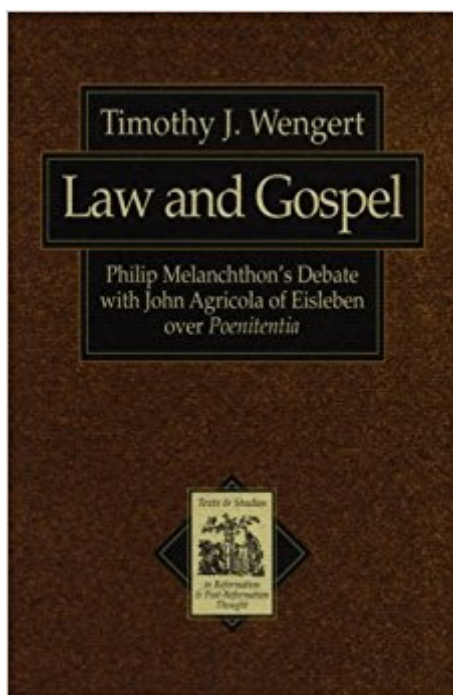


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# Law And Gospel: Philip Melanchthon's Debate With John Agricola Of Eisleben Over Poenitentia (Texts And Studies In Reformation And Post-Reformation Thought)



## Synopsis

In *Law and Gospel*, Timothy Wengert, one of the world's leading Melancthon scholars, explores the relationship between poenitentia and law in his theology during the time he was opposed by another of Luther's disciples, John Agricola.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This rather academic work should be read by anyone interested in: (1) Philip Melancthon's theology and the development of his theological methods and ideas, including his commentaries on Colossians, his Visitation Orders, and the origins of his Third Use of the Law; (2) the development of Law/Gospel theology, ideas on repentance (poenitentia), and the Antinomian controversy within Lutheranism in the 1520s and 1530s; (3) John Agricola's theology from about 1525-1530; and (4) Lutheran catechisms of the 1520s. This work is primarily centered on Philip Melancthon and Wengert is both very respectful of Philip and rather positively disposed to his methods and ideas. Wengert provides needed balance to the views of Philip, showing he was both his own theologian as well as the significant positive relationship, esp. in the world of theology, between he and Luther. Agricola and Luther exist in this work mainly to show either how they "motivate" Philip's writings or their reactions to Melancthon's ideas. It is odd that in a work that seemed at first designed to culminate in the Torgau Conference of 1527, the actual conference is rather glossed over and is over by p. 138. Yet, the real heart of the work is afterwards, esp. Philip's commentary on Colossians

in the Scholia of 1528 and 1534. I think Wengert does fail to do adequate justice to one area related to Melanchthon's thoughts. As Graybill clearly discusses in his work *Evangelical Free Will: Philip Melanchthon's Doctrinal Journey on the Origins of Faith* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2010), Melanchthon was horrified by the reaction against authority and the anarchy exhibited early in the Reformation as shown by people like the Zwickau Prophets (1521-22) and during the Peasant's Revolt (1524-25). Unfortunately, while Wengert does mention the Peasant's War a couple of times in the text (though not listed in the Index), he doesn't mention the Zwickau Prophets at all, and he fails to capture the impact these sad events had on Philip's ideas in regard to both the Uses of the Law and Free Will. Thus Philip had a most positive view of the Decalog in the life of all people. He had seen firsthand what could transpire when "law" was disregarded or abolished. I don't believe the subtitle of this work "Philip Melanchthon's Debate with John Agricola of Eisleben over Poenitentia" does real justice to the work. The work is far broader. I'd argue that poenitentia is really tied to the larger issues of how to catechize this Reformation movement, the uses of the Law, and the types of Christian freedom, from the period 1522-1535. The work ends as the antinomian controversy between Luther and Agricola (1537-40) is about to reignite from the embers of its earlier dispute in 1527. This isn't a very long work. And for being academic it is surprisingly accessible. The only reading issue is that sometimes in the English text Wengert uses German or Latin words and phrases without translating them. The introduction starts on p. 15, after a 3-page author's Preface and 1-page Series Preface, and the final chapter ends on p. 210. There are extensive page footnotes, mostly giving the German or Latin for the English translation in the text. There is a good 5-page Subject Index and a 2-page Scripture Index. There is a 6-page Bibliography. Plus three Appendices totalling 7 pages. A footnote on the first page of the Introduction states: "Because the word poenitentia and its German equivalent, BuBe, may be translated 'repentance', 'penitence', or 'penance' (and the phrase 'poenitentiam agite [tut Bube]' translated 'repent,' 'be penitent,' or 'do penance'), we will leave it untranslated throughout this work. Its meaning is key to the dispute studied here."

This is just an outstanding scholarly work which incorporates the history of the twenty-five year exegetical debate between Melanchthon and Agricola over poenitentia. While Agricola sees this as nothing more than the work of the gospel which led the sinner to love the righteousness of Christ, Melanchthon continued to contend for the movement of law to gospel in contrition/justification won the day then, and properly so, as Wengert substantiates. Luther's role is significant, as he was so prone to do, he had in mind the common man's view, so although he could sense that poenitentia

brought about not only fear and terror of God but also love of righteousness, he would not settle to make anyone (let alone the laity) have to make this discretion. In the escalating debate between the two catechisms and commentaries were the vehicles which carried the controversy on. Finally, due to historical circumstances which Wengert documents and presents articulately, Luther introduced his own, which clarified the argument in Philip's favor with his infamous, "we should fear, love and trust" as well as focus on the Decalog and its significant place in the Word's proclamation. Wengert is to be highly commended on this excellent work. It exhibits the highest in scholarship and research, presented in organized way to follow the debate's development with all its subtle sidebars and backgrounds. Students of the Reformation will be well served by the study of this work. There is a great deal of Latin and German which remains untranslated. However, main points of his developing argument are not greatly affected. It is questionable how the layperson who holds no knowledge of the Confessions nor their background material would have much interest or skill in following this fascinating historical chapter.

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