

# Church and School in Early Modern Protestantism

Studies in Honor of Richard A. Muller on the  
Maturation of a Theological Tradition

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LAW AND GOSPEL IN EARLY REFORMED ORTHODOXY:  
HERMENEUTICAL CONSERVATISM IN OLEVIANUS'  
COMMENTARY ON ROMANS

R. Scott Clark

INTRODUCTION

Before 1513 Martin Luther (1483–1546) understood that God had made a covenant whereby he was prepared to co-act with those who capitalize on the natural endowments given by God, that “to the one who does what lies within him, God denies not grace.”<sup>1</sup> In this Pelagianizing scheme, justification is a process in which God recognizes the sanctified as righteous on the basis of their inherent righteousness achieved by grace and cooperation with grace.

Between 1513 and 1521 Martin’s theology gradually underwent a series of revolutions. At the end of the process he was articulating what we know as the Protestant doctrine of sin, grace, the imputation of Christ’s righteousness as the ground of justification, and faith as trusting, receiving, and resting in Christ alone as the sole instrument of justification.

These were not the only changes in his theology, however. Concomitant with these developments was a change in the way he read Scripture. Since the third century most of the church most of the time had understood Scripture to contain only one kind of speech: law. When the pre-Reformation church said “gospel” they meant only “the new law.” As early as 1513–1514, in his first course of lectures on the Psalms, Luther began to recognize a more profound difference between law and gospel than just the degree of grace.<sup>2</sup> By 1518 he was expressing the substance of what we know as the law-gospel hermeneutic. The law, he said, is a “word of perdition, a word of wrath, a word of sadness, a word of anguish, the voice of a judge and a defendant, a word of trouble, and a word of curse.” The gospel, however, is “the word of salvation, the word of grace, a word of solace, a word of joy,

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<sup>1</sup> WA, 1.359. Luther’s condemnation of the Franciscan *pactum*, in 1518, was a repudiation of his earlier view. On his theological development see R. Scott Clark, “*Iustitia Imputata Christi*: Alien or Proper to Luther’s Doctrine of Justification?” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* (2006): 287–294.

<sup>2</sup> WA, 4:9.

the voice of the bridegroom and the bride, a good word, a word of peace...."<sup>3</sup> For sinners, the law, relative to acceptance with God, is bad news because it demands what we cannot give but the gospel is good news because it announces that God will (in the case of the Old Testament) accomplish or has (in the case of the New Testament) accomplished in Christ, for sinners, what the law demands. By 1532, Luther was able to say that making this "certum discrimen inter legem et Euangelion, inter praecepta et promissiones" (certain distinction between law and gospel, between commands and promises) is "die höchste kunst in in derr Christenheit" (the highest art in Christendom). For Luther, failure to observe this distinction marks one as a pagan or Jew.<sup>4</sup> Did the Reformed accept Luther's distinction or did they become, in Luther's categories, pagans and Jews? The question under consideration in this essay is that of the continuity between Martin Luther and early Reformed orthodoxy on the hermeneutical distinction between law and gospel and the development of this principle by the Reformed in their covenant theology. As representative example, we will discuss Caspar Olevianus' (1536–1587) commentary on Romans.<sup>5</sup>

There are three approaches to the question of substantial continuity between the Lutherans and the Reformed on this point, to affirm it, to deny it, and to ignore it. Introductory surveys of the history of interpretation frequently take the last approach. No less a Reformed stalwart than Louis Berkhof, in his *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, published after decades of biblical and theological study, surveys the hermeneutical principles of the Reformation but never mentions what was arguably the most important hermeneutical principle of the Reformation, though he did discuss and affirm the distinction in his *Reformed Dogmatics* (1932).<sup>6</sup> Those handbooks that do address the law-gospel distinction typically assign it to the Lutheran tradition.<sup>7</sup> This ignorance of the distinction also appears in

<sup>3</sup> WA, 1:616.

<sup>4</sup> WA, 36:9, lines 9, 28–29. See also Martin Luther, "The Distinction Between the Law and the Gospel: A Sermon By Martin Luther January 1, 1532," *Concordia Journal* 18 (1992): 153–163.

<sup>5</sup> Caspar Olevianus, *In epistolam...ad romanos notae...cum praefatione Bezae* (Geneva, 1579). Hereafter *Romanos*.

<sup>6</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950), 25–27, Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 612–614.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g., Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson, ed., *A History of Biblical Interpretation: The Medieval Through the Reformation Periods*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), where the editors speak of the "law-gospel hermeneutic" (2.51) in the context of Luther and Melancthon and Timothy Wengert speaks of the "developing Lutheran hermeneutical principle of law-gospel" (2.326). See also D. L. Puckett, "John Calvin," in *Historical Handbook*

more historical treatments even where recognition of it would seem to be essential. For example, John Leith's brief essay, in ecumenical dialogue with mainline Lutherans, gave no indication whatever that, for Calvin (or for other Reformed theologians) there is any antithesis between the law and the gospel.<sup>8</sup>

The second approach, represented by Peter Lillback and Mark A. Garcia, regards the distinction as solely Lutheran and even antithetical to the Reformed hermeneutic. Lillback argues that Luther's discovery of the law-gospel hermeneutic introduced an "inescapable tension" between his doctrine of justification and his doctrine of sanctification, which problem Calvin's covenant theology was intended to resolve.<sup>9</sup> He argues that, relative to the *ordo salutis*, Luther's hermeneutic saw two words in Scripture, Law and Gospel, which "required the separating of faith and grace from law." In contrast, "the covenantal hermeneutic of the Reformed created an emphasis upon the mutually necessary presence of faith and love."<sup>10</sup>

Garcia elaborates on Lillback's approach by contrasting Luther's "universal extension and application of a Law-Gospel hermeneutic" the effect of which was to relegate all conditional passages in Scripture "to the category of Law as distinct from Gospel" whereas Calvin rejected such an approach and regarded such passages as "gospel."<sup>11</sup> Garcia concludes, "Lillback was quite correct to identify a hermeneutical disagreement between Luther and Calvin: Luther's strict use of the Law-Gospel hermeneutic must not be reconciled simplistically with Calvin's broader and more complicated use of similar language."<sup>12</sup>

A third approach and that advocated in this essay, represented by I. John Hesselink, Andrew Bandstra, and Michael Horton, is to see fundamental unity between Lutheran and Reformed traditions on the

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of *Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. McKim (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 171–179 where Calvin's hermeneutic is surveyed with no recognition of the presence of a law-gospel hermeneutic.

<sup>8</sup> John H. Leith, "Creation and Redemption: Law and Gospel in the Theology of John Calvin," in *Marburg Revisited*, ed. Empie and McCord (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1966), 141–151. A similar approach is evident in Wayne G. Strickland, ed., *The Law, the Gospel, and the Modern Christian: Five Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), where two chapters ostensibly describe the Reformed approach to law and gospel but do so in purely redemptive-historical terms with no reference to a hermeneutical distinction.

<sup>9</sup> Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 70–71.

<sup>10</sup> Lillback, *The Binding of God*, 125.

<sup>11</sup> Mark A. Garcia, *Life in Christ: Union with Christ and Twofold Grace in Calvin's Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), 75, 76.

<sup>12</sup> Garcia, *Life in Christ*, 77.

distinction between law and gospel in justification but which also sees development in the way Reformed theologians articulated that distinction when accounting for redemptive history, covenant theology, and eschatology. Hesselink argues that when speaking of “law and gospel” Calvin was more likely to be speaking in redemptive-historical rather than hermeneutical categories.<sup>13</sup> When speaking redemptive-historically or covenantally, Calvin used the terms law and gospel in the traditional way to speak of the old and new covenants or Moses and Christ. In those cases, his emphasis tended to be on the substantial unity of redemptive history.<sup>14</sup>

Hesselink also observes helpfully that, when Calvin wanted to speak in hermeneutical categories, however, he used the terms “promise” and “curse.”<sup>15</sup> Hesselink says that “a careful comparison of Luther’s and Calvin’s exegesis of key law-gospel passages in Galatians shows that the two reformers are in fundamental agreement on this issue.”<sup>16</sup> Calvin’s comments on Galatians 2:19 might well be taken to be Luther’s.<sup>17</sup> “Here,” he says, “Calvin is as uncompromising as Luther. There are two kinds of promises and two kinds of righteousness: legal promises and evangelical promises, the righteousness of works and the righteousness of faith. These are two opposing systems which are totally unreconcilable.”<sup>18</sup> Building on Hesselink’s 1961 doctoral research on this topic, Andrew Bandstra argued a similar case in 1976.<sup>19</sup> Michael Horton’s thorough 1997 essay consolidated the case for a fundamental unity between Calvin and the confessional Lutheran position on the law-gospel hermeneutic.<sup>20</sup> In his essay Horton suggests a trajectory of research into Reformed orthodoxy. This paper begins to take up that task.

This essay argues that despite the various areas of genuine disagreement (e.g., Christology, Baptism, the Supper, and the theory and practice of worship) between Luther and early Reformed orthodox theologians, the latter were not conscious of departing from Luther on the law-gospel

<sup>13</sup> I. John Hesselink, “Law and Gospel or Gospel and Law: Calvin’s Understanding of the Relationship,” in *Calviniana: Ideas and Influence of Jean Calvin* (Kirkville: SCS, 1988), 16–17.

<sup>14</sup> Hesselink, “Law,” 17–23.

<sup>15</sup> Hesselink, “Law,” 16.

<sup>16</sup> Hesselink, “Law,” 25.

<sup>17</sup> Hesselink, “Law,” 26.

<sup>18</sup> Hesselink, “Law,” 29.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Bandstra, “Law and Gospel in Calvin and Paul,” in *Exploring the Heritage of John Calvin*, ed. Holwerda (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 11–39.

<sup>20</sup> Michael S. Horton, “Calvin and the Law-Gospel Hermeneutic,” *Pro Ecclesia* 6 (1997): 27–42.

hermeneutic and Caspar Olevianus' commentary on Romans is a clear example of this conservation of Luther's hermeneutic.

#### THE LAW GOSPEL DISTINCTION IN ROMANS

A striking facet of Olevianus' commentary on Romans, on which we focus in this essay, is his strong concern with the doctrine of justification and the distinction between law and gospel. Olevianus used the word *iustitia* (righteousness) no fewer than 580 times in his commentary.<sup>21</sup> He used some form of the word "justified" (*iustificare*) 282 times.<sup>22</sup> Some form of the verb "to impute" or the noun "imputation" occurs 116 times.<sup>23</sup> Eighteen times he used some variation of the phrase *iustitia coram Deo* (righteousness before God).<sup>24</sup> In seven different places he discussed the righteousness of Christ as *extra nos*.<sup>25</sup> The expression *sola fide* occurs four times but the doctrine of justification *sola fide* is strewn throughout the commentary.<sup>26</sup>

For Olevianus, the central message of Romans was not predestination.<sup>27</sup> He was a student of Calvin and a strong predestinarian, but he neither deduced his theology from the doctrine of predestination nor from any other alleged central dogma. Rather, in certain respects, he read the book of Romans in a way that one might have expected an orthodox Lutheran to read it. Olevianus was a man seized by the Protestant understanding of the gospel of justification and that commitment was evident from the beginning of his commentary.

Explaining Romans 1:1 he offered a *summa* of the gospel. He said that the "Holy Spirit affirms constantly through Paul" that the gospel is "the forgiveness of sins and eternal life to be freely given to believers on account of the Son."<sup>28</sup> Indeed, in proper Lutheran fashion, at the outset of the commentary he argued that, in order to understand Romans, two

<sup>21</sup> Calvin used the noun *iustitia* about 500 times in his commentary on Romans.

<sup>22</sup> Calvin used it about 160 times.

<sup>23</sup> Calvin used it less than 60 times.

<sup>24</sup> Calvin used similar expressions about fifteen times in his commentary on Romans (1671 edition).

<sup>25</sup> Calvin used the expression *extra nos* three times.

<sup>26</sup> Calvin used the expression five times.

<sup>27</sup> Much of this section of the essay is drawn from R. Scott Clark, "Olevianus and the Old Perspective on Paul: A Preliminary Report," *The Confessional Presbyterian* 4 (2008): 21–24.

<sup>28</sup> *Romanos*, 2.

things must be understood: the gospel and “the distinction between law and gospel.”<sup>29</sup>

Here we begin to see the hermeneutical function of the law-gospel distinction in Olevianus’ reading of Romans. It was not simply a theological abstraction but rather he regarded it as the teaching of Scripture to be employed, on analogy with Scripture, in the interpretation of Scripture. His understanding of both what the gospel is and what Romans teaches about it were inextricably bound up with Luther’s law-gospel hermeneutic.

For Olevianus, as for Luther, Melancthon, Bucer, and Calvin, the moral law was God’s law and it was revealed in creation before the fall, as part of a legal covenant,<sup>30</sup> republished to national Israel, and published universally in nature and in the human conscience.<sup>31</sup> The nature of God is reflected in his law and the nature of the law is that it must be satisfied. No one since Adam, including the patriarchs, prophets, or others, who has fulfilled the law or satisfied its demands.<sup>32</sup> The law demands works but we are all unable to satisfy the law because of the corruption of our nature.<sup>33</sup>

According to Olevianus, the gospel is that God has promised and Christ has fulfilled the promise that the seed of the woman will crush the head of the serpent.<sup>34</sup> The history of redemption was never far from Olevianus’ consciousness. He appealed repeatedly to the prophets and to the history of salvation to show the fundamental unity of the covenant of grace. For Olevianus, it was not possible to set redemptive-historical categories against hermeneutical or theological categories. They were complementary because he found expressions of the law and the gospel throughout redemptive history.

In his comments on 1:17–21 he quoted Romans 3:28 to establish his analogy of Scripture and framework for interpretation. Romans 1:17–21 is about law, righteousness, and acceptance with God. The gospel, not the law, saves sinners and the gospel saves those who believe and the Spirit uses

<sup>29</sup> *Romanos*, 2–3.

<sup>30</sup> On Olevianus’ doctrine of the republication of the moral law to Israel see R. Scott Clark, “Christ and Covenant: Federal Theology in Orthodoxy,” in *Companion to Reformed Orthodoxy*, ed. Selderhuis (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

<sup>31</sup> *Romanos*, 3. This language is virtually identical to that used by Philipp Melancthon in his 1551 *Loci communes*. See MWA, 2/1.66.37–67.1–14.

<sup>32</sup> He argued on the basis of the grammar of Isaiah 64:5 that the prophet included himself when he said that all our righteousness is as a menstrual rag. See *Romanos*, 3.

<sup>33</sup> *Romanos*, 3.

<sup>34</sup> *Romanos*, 3.



the gospel to create faith in the elect.<sup>35</sup> The righteousness demanded by the law, he argued, is “either proper or alien, i.e., from God.”<sup>36</sup>

He defined *iustitia propria* as “a righteousness of proper strength” which is required by God’s law (written or unwritten).<sup>37</sup> Alien righteousness is simply that which is imputed to the believer.<sup>38</sup> According to Habakkuk 2 and Romans 1:17 the righteousness that comes through the gospel is not proper, therefore it is alien to us and received through faith.<sup>39</sup>

Here we see another example of Olevianus’ debt to Luther and another reason why we cannot make facile distinctions between Luther’s doctrine of justification and that of early Reformed orthodoxy. The distinction between *iustitia aliena et propria* was bequeathed to Olevianus not by Calvin, who certainly taught it, but by Martin Luther beginning with his *Sermo de duplici iustitia* in 1518.<sup>40</sup> Commenting on 1:19, Olevianus again appealed to the hermeneutical distinction. He argued,

It is to be observed that it is quite possible to distinguish between the law and the gospel. The righteousness of God is to be sought in the gospel. For that is perfection of the sort of sanctity which is able to stand before God and it is called the righteousness of God not only because it is freely given by God and on account of the Son but also because it is only able to bear the rigor of the divine judgment.<sup>41</sup>

The distinction between law and gospel is not the distinction between old and new but between two different paths to acceptance with God. This is how he interpreted Philippians 3:9, 2 Corinthians 2:5, Isaiah 53, and Jeremiah 33, each of which he quoted or cited immediately following his reassertion of the law-gospel distinction.

Those who are aware of the current controversy in New Testament studies about the nature of Judaism in the first century and concerning relations between Paul and Second Temple Judaism may be interested to hear Olevianus’ interpretation of Romans 3:20. The expression “ex operibus legis” (from the works of the law) is misconstrued by the “Papistae” to refer only to the ceremonial laws, so that when Paul says that no one is justified before God by the works of the law, according to Olevianus’

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<sup>35</sup> *Romanos*, 27.

<sup>36</sup> *Romanos*, 28. He uses this same argument in his interpretation of Romans 3:21, *Romanos*, 134.

<sup>37</sup> *Romanos*, 31.

<sup>38</sup> *Romanos*, 31.

<sup>39</sup> *Romanos*, 28.

<sup>40</sup> On this see Clark, “*Iustitia Imputata Christi*,” 266–310.

<sup>41</sup> *Romanos*, 29–30.

sixteenth-century Roman opponents, he was only saying that we need not keep the ceremonial laws any longer.<sup>42</sup> He was not saying that we are not justified through Spirit-wrought sanctity and cooperation with grace.<sup>43</sup> On the contrary, Olevianus interpreted the expression “ex operibus legis” to include both the ceremonial law and “the other works mandated in the Decalogue.”<sup>44</sup> He defended his interpretation by appealing to Paul’s discourse earlier in Romans 3, where Paul cited examples of transgression of the Decalogue not transgression of the ceremonial law.<sup>45</sup> He carried on by appealing to Romans 7, which he, like Calvin and the rest of the Reformed orthodox in the period, interpreted as referring to Paul the Christian, and to Galatians 3, all of which “proves that we are not justified by the law because the law says, ‘Cursed is he who does not continue in all things to do them.’”<sup>46</sup> Thus he took that portion of Romans 3 as law, not gospel.

What was implied earlier in his comments on chapter 1 was now clearly articulated. For Olevianus, the Roman Catholic and Galatian errors were essentially the same. God’s law demands inherent righteousness. Both the Judaizers and Romanists set up systems that purported to enable one to obtain inherent righteousness. Whether it was by grace and cooperation with grace was immaterial since both systems made the same fundamental mistakes. They downplayed the effects of sin, they downplayed the nature of the demands of the law, and they failed to distinguish between law and gospel.

This is how Olevianus interpreted Romans 3:21. Thus far in the epistle Paul has given an extended syllogism.<sup>47</sup> All we sinners are under condemnation because of our failure to obey perfectly God’s righteous law revealed in nature and in the “legalis foedus.”<sup>48</sup> The gospel, however, offers to believers what the law demands: perfect, intrinsic righteousness. Christ’s righteousness, which was intrinsic to him, is ours extrinsically, by imputation, and received through faith alone. Thus the purpose of the law is to teach sinners the righteous judgment of God and their need for a Savior so that they might look “outside themselves” in order that “they might receive by faith the righteousness offered efficaciously in the gospel,” unless, of course, “they wish to remain under condemnation.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *Romanos*, 132–133.

<sup>43</sup> *Romanos*, 133.

<sup>44</sup> *Romanos*, 133.

<sup>45</sup> *Romanos*, 133.

<sup>46</sup> *Romanos*, 133.

<sup>47</sup> *Romanos*, 134.

<sup>48</sup> *Romanos*, 134.

<sup>49</sup> *Romanos*, 134.

Thus, when Paul says, “they are justified” in Romans 3:24, he means to teach, “they are absolved or they receive the remission of sins freely (δωρεάν), by a free gift.” This is the reason that it is necessary “to retain the exclusive particle (*gratis*).”<sup>50</sup> Here Olevianus echoes Calvin’s 1548 comment on Galatians 5:6, where he said, “Therefore when you move to the subject of justification, be careful about making any mention of charity or works, but hold on tenaciously to the exclusive particle....”<sup>51</sup> By retaining “the exclusive particle,” Olevianus means retaining *sola* before *grace*.

We hang on tenaciously to the exclusive particle because our justification is owed (*debitus*) entirely to the sole obedience (*sola ipsius obedientia*) of the Son of God for believers.<sup>52</sup> All the honor is owed to him and not to anything done by or even in us. According to Olevianus, we also hang on tenaciously to the exclusive particle “in order that our conscience might have a firm consolation, because if the promise depends upon the condition of our worth it is made uncertain. Wherefore it is freely by faith in order that the promise might be firm.”<sup>53</sup>

All this leads to his remarkable conclusion in his discussion of this passage when he tied Paul’s doctrine of justification to the Protestant hermeneutical breakthrough. The fourth reason Paul spoke as he did regarding justification is:

[W]e should retain [*retineatur*] the distinction between the law and the gospel. The law does not promise freely, but under a condition, if you shall have done everything. And if it be that one has transgressed it only once, he has no promise of the forgiveness of sins in the law or legal covenant. The gospel, however, promises freely the forgiveness of sins and life not if we shall have fulfilled the law, but for the sake of the Son of God, through faith.<sup>54</sup>

Two things are striking about this language. The first is how utterly indistinguishable this passage is from anything one might read in Luther or Melancthon or, indeed, in the Book of Concord. To prove this assertion one need only to compare Olevianus’ language with that of Philip Melancthon’s 1521 *Loci communes* where it says, “In the whole of Scripture there are two parts, the law and the gospel. The law reveals sin and the gospel reveals grace. The law exposes disease, the gospel shows the

<sup>50</sup> *Romanos*, 148.

<sup>51</sup> John Calvin, *Commentarii in Pauli Epistolas*, ed. Feld (Geneva: Droz, 1992) 120. Contrast this view with that advocated in Lillback, *Binding*, 125.

<sup>52</sup> *Romanos*, 148.

<sup>53</sup> *Romanos*, 148.

<sup>54</sup> *Romanos*, 148.

remedy.”<sup>55</sup> It is not the case, he continued, “as they commonly think that the law and the gospel are distinguished temporally,” as if the law refers to the OT and the gospel to the NT. Rather, the law and the gospel have been revealed in every epoch. The law has always revealed sin and the gospel has always revealed the means by which men are justified.

This was also the language of Melanchthon’s *Apology* of the Augsburg Confession (1530), subsequently part of the Book of Concord under Article 4:

All Scripture should be divided into these two main topics: the law and the promises. In some places it communicates the law. In other places it communicates the promise concerning Christ, either when it promises that Christ came and on account of him offers the forgiveness of sins, justification, and eternal life, or when in the gospel itself, Christ, after he appeared, promises the forgiveness of sins, justification, and eternal life.<sup>56</sup>

The Latin text of the *Apology* speaks of the “remissionem peccatorum, iutificationem, et vitam aeternam.” Variations of this expression are found repeatedly in Olevianus’ works, fifteen times to be precise. Nine of those instances are in his commentary on Romans. The verbal similarity is impossible to miss. Because of his doctrine of the double benefit of Christ, he introduced variations into the formula so that in one instance it might be “remissionem peccatorum et renovationem ad vitam aeternam,” or “initia vitae,” or in one instance he used “resurrectio carnis” in place of “renovatio” or “initia.” In other words, Olevianus deliberately echoed not only the early Protestant language of Luther and Melanchthon but there is also no evidence that he saw any fundamental difference between his doctrine of justification, on this point, and that of the confessional Lutherans. Remember that he published his commentary on Romans just one year before the Book of Concord appeared. The Formula of Concord had been in print for two years and Olevianus had been a participant in some heated exchanges with confessional Lutherans. Indeed, he was the recipient of orthodox Lutheran wrath in Heidelberg when he refused to officiate at a mixed marriage, namely the marriage between a Lutheran girl and a confessional Reformed boy, who just happened to be Johann Casmir (1543–1592), the third son of prince Frederick III (1515–1576), the Elector Palatinate. His refusal to conduct that wedding cost him a job when he,

<sup>55</sup> MWA, 2/1.66.28–35.

<sup>56</sup> BC, 121.5–6. The Latin text of the *Apology* is taken almost verbatim from Melanchthon’s *Loci communes*. See *Concordia Triglotta: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church, German-Latin-English*. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1917), 120, §5.

with all the Reformed, were ejected from Heidelberg in 1576 on the death of Frederick III and the accession to power of Frederick's second son, Ludwig VI, a gnesio-Lutheran. Nevertheless, despite his personal experience and his theological misgivings about aspects of Lutheran theology, Olevianus did not take the opportunities afforded him in several volumes to distinguish clearly between his doctrine of justification, his hermeneutic, and that of the gnesio-Lutherans, even though he had personal motive to do so.

The second thing one notices from the passage of Olevianus above is a form of the verb *retinere*. The most literal rendering is "to retain" but it might just as well be translated "uphold" or "preserve." In biblical usage, in the Vulgate, Olevianus' childhood Bible, and in Beza's Latin New Testament, which Olevianus used for his commentary on Romans, it usually means "hold fast."<sup>57</sup> Olevianus did not say explicitly whom he had in mind when said that the law-gospel distinction is to be retained, but, given what we know about his context and the strong continuities between his biblical hermeneutic and that of Luther and the Lutheran confessionals, there are three groups he might have had in view: the Reformed, the Anabaptists, and the Romanists.

To speak to the first: the evidence is overwhelming, whether we look at Calvin, or Beza, Ursinus, Zanchi, Perkins, Diodati, Gomarus, Polanus, Wollebius, Pemble, Twisse, Owen, or Turretin, that the Reformed adopted and used the law-gospel distinction explicitly and implicitly from the mid-sixteenth century through the seventeenth century.<sup>58</sup> After an extensive search of dozens of Reformed authors in the sixteenth and seventeenth century I can find none inveighing against Luther's law-gospel distinction.

Olevianus did occasionally speak to the Anabaptist denial of justification *sola fide et sola gratia*, as in his comments on Romans 5:19, where he condemned both "Pelagius and the Anabaptists" for teaching that sin comes only through the imitation of Adam.<sup>59</sup> His usual object of criticism was the Romanist denial of justification *sola gratia, sola fide*.<sup>60</sup> It seems

<sup>57</sup> See e.g., Robert Webber, ed., *Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam*, 4th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1969), Exod. 9:2, Job 2:3 and Theodore Beza, ed., *Iesu Christi D. N. Novum Testamentum Sive Novum Foedus* (Geneva: 1565), Luke 8:15, John 20:23, Hebrews 3:6.

<sup>58</sup> See R. Scott Clark, "Letter and Spirit: Law and Gospel in Reformed Preaching," in *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry: Essays By the Faculty of Westminster Seminary California*, ed. Clark (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2006).

<sup>59</sup> Clark, "Letter and Spirit," 199.

<sup>60</sup> To see a comparison of Olevianus' doctrine of justification with that of his German Jesuit counterpart, Peter Canisius, see chapter 7 of R. Scott Clark, *Caspar Olevian and the Substance of the Covenant* (Grand Rapids: RHB, 2008), 181–209.

most likely that when he wrote about the necessity of holding on to the law-gospel distinction he had in mind his Romanist opponents who, in his view, had let go of a biblical distinction. Another way of putting this would be to say that, for Olevianus, the law-gospel distinction was so basic, so fundamental, that he would not imagine that anyone in the Reformed church would even bring it into question.

Finally, let us consider the last place where Olevianus discussed the law-gospel distinction explicitly, in his comments on Romans 10:1. He wrote of the

distinction between legal righteousness, which, because it teaches perfect obedience and promises life under the condition of the impossible (Rom. 8, “which is impossible from the law”) for it is not possible for us to apprehend eternal life thus, however fast we may run; and the distinction between the righteousness of faith offered in the gospel, which is not only possible but also easy [*facilis*], of course, for the believer, of whom also there is to be a beginning with a denial of proper righteousness.<sup>61</sup>

For Olevianus, the law is one principle. It is conditioned upon, as he said, “perfect obedience” to a perfect, unyielding demand for righteousness. This he called “legal righteousness.” Adam had the potential for achieving such legal righteousness, but he refused. We children of Adam do not have the potential to achieve such righteousness but the demand continues unabated because the divine nature has not changed and the demands of justice have not changed.

For Olevianus, what the law demands, the gospel gives. Perhaps the most striking word in this passage is the adjective *facilis* (easy). To be sure Olevianus was no proponent of what today is called “easy believism” or sometimes “cheap grace.” He was a vigorous doctor of the double benefit, i.e., that we are justified by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, in order that we may be renewed and sanctified and conformed to Christ by grace, through faith. For Olevianus, the Christian life begins and flows out of the gospel of justification. It begins by looking outside of oneself (*extra nos*). The Christian life consists of self-denial but it begins with the denial of “proper righteousness.” The expression “proper righteousness” was a reference to the Romanist doctrine that we are justified because and to the degree we are sanctified, to the degree we possess inherent, intrinsic or proper righteousness.

The Protestants agreed that there needed to be a righteous man with perfect, personal, inherent righteousness and condign merit, and that

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<sup>61</sup> Clark, *Caspar Olevianus*, 485.

man, they said was the God-Man Jesus Christ. His inherent righteousness is “*iustitia aliena*” to us and it becomes ours when it is imputed to us and received through faith alone.<sup>62</sup> In short, for Olevianus, our justification was hard for Christ. It cost him perfect obedience in our place but it is easy for us who have only to trust in Christ the righteous.

It is evident from the opening pages of Olevianus’ *Romerbrief* and throughout his exposition of the other Pauline epistles that those who wish to juxtapose the confessional Reformed and Lutheran biblical-hermeneutical systems cannot do so without ignoring Olevianus.

### CONCLUSION

In January 1547, the delegates to the Council of Trent issued thirty three canons on the doctrine of justification. Canon 11 categorically rejected the doctrine justification only on the basis of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness in favor of the infusion of charity into the heart as the basis of justification. With equal clarity canon 12 denied explicitly the Protestant doctrine that faith, in the act of justification is nothing but confidence in the divine mercy, which forgives sins for Christ’s sake.

These canons, categorical rejections of the Reformation doctrine of justification, arose from a particular and ancient way of reading Scripture. That reading of Scripture was that it is all law and all gospel, that the law is the gospel and the gospel is the law. They were merely two sides of the same divine Word.

Since the Reformation there have been two irreconcilable ways of reading Scripture. Either it contains throughout one word, law, or two words: law and gospel. From Luther’s hermeneutical breakthrough in the second decade of the sixteenth century through the seventeenth century there was a strong consensus among confessional Lutheran and Reformed Christians that Luther was correct. There were challenges to the pan-Protestant consensus. The Arminians raised questions in the early seventeenth century. Richard Baxter would challenge the consensus in the mid-seventeenth century and the Scottish neonomians would fall away from Protestant hermeneutical orthodoxy in the eighteenth century.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>62</sup> See *Romanos*, 27, 30, 134, 141, 160.

<sup>63</sup> Regarding Arminius and the Remonstrants on justification see W. R. Godfrey, “Tensions Within International Calvinism: The Debate on the Atonement at the Synod of Dort, 1618–1619” (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1974), 40–43; and J. V. Fesko, *Beyond Calvin: Union with Christ in Early Modern Reformed Theology (1517–1700)* (Göttingen: V&R,

The title of this paper suggests that the law-gospel distinction belonged to early Reformed orthodoxy. Was Olevianus' hermeneutical and theological Lutheranism unique or was his theology representative of early Reformed orthodoxy? The scope of this paper precludes any survey but the evidence is quite strong for the conclusion that Olevianus' doctrine, hermeneutic, and praxis of the law-gospel distinction was by no means unique. It was, in every phase of Reformed orthodoxy and in every geographical place, a *fundamentum*.

Caspar Olevianus' commentary on the book of Romans, read in its context, stands as a strong indicator of the hermeneutical continuity between Luther and Reformed orthodoxy. In it Olevianus articulated an intentionally and precisely anti-Tridentine doctrine of justification because he embraced an anti-Tridentine hermeneutic. As far as he knew his was the hermeneutic of his teachers Theodore Beza and John Calvin, his Heidelberg colleague Zacharias Ursinus, and Martin Luther and Philip Melancthon before them, and most importantly of all, that of Romans itself.

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2012), 276–284. On Baxter, see R. Scott Clark, “How We Got Here,” in *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry*, 15n27.