ebeling, as for Luther, the Law and the Gospel each exist for the sake of the full and proper effectiveness of the other; each is necessary in order to bring the other properly to expression.

7. The action of distinguishing the Law and the Gospel is the cardinal task of all Christian theology that deserves the name. The Law-Gospel Polarity thus functions in exegesis, in the history of the church and its theology, in proclamation, and especially in systematic theology, where it serves to aid theology's reflection on what is brought to expression in the event of proclamation.

8. To distinguish the Law and the Gospel is to distinguish the opposing historical forces which a man encounters; this enables theology to discern the "before God (coram Deo)" dimension of the

existence of man apart from faith as existence under bondage and under the condemnation of the Law, to see philosophy and other non-theological disciplines as expositions of the nature of existence under the Law, and thus to summon theology and preaching to the event of the word as the Gospel, as the authentic word that saves a man. Awareness of the Law-Gospel Polarity thus preserves theology from becoming just another voice among the many that expose the nature of existence under the Law; it enables theology to present Jesus Christ as the basis of faith, thereby opening up man's future and giving him the "certainty that certifies his conscience" ("die das Gewissen gewißmachende Gewißheit") because it provides him a basis outside himself, and that is his salvation, his movement from death to life.

Questions for Further Study

Our examination of the Law-Gospel Polarity in Luther's theology suggests that several questions remain about Ebeling's use of the Polarity:

One must ask whether by the term "faith" Ebeling is accounting adequately for the biblical data. Ebeling's call for grounding the explicit christological kerygma of the church in the implicit christological kerygma that came to expression in the historical Jesus seems to make faith, in spite of his claims to the contrary, rest on what can be demonstrated historically.

Gerhard Stephan¹ charges that Ebeling, by reducing the content of christological kerygma to that which came to expression in the historical Jesus, eliminates Easter from the basic data of christology. It is true that Ebeling insists that the Easter event was no additional datum which in any way altered the conditions for faith in Jesus or that an encounter with the risen Christ in any way obviated the need for faith; rather, he insists, the encounter with the Risen One was simply the encounter with Jesus. But Ebeling also maintains that a physiological conception of the resurrection is the only possibility; also that, whether before or after the resurrection, faith is the only possible mode for one's right relationship with Jesus. Ebeling's point is that the resurrection does not eliminate the need for faith, not even by providing a new and miraculous basis for that faith beyond what came to expression in the historical Jesus. But he also maintains that faith in Jesus necessarily means faith in him as the Risen One. Not an empty tomb, but Jesus himself, is the basis for faith.² Nevertheless, the question remains: what role does Ebeling, by insisting that the resurrection is no additional basis for faith, assign to the article of the resurrection in the Christian creeds?³

¹Gerhard Stephan, "Der Streit um den historischen Jesus innerhalb der Bultmann-Schule," Kirche in der Zeit, XX (November 1965), 492-504.

²The Nature of Faith, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961), pp. 62-71.

³Hans Schmidt has charged ("Das Verhältnis von neuzeitlichem Wirklichkeitsverständnis und christlichem Glauben in der Theologie

Ebeling works out his theology under constant and frequent appeal to the work of Luther. An examination of Ebeling's actual citations from Luther, however, shows a distinct preference for Luther's earlier works. Apart from the essay on Christian liberty, the basic controversial documents of the Reformation are rarely referred to; and, although the lectures on Galatians, the treatise on the bondage of the will, and the works against the Antinomians come in for frequent use, Luther's works on sacramental theology are almost completely absent, as are the lectures on Genesis and other works from Luther's later life. In particular, the two catechisms and the Smalcald Articles, the three symbolical documents from Luther's pen, make only rare appearances in Ebeling's works; and they are not the subjects of any extended study.

Gerhard Ebelings, "Kerygma und Dogma, IX [1963], 71-101) that Ebeling so thoroughly absolutizes the Law-Gospel Polarity that he suffers a more than terminological association with Marcion. However, at this point Schmidt completely misunderstands Ebeling and fails to take into account Ebeling's specific statements on that question. (Supra, Chapter V, p. 87, n. 20.) Also, when Schmidt cites two alleged examples of Ebeling's exegesis to support his contention, he fails to note that, in the places cited, Ebeling is merely illustrating a small point--and that in a way not unfaithful to the biblical documents in question. The mere paucity of Old Testament references in Ebeling's essays does not really support Schmidt's charge.

Potentially more substantive, perhaps, is Schmidt's charge that Ebeling replaces the Old Testament with philosophy as the propaedeutic for the New Testament kerygma. However, Ebeling's essay on the responsibility of theology in relationship to the thought of Heidegger shows clearly that Ebeling regards Heidegger (and any other philosopher) as an exponent of the Law, and an unevangelical exponent of the Law, at that. And to that extent, also, Ebeling is faithfully representing Luther. See Ebeling, "Verantworten des Glaubens in Begegnung mit dem Denken M. Heideggers--Thesen zum Verhältnis von Philosophie und Theologie," Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche, LVIII (1961), Beiheft 2, 119-124.

There is little talk in Ebeling about the forgiveness of sins. One must ask whether the concept of sin can be reduced to uncertainty and to being called radically into question. There is little room in Ebeling's thought for the actual guilt of a man who is implicated in his troublesome condition and who therefore needs to be saved not merely from historical accidents but also from a jeopardy for which he is in fact responsible. Likewise, Ebeling seldom speaks of righteousness; and, although on a few occasions he does speak of a "justifying God," he does so, as far as this writer could determine, only when he is quoting Luther. The concepts of righteousness and justification simply do not work their way materially into Ebeling's theology. Ebeling thus claims to take his bearings from Luther's theology without making material use of concepts that are clearly at the heart of the Reformer's theology.

Of course, these concerns are raised in relation to matters that are only tangential to our focus on the Law-Gospel Polarity. While no significant evidence of unfaithfulness to Luther has emerged in our examination of Ebeling's use of this central Polarity, it is nevertheless clear that, in these tangentially-related areas, some significant differences do appear--differences which suggest that, beyond the focus of a Law-Gospel methodology, Ebeling's theology will be found to differ appreciably from Luther's. What must be examined, then, is the question whether Ebeling is making necessary and creative adaptations of Luther's theology for the contemporary situation or is, for reasons yet to be determined, setting out on a path that diverges from Luther's at some crucial

and fundamental points. Our study of the Law-Gospel Polarity suggests that Ebeling will probably be seen to be attempting to make creative adaptations in Luther's theology, adaptations which seem necessary to one who operates with Ebeling's view of contemporary man's understanding of reality.⁴

Nevertheless, while Ebeling uses terminology that is characteristic of Luther and uses it in a sense that is basically fair to Luther's intentions, the substance of Luther's concerns emerges either in an altered form or at least with diminished intensity. This is apparently due to the radically altered understanding of reality on the basis of which Ebeling proceeds. One must note, of course, that Ebeling is well aware of this fact and counts it a necessary condition for engaging in the theological enterprise today. He recognizes that one cannot assume the awareness of guilt and sin and righteousness--or even of God--on the part of contemporary man that one could assume in the sixteenth century. He seeks, instead, to make use of the formal insights and the theological categories of Luther as aids for bringing about contemporary man's understanding of reality both before and after faith. But is a twentieth century theologian really faithful to the theology of the Reformation if he only uses Reformation terminology and Reformation principles but in the process abandons the substance that those terms intended to convey?

⁴On this point Hans Schmidt offers some intense criticism; see Schmidt, Kerygma und Dogma, IX, 76-95.

Of course, Ebeling points out quite clearly that the mere mimicry of biblical and Reformation vocabulary is no solution to the problem of hermeneutics; such mimicry does not relieve one of the task of interpretation but is itself an interpretation. Ebeling has performed the necessary service of making theology acutely aware of the problem of hermeneutics. He has, in addition, suggested that there are extremely helpful and valid pointers in the theology of Luther for successfully meeting the hermeneutical challenge today. He makes reference to Luther's understanding of the word, of faith, and of the essentially proclamatory nature of the Gospel; and he appeals especially to the Law-Gospel Polarity as the fundamental principle for making theological sense. For the Law-Gospel Polarity is necessary in order to come to an adequate definition of the Gospel. One cannot merely note, in a concordance or lexicon, the uses of words like gospel and preach in the New Testament; some interpretative clue, some principle of discrimination must be employed to weigh the biblical texts, in the way that Luther did. That principle of discrimination, or that "polarized lens" as this thesis called it above, is, simply, the Gospel--for an adequate understanding of which the Law-Gospel Polarity is necessary. Without this, Scripture remains a closed book.

Whether Ebeling's analysis of the contemporary understanding of reality as essentially historical and linguistic is accurate or not must be determined elsewhere; that is beyond the scope of the

present study. Yet that would appear to be a necessary investigation, for the validity of Ebeling's entire conception of theology depends on that.

What we have demonstrated in the present study is that Ebeling has drawn from Luther the basic outlines of his hermeneutically-oriented theology; that he sees--and uses--the Law-Gospel Polarity as the fundamental theological insight and principle of discrimination, not only in exegesis, but in all aspects of the theological endeavor; and that future analysis of Ebeling's theology will have to understand him first of all as an interpreter of Luther. He will not be properly understood if he is viewed merely as the systematician of the Bultmann school, or as a linguistically-oriented theologian who works with the thought of the later Heidegger as Bultmann did with the thought of the earlier Heidegger, or as a participant in the "new quest for the historical Jesus"; he must be viewed no less as an interpreter of Luther who finds in his study of Luther a fundamental starting place for theology's task today. Any attempt to understand Ebeling will have to take seriously, as this thesis has attempted to do, the fact that almost one-half of Ebeling's published works deal directly with problems in Luther research and that many of his other writings make frequent and heavy use of the Reformer's thought. Seen as a Luther-oriented theologian, Ebeling can be understood; and in relation to that stance he must be further criticized.

APPENDIX A

The following biographical note was sent to this writer by Ebeling's Assistent, Karl-Heinz zur Mühlen, as part of correspondence dated 21 January 1966.

Biographische Notiz

Professor Dr. Gerhard Ebeling ist evangelischer Theologe. Er wurde 1912 in Berlin geboren. Nach Abschluß des humanistischen Gymnasiums studierte er von 1930 an in Marburg, Zürich und Berlin Theologie bei Rudolf Bultmann, Hans Freiherr von Soden, Emil Brunner u.a. sowie Philosophie bei Gerhard Krüger, Eberhard Grisebach und Nicolai Hartmann. Im Herbst 1934 meldete er sich während des Kirchenkampfes bei der illegalen Prüfungskommission des Bruderrats der Bekennenden Kirche Berlin-Brandenburg zum Examen. Während anderthalb Jahren war er als Vikar in Crossen an der Oder und in Fehrbellin (Mark Brandenburg) tätig. Anschließend besuchte er ein halbes Jahr das Predigerseminar der Bekennenden Kirche in Finkenwalde bei Stettin unter Leitung von Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Auf dessen Veranlassung wurde er von der Kirchenleitung zur Promotion beurlaubt und arbeitete an seiner Dissertation in Zürich, wo er 1938 zum Dr. theol. promovierte. Nach dem zweiten theologischen Examen und der Ordination in Berlin-Dahlem wurde er Pastor der Notgemeinde der Bekennenden Kirche in Berlin-Hermsdorf. Von 1940 bis 1945 war er als Sanitätssoldat eingezogen. Ab August 1945 arbeitete er als wissenschaftlicher Assistent an der Universität Tübingen bei Hanns Rückert, habilitierte sich und wurde dort 1946 Ordinarius für Kirchengeschichte und 1954 Ordinarius für systematische Theologie. 1956 wurde er an die Universität Zürich auf den Lehrstuhl für systematische Theologie, Dogmengeschichte und Symbolik berufen und übernahm ab 1962 außerdem die Leitung des auf seine Anregung hin errichteten Instituts für Hermeneutik an der Theologischen Fakultät der Universität Zürich. Im Herbstsemester 1963 wirkte er als Gastprofessor an der Drew University in Madison/N.J., USA. 1965 folgte erneut einem Ruf an die Universität Tübingen als Professor für systematische Theologie und Direktor des dort neu gegründeten Instituts für Hermeneutik. Sein Wohnsitz ist z.Zt. noch in Zürich, wo er auch noch einen Lehrauftrag versieht. Er ist Herausgeber der Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche sowie der Beiträge zur historischen Theologie, Mitherausgeber der Hermeneutischen Untersuchungen zur Theologie sowie des Journal for Theology and the Church. Außerdem ist er Mitglied der Kommission zur Herausgabe der Werke Martin Luthers. Seine Hauptarbeitsgebiete sind Dogmatik, Lutherforschung und Hermeneutik.

Tübingen, den 21. 1. 66.

APPENDIX B

The following chronological bibliography of Gerhard Ebeling was sent to this writer by Ebeling's Assistent, Karl-Heinz zur Mühlen, as part of correspondence dated 21 January 1966. The abbreviations used throughout the bibliography are those standardized by the editors of Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart (third edition; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1958-1963).

Additional abbreviations include the following:

WeGL for Das Wesen des christlichen Glaubens (#39)
WG for Wort und Glaube (#48)
Ge for Vom Gebet. Predigten über das Unser-Vater (#68)
Lu for Luther. Einführung in sein Denken (#77)
WGT for Wort Gottes und Tradition (#80).

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