

Elert on Freedom

Colleagues,

Within hours of this posting Marie and I, d.v., will be on our way to the Holy Land to celebrate Christmas in “the city of David called Bethlehem.” We’re in a group of 27 folks, many of them friends or relatives—some from the USA, some from Germany. Our hosts in the Holy Land will be Palestinian Lutherans—yes, they’re there! It’s touristy, sure, but also with some elements of pilgrimage and study in the mix. Crossings Internet manager, Robin Morgan, is part of the group, so there’s no one taking care of the ThTh store till we get back on Jan. 4.

Elert’s 1953 essay, sent out two days ago as [ThTh 29](#) brought some interesting and interested response. So I’ll offer some more of the same to cover the upcoming 3 Thursdays—Dec. 17, 24, 31. It’s my translation of Elert’s chapter on freedom which nicely has 3 parts for 3 Thursdays. It’s from DAS CHRISTLICHE ETHOS, his theological ethics published in 1949. A version of this translation appeared some years ago in LUTHERAN FORUM. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Section #36: Freedom

1. Just what is Christian Freedom?

The distinctive quality of a Christian’s “new life” is that it unfolds under the mercy of God. Since mercy and law are mutually

exclusive, when God justifies us by mercy, life under the law comes to an end. Thus the Christian's new ethos [=the new quality, the new value, of our life by virtue of what God's mercy says about us] can be nothing less than a life of freedom. But what is freedom?

The popular 18th century Wandsbeker Bote answered that question this way: "Those who are free are not those who can do whatever they want. Rather those are free who can want to do what they ought to do." Here we see freedom portrayed in the manner of classic German philosophical idealism, and idealism's debt to Luther is undeniably evident. For this is the concept of freedom that Luther advocated in his debate with Erasmus on the freedom of human will. Luther's point, however, was to show that no human being possesses it.

If freedom were viewed in that way—to be able to do what we ought to do—we could conclude that our transformation from being an "old" creature to being a "new" one was an act of liberation whereby new creatures gained possession of the freedom tragically absent in their old existence. To be able to do what you ought to do would amount to the sort of freedom needed to fulfill the law. Were that the case, then the difference between the new and the old person would amount to this: the new one can do what the old one cannot do, but what both ought to do, namely, fulfill God's law. And in this way the law would finally get its due.

Yet if that were the case, then Kant [the father of philosophical idealism] and Luther, despite their divergent perspectives on human nature [discussed earlier in this book], would in the end wind up at the same place. The only difference would be that Luther (and not just he, but St. Paul and finally all Christians as well) takes a frightfully roundabout way—through Christ, faith, repentance, through a complicated

collection of concepts and real (or just imagined) processes—to get to the same goal of freedom that for the rational moral agent in Kant’s thought was no problem at all. Kant saw freedom as self-evident; it is not the goal, but the natural starting-point, for everything ethical: “Since you ought to do what is right, it follows that you are able [=free] to do so.”

“People are free,” said Friedrich Schiller, “even if they were born in chains.” A human being is free, and does not need first to be set free. The truth of this cannot be proved, but we all experience it when we take an “ought” that someone imposes on us and turn it into an “I will” of our own. Thereby we want to do what we ought to do. Is there anything that could thwart such freedom?

Kant himself does acknowledge some opposition to such freedom arising from what he calls “radical evil,” and so he also requires a kind of “rebirth.” Yet this occurs via “self-improvement,” even though it does take considerable effort. In any case, if the new creation of a Christian had no other purpose than to put such freedom into service for God’s law, then idealism’s path toward that goal is much more direct, and clearly preferable, to the one proposed by Paul and Luther.

Nevertheless, as close as these two paths seem to come to each other, there are two different concepts of freedom involved. These differences in freedom arise from different meanings ascribed to the law. The unconditionally valid law of reason stands in contrast to the unconditionally valid law of God. Here is the significant distinction: the law of reason is perceived to be a mandate addressed to our will, while the the law of God is seen as a divine verdict that condemns us.

Under the law of reason, the quality of our personal ethos depends on whether or not we decide to fulfill it. God’s law, by

contrast, gives us no choice, but rather discloses what our ethical quality already is, namely, our inevitable opposition to God, and thereby it exposes our guilt. Our un-freedom here is that we are already under a guilty verdict from God, and therefore we are not free.

If God, when changing us from old to new creatures, sets us free, that too can happen only by virtue of another divine verdict. Seen from this vantage point, such a transaction is indeed an act of justification, wherein God acquits us of our guilt, making right what was wrong, and therefore changing our un-freedom into freedom.

Christian freedom is freedom from guilt by virtue of God's verdict. That is the concept of freedom in the Epistle to the Galatians, and it has nothing at all to do with idealism's freedom. Human ethos under the law is always life under a curse (Gal. 3:10,13), since the mark of guilt remains upon it. It therefore amounts to a life of slavery (5:1). The freedom brought about by Christ, which we receive when we believe him, is our redemption from this slavery (3:13 and 4:5). We are free people, not because we can now do what we could not do before, namely, fulfill the law, but because we no longer even exist for the law (2:19). It is not that we are free for the law as Kant maintains, but we are free from the law as Paul proclaims.

2. The dimensions of Christian Freedom.

Christian freedom is free access to God, access that was previously blocked off for us. From God's side the blockade consisted of the law's threats, God's own wrath, yes, all the structures of law that order our lives; from our side it was our sin, unfaith, and fear (Romans 5:2; 8:13; Ephesians 2:18). Christian freedom arises where Kant's rationally moral person

least expects it: in our relationship with God. When we now face God, we are free, since the divine judge has acquitted us. This acquittal alters the value of everything that we are, just as the law always puts the value judgment, "sinner," on our entire self. Consequently everything done by an acquitted sinner is an act of a free person. But then the question arises: how can we live day by day in the freedom given to us in this divine verdict?

If freedom means being free from the law, then it also means living apart from the law. Is that then a lawless life? The term "lawless" would mislead us, since in common parlance it carries the same meaning as the New Testament term *anomia*, that is, living in opposition to the law. A life without law, however, is not necessarily a life in opposition to the law. We need think only of Paul's words that "Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires" (Rom. 2:14).

Instinctively, when we hear of living without the law, we think we are staring into the abyss of libertinism. Paul, too, sees this abyss, but its danger in no way compels him to retract any part of his doctrine of freedom. Freedom is itself a dangerous commodity. Why? Because our total acquittal includes our flesh, because "the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit," and because our experience as new creatures is that the battle with the old self never ends. Flesh needs to be subdued, to be put to death. The old self needs the threats of the law of retribution.

However, the new self, which is destined to overcome the old, is precisely the free person who no longer needs the law, whose newness, in fact, depends on how completely the law is kept at a distance. You do not banish the spectre of libertinism by subjecting the new self again to the law's dominion. Instead, the real antidote for libertinism is to be led "by the Spirit." "If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law" (Gal.

5:13-18; Rom. 7:1-17).

Here we find the lines converging from the various paths we followed to comprehend the new creation earlier in this book. Like all of God's creating, the new creation is *ex nihilo* (from nothing). Yet this refers not merely to the one distinct moment when it began. A necessary part of its newness is that it must continue distancing itself from the old existence under the law. Our experience of the newness in our day-to-day living comes as the Holy Spirit's power continues to renew us. That power is God's personal presence with us. God's Spirit, not God's law, is the new active subject at the center of our new lives.

It is inconceivable that the Spirit of God as the formative agent for our new life could be subject to any law. "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor. 3:17). Even the restoration of the image of God within us does not take place according to some divine command, but rather in conformity with the image of Christ. That image is the "Christ in us," not a new lawgiver, but the personified measure of all things, as he was for his first disciples.

All of these paths lead finally into that free space where no law could restrict, threaten, or even set limits. This is the freedom of God's new creatures, and all the paths flowing into that freedom originate in God.

It would seem at first glance, at least according to the apostolic witness, that the word freedom can mean a host of different things. God's verdict of acquittal frees us from guilt and thus also from the accusing power of the law. According to Paul, the law therefore no longer has any claim upon us, and thus Christian freedom amounts to freedom from the law's jurisdiction.

Because the law constituted a whole way of life for the people

of the Israelite theocracy, including circumcision and cultic regulations, one can say that the early church graphically demonstrated a second meaning of the word freedom when it annulled these regulations, even though that entailed coping with internal opposition (Gal. 2:3, 11ff.; 5:1ff.; Acts 15). Paul, of course, held that it was not external annulment that counted, but internal freedom. It was such freedom that enabled him, in consideration of others, even to continue his own external practice of the old regulations in some cases (Acts 16:3; 1 Cor. 9:20).

There is still another freedom that follows when guilt is absolved. To be guilty means to be a sinner. Consequently, living without guilt means not being a sinner. Here our earlier question, how life under grace can be lived practically in day-to-day existence, takes on greater intensity. For living according to God's own verdict now has to mean living as a non-sinner. Our lived freedom from sin must correspond to our believed freedom from guilt. This is no mere utopia, as we can see when we remember that life under grace is lived by faith. [More needs to be said about this below.] Our point at present is only to show that Christian freedom also entails freedom from the dominion of sin (John 8:34ff.; Rom. 6:11ff.).

So we have the freedom of faith, freedom of the Spirit, freedom from guilt, freedom from the law's jurisdiction, freedom from cultic regulations, freedom from sin and its dominion – a multiplicity of freedoms, it seems. But that list is not yet complete. There is one more freedom which makes the apostle Paul groan as he thinks about it. It is not yet present, but its very approach almost transports him into ecstasy. It is not yet here, for the children of God, along with the rest of creation, are still subject to decay, bound by suffering, lying in earthly chains, since they too must suffer travail along with the entire creation.

But this freedom will come and redeem those who wait for it, once more, in linkage with all creatures. Such freedom will bestow upon them all doxa (=glory), the genuine glow of the freedom of the children of God. It will be not only a spiritual, but also a bodily, event since physical substance is our common denominator with all other creatures (Rom. 8:18ff.). It will be total freedom, anthropological as well as cosmic, not a private affair just for the children of God, but an event arising from the collapse of the entire cosmos with all its "rulers and authorities and powers" (1 Cor. 15:24), every one of which has oppressed, coerced, and dominated the powerless. This collapse of the cosmos is not the ultimate natural catastrophe. It is instead the conclusion of Christ's battle with his adversaries, the cosmic powers that rule in darkness along with all the other forces of the cosmos, "whatever their names may be" (Eph. 1:21; 6:12; Col. 2:15).

It might appear that in this last paragraph we have gotten rather far away from the simple, transparent beginnings of our new ethos, namely, our encounter with Christ, the friend of sinners, and our master-disciple relationship with him. Nevertheless, such a cosmic expansion of expectations for freedom not only corresponds to the apocalyptic vision of the Son of Man himself as portrayed in the synoptic gospels (Mark 13; Matt. 24). It also turns our attention back once more to the full picture of the earthly Christ, who is the starting point for the entire apostolic witness. For us he is grace and truth in person by his befriending sinners and pardoning them. And his forgiveness is curiously and yet inseparably linked to his helping people in physical need (Matt. 9:2ff.).

When John the Baptist asks for his credentials, Jesus reminds him that not only is the good news being preached to the poor, but also that all sorts of illnesses are being healed and even the dead are raised (Luke 7:22). Whoever comes to him with a

burden goes away unburdened (Matt. 11:28). Grace for him is not merely forgiveness. When he encounters pain, tears, hunger, anxiety, perplexity, or misery, he "is moved with compassion." He bears their grief and carries their sorrows. Even the pain of animals he links to human suffering (Luke 13:15; 14:5). Consequently, when he dies the whole creation mourns (Matt. 27:51; Luke 22:45). His resurrection breaches the massive cosmic wall that encircles us, thereby opening our view into a freedom where all cosmic requirements and limits are gone.

There is thus a straight line from the friend of sinners to the one who sets the whole creation free, the triumphant Christ of Col. 2:15. This is the way his first witnesses saw, believed and proclaimed him: the one who opposed not only sin, but also the princes of this world; the one who cleansed them not only from guilt, but also from leprosy; the one whom even the Roman empire, through the mouth of Pontius Pilate (John 19:1f.), had to acknowledge as king; the one who abolished death (2 Tim. 1:10); the one who "led captivity captive" (Eph. 4:8); a priest not according to legal requirements but by the power of an indestructible life (Heb. 7:16); the bright morning star (Rev. 22:16); the one who "called us out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9); the one who possesses all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18); the one who holds the keys of death and Hades (Rev. 1:18); the one whose kingdom will have no end, as the ancient church confesses in the Nicene Creed.

This is the Son of God who, when "he makes you free, you are free indeed" (John 8:36), and it is from him that the children of God await their total freedom, righteousness, sanctification, imperishability and immortality (1 Cor. 15:53; Eph. 6:24). All of these are freedoms from something: from guilt, from blemish, from decay, from death. They add up to be the total negation of all negations, the glorious freedom of the children of God (Rom.

8:27). We cannot yet envision the whole picture, because “it does not yet appear what we shall be” (1 John 3:2).

3. The Hidden Power of “Believed” Freedom in World History

The total freedom of the children of God carries the label: “It does not yet appear.” The same is true of the new image of the human, formed from the pattern of the divine original, Christ. Both this freedom and the new human image are “not yet.” They are facets of the new creation, which is itself still hidden for the time being. For that reason the apostles can talk about the new creation, and freedom too, using verbs in both the present and future tenses. That corresponds to the already/not yet character of “believed freedom” and “lived freedom.”

In keeping with God’s verdict that sets us free, “believed freedom” is a present tense reality – complete and incapable of further expansion, for when God’s word of acquittal sets us free, we are 100% free. As “lived freedom,” on the other hand, it proceeds in piecemeal fashion wherever it confronts chains to be broken or opposition to be overcome—be it a challenge to faith, temptation, the weakness of the flesh, opposition arising from considerations to “be reasonable,” or that coming from political power. Here is where freedom demonstrates its alluring, incendiary, unpredictable power.

By contrast those who act as though they own freedom are lethargic and do not know what to do with it. They then seek to lecture others all about freedom and wind up tormenting those who are not yet free. We encounter such freedom know-it-alls in the realm of politics. Freedom that claims to have it all wrapped up is freedom with no future.

Believed freedom possesses liberating power only when it confronts situations of bondage. If it were not for the seventh chapter of Romans, Paul himself would come off as a know-it-all lecturing us about freedom. In this seventh chapter he shows that he really is the apostle of freedom, for here he supplies the evidence that he too knows what bondage is.

For this reason the freedom of the children of God is genuine power, not despite the "not yet" element, but precisely because of it. Its power presses forward spasmodically—here a spurt, there a spurt—as temporal world history unfolds. Freedom is on the increase in the world. Admittedly that is a statement of faith. It cannot be proved statistically simply because of freedom's hidden character. But where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And where Christ is preached, the Spirit of the Lord is promised. Consequently we cannot doubt that, as Christian proclamation presses forward into new areas of the world, freedom too is on the increase.

The philosopher Hegel indeed thought he could give historical documentation for such growth of freedom. He noted that among the peoples of the ancient Orient, only one person was free [namely, the emperor]; in ancient Greece many were already free; and among the Christian nations, especially those who welcomed the Reformation, the development went so far that all people were free. That was not a bad observation on Hegel's part. And we cannot simply dismiss it out of hand. For it is a fact that the notions about freedom of the human spirit, promoted by philosophical idealism, did arise on Christian soil. The political and social freedoms related to this freedom do indeed have some pragmatic linkage with the freedom for which Christ has set us free. We might even see an inverse corroboration of Hegel's claim in the fact that since his time a de-Christianizing of those very nations has set in, paralleled by freedom's falling curve in these same places.

Yet the Lord of lords did not make it as easy as this scheme might suggest for the opposition, the powers of the cosmos, to achieve their ends. Were Hegel's view to be taken as an index, these powers could conclude that merely by suppressing the Christians they could eliminate freedom. But that would be a tactical blunder. For Christian freedom always arises, as we have said, precisely in those places where it encounters opposition, in this case in the face of the powers' attempt to suppress it. How freedom will react in any given instance remains for the outsider a complete enigma. Since it remains intrinsically hidden, one can expect to see it come on stage clad in the most unlikely costumes.

When the flagellants, for example, in P. J. Jakobsen's novel, *Pestilence in Bergamo*, come on the scene they look as pitifully retarded and handicapped as can be imagined. And yet we catch signals of their tremendous inner freedom. They are indifferent to self-inflicted whiplashes, to the jeers of the onlookers, and to the danger of infection from the plague—the last item doubtless the most incredible for modern readers. Whether or not this really is the freedom of the children of God, we cannot tell, for the whole story is only fiction. Yet the author has given us a vivid example of how the appearance of freedom mystifies the normal thinking of the outsiders, how in fact it tears apart the seams of normal events in the world. The devil knows that, too. We can never be sure just from the visible evidence whether such freedom is usurped, demonic freedom or the freedom of the children of God.

Certain in any case is Paul's general principle that no one knows a person's thought except the spirit within that person (1 Cor. 2:11). That applies to Christians as well, in a particularly uncanny way. The freedom within Christians does not make them autonomous, as though they lived from their own resources. If that were the case, then the rulers of this world,

with the help of a little psychoanalysis, could track it down and control it.

When analyzed under the rubrics of the law-structured world this freedom appears to lack real substance. It is, however, God's personal presence in new human creatures. It defies any earthly attempt to get a handle on it. For this reason Christian freedom is subversive and disruptive of world history. It injects uncertainty into all the schemes of politicians and social reformers, for it reckons with the eventual collapse of the entire cosmos. In fact, as the first fruits of total freedom, it is already secretly at work dismantling the entire network of the law-structured world we live in.

Those who carry this freedom in their hearts know that all ropes of bondage can be torn to shreds. They smile as they notice the rust on all chains of oppression. Knowing that all revolutions inevitably run out of steam, they can detect the self-serving substratum in all political programs.

Translated by Edward H. Schroeder

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St. Louis, Missouri

Lutheranism and World History

Colleagues,

ThTh 29 is an Advent gift from the past. Forty-five years ago—summer semester 1953—Bob Schultz, Dick Baepler and I were students at Erlangen University in Germany. Werner Elert was one of our profs. After class one day he invited us

"Missourians" to come over to his home on a Sunday afternoon for "Kaffee und Kuchen." Because the founding father of "Missouri," C.F.W. Walther, had gotten law and gospel right in his judgment, Elert had high hopes for the Missouri Synod despite its hangup with verbal inspiration, which he knew about and lamented. So we got the red carpet. In the course of the conversation that afternoon we were brash enough to ask him if he would write an article for THE SEMINARIAN, our in-house student theological journal at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. I can still hear his response: "Das tue ich!" (I'll do it!) Back home in the fall Baepler and I translated his German text and published it in the Reformation issue of the SEMINARIAN, Volume 43, No. 3, November 1953. It never appeared anywhere else in any publication here or abroad. There may well be more readers seeing it this time via cyberspace than saw it the first time in its one and only appearing.

In a few spots where we got it wrong, I've tried to correct our English translation. Otherwise it is reprinted as it originally appeared, including the non-inclusive language which now jolts me too. Even so, enjoy!

Ed Schroeder

LUTHERANISM AND WORLD HISTORY

by D. Dr. Werner Elert

In the beginning and in the center of the Lutheran Reformation stands "the lofty article of justification." A generation ago Ernst Troeltsch, a leading German theologian and philosopher of religion, wrote that this doctrine was merely a product of medieval dogmatics, a dogma which we today could no longer understand because it possessed no value in Reality. This judgment was in step with the times, because all dogma was out of step. Today dogmatic thinking is rehabilitated, in theology,

in the church, and, above all, in political thought. Nevertheless, concerning the doctrine of justification, outside of the specific theological realm, it finds as little discussion now as before. There might be reasons for this, because in its Lutheran conception this teaching comes very close (and for some critics perhaps all too close) to the realities of our human living.

That man is justified before God, and in addition "by faith alone," actually appears as the most harmless thing in the world – an anaesthetic for self-accusation, or even a cover-up for dubious undertakings. Today we understand by justification that a man furnishes proof of his innocence, in any case brings forth a turn to the Good, an exoneration. Nevertheless, in Luther's age justification meant something different. It is used at that time judicially in criminal cases and signifies the execution of the penalty, even the death-penalty. In theological language it signifies that man sees himself standing before God – he the accused and God his judge. Luther also circumscribes this situation as "man summoned to his own death." This is the position in which man finds himself and from which he can never escape. His task is to justify himself before God's tribunal. But he cannot, and therefore is "summoned to his own death." Man is not looked upon here as being in some illusionary unassailable state. He stands in chains before the judge who cannot be bribed.

With this insight the historical strength of Lutheranism begins, for it conditions Lutheranism's relationship to the medieval church. Viewed externally a great deal remained just as it had been. The Lutheran church, in contrast to others, expressed itself very conservatively in relationship to the heritage of the ancient and medieval church. The Augsburg Confession takes its position not outside of, but rather, within the "catholic" church. It uncovers distortions, theological miscarriages, errors, but it never considers substituting a new church for the

church up until now. And subsequent events changed nothing of this axiomatic position. In the entire compass of the Augsburg Confession the dogma of the early church is accepted, its liturgy (to be sure, cleansed, but in the main) conserved, the practice of infant baptism carried further, iconoclasm rejected, and (in the Scandinavian lands) even the episcopal polity retained. In this respect the external structure of the church remains essentially the same.

But – man cannot sneak away from the judging eye of God and hide within the structure of the church. Nothing will safeguard him from this – no bishop, no cultus, not even a “good work,” no indulgence, no dispensation, no privileges, not even the holy helpers in time of need. Even the totally accepted heritage of the church can no longer stand protective and mediating between God and man. Christ alone is the Mediator. He it is, in that He suffered Death for the others, who is our justification before God. All of the church’s organizational arrangements are thereby relativized. No one dare set himself on Christ’s place. The church is the sphere within which the eternal Word of God is proclaimed, but one dare not mistake this sphere for the Word itself. The structure stays; it’s not torn down. But it is looked through in its human conditionality and in all its accommodations it is turned toward its single purpose: by the divine Word to call men to justification before God. The church is forced out of her position as mediator. She is a medium, but not the Mediator.

What then? Religious individualism? Without a doubt. Except that here it is not a sociological phenomenon, but a religious one. Man is in-dividuum, indivisible, because he is summoned by God in his Totality. But the distinctive elements that condition each human life are not thereby disregarded. On the contrary, rather, they are emphatically brought to consciousness. But man before God cannot use his particular circumstances as excuse for

his situation. The total person is summoned. Unconditional truthfulness before God is demanded. But this ultimately requires the confession that our moral existence is never "totally unified," but always fractured. "Total unity of the personality," the goal for which all great men since Plato have wished, exists only in submitting to the judgment of God, who judges in totality, but also in totality justifies. This is justification "by faith alone." Had Hitler been a Protestant, he would have been forced to see himself obligated to this unconditional truthfulness, and therefore would have been unable to praise his own "good works" incessantly. But he was just as little Protestant as Joseph Goebbels, the chief of his propaganda.

THE CHURCH

The medieval church, however, laid claim not only to the position of religious mediator between God and men. She is, in her intention and in her structure, a creation resembling the state with a central authority (head) – the prototype of a totalitarian and authoritarian imperialism. She is authoritarian, because she tries to direct all the areas of life – political events, the entire social and economic order, and the family even on down to its most intimate transactions. She lays claim to compulsory power over all who want to be Christians, and she puts this into practice against all those who oppose her. She lays claim to a cultural monopoly and to a great extent she has it. Her goal is to rule the world. The Reformation was unsuccessful in completely setting aside this system, but it did succeed in cracking it open and making it null for a broad portion of Christianity.

Looked at from the standpoint of Roman world power it is

understandable that Luther appears as a revolutionary. However, if the concern had been merely a rupture in the sphere of power, then Luther would have been unnecessary. But the church had never been able to push through completely her claim to total authority over the civil powers. Above all, man himself had wrought his own independence long before Luther – man who wants to be nothing more than man, but at all costs a full man. The Renaissance man is not concerned about heaven or hell. For him the church belongs, at the very best, to the World's Fair of life. His Weltanschauung (worldview) and his morality he draws from antiquity. This completely secularized humanity was also celebrated within the circle of the highest and most honorable ecclesiastical personages. This Renaissance man, free from all restraints, is also the “modern man.” He did not, however, spring forth from the soil of Lutheranism, but rather from that of the late medieval church, and since then he has not at all disappeared out of the world.

What Luther placed in opposition to the church's will to rule the world was not the autonomy-seeking Individual. Much more he calls for a return to the early Christian orientation of the church upon the coming Kingdom of Christ, which will put an end to all world kingdoms. The faithful are experiencing its beginning already now in that they are called to Him and, ruled by the Word of Christ, are led by His Spirit. His Kingdom lies in a completely different dimension from the secular ordinances. It does not, however, do away with them, nor does it enter into contest with them.

For even these ordinances are ordinances of God by which the present world will be preserved until its final destruction. It doesn't stake out their external limitations, but instead their internal ones, and does so by uncovering the shadow of Death inherent in all earthly and even “ecclesiastical” glory. To worldly might it juxtaposes the power of suffering, to

retaliation the power of forgiveness, and to legalistic compulsion the freedom of the redeemed. The church stands within the kingdom of Christ only so long and only insofar as she carries the identical characteristics. Her claim, in the name of Christ to rule the world, is usurpation. It is apostasy.

In his criticism of the secularized church Luther had numerous predecessors, but not until him were positive results ever achieved. These are evident first of all in the internal shifting (regrouping) of the church itself. By the criticism leveled against her claim to lordship the power of the entire ecclesiastical hierarchy was shot through. In the church there is no first floor, second floor, etc., of which one would be closer to heaven than the other. Because all are summoned to the same Death, the church can only be a brotherhood and not lordship. The gravitational center of all of the life of the church lies in the circle of the individual congregation. For the evangelical understanding of the church this corresponds with the priesthood of all believers. In early Christianity and even long on afterwards it is just like that. In Germany, in the Baltic provinces, in Poland and Hungary the cities are the main ones which take a hand in reorienting the church. Her members are trained to be personally responsible for the preservation and intensity of church life. Today the Lutheran churches which have developed on American colonial soil as well as those in South Africa and Australia serve as the model for the European. Elsewhere the consciousness of congregational responsibility was hemmed in for a long time because the state rulers were the ones who took care of the Reformation. But in any case it was demanded from the very beginning by the evangelical understanding of the church.

In this manner the Church, in her historical appearance, is decentralized. Only in her unseen Head has she a fixed Center, but the exalted Christ is equally close to Greek, Pole, German,

or American. Between peoples and therefore also between their resultant indigenous churches there is no nationalistic difference in rank. Also, the Holy Spirit has no particular preference for the big cities with scintillating names. Through the weakening of the power of the hierarchy the polity of the church becomes a question of secondary importance. In Lutheranism the three great types of polity enjoy equal recognition: the consistorial in the old German state churches, the episcopal in the Scandinavian lands, and the synodical in North America and other continents. The fact that these three political forms exist alongside each other guards against our seeking the unity of the Church in the wrong place.

Together with the fall of the centralized structure of the hierarchy there falls also the Latin church-language which the clergy alone understood. If only the divine Word is to rule in the Church it must be heard and understood by all in their native tongues. Therefore with the Reformation there commenced an unprecedented amount of activity in translating, totally apart from Luther himself. Swedes and Finns, Poles, Magyars, the Slovaks, Slovenes, Croats, the Prussians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians received for the first time their own formal written language, their first grammars, largely through the activity of Lutheran preachers. And from these also came the first printed matter in their own tongue. Through the Lutheran Reformation all these languages became bearers of divine, eternal content, and in this way for the first time these peoples were drawn into the complete and equal spiritual birthright which they shared together with all the rest.

THE WORLD

This demonstrates concretely that the effect of the

ecclesiastical upheaval neither did nor could confine itself to the narrower ecclesiastical realm. The claims of the Lutheran Reformation directed themselves not to the hierarchical powers as had all previous attempts, nor only to the civil representatives of Christendom, but to all believers. Taking the place of the scientific apologetic literature of the imperial publicists and of the council era of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, are now the reformatory pamphlets which everyone understands. Within two weeks after they left the presses, Luther's popular writings are known from Madrid to Riga, from Amsterdam and Copenhagen to Venice. They are voluminously reproduced. Already in the year 1522 the shoemaker and poet Hans Sachs of Nuremberg calls forty of Luther's booklets his own. With the help of the press there emerged from the debate and discussion for the first time a European public opinion.

Even without the Reformation that would have happened sometime, though scarcely at this pace; but it was of great importance that in this most critical time, all levels of society suddenly became vocal all at once. In the later age of absolutism public opinion suffered a setback, as happened again for a few years in Germany in the recent past. But on the whole these were only episodes. The theoreticians of public opinion since the 17th century have elevated this into a science, but it was practiced already in the Reformation, at least in church affairs, and the world today still thrives on what was accomplished then. For in that moment when the total passion for reform hit the church, there was no area of public or private life that was not thereby affected. The result amounted to an unraveling which was no less consequential for all secular structures of society than it was for the Church.

Since the Church is therewith called back to her real commission in the area of the Kingdom of God, she turns loose the temporal

realm which had been till now ruled or claimed by her. To let the devil have it? No. No one had such an insight into the nature of the destructive powers at work in the world as had Luther. The derision which the Enlightenment cast upon his pessimistic prophecies may well be a thing of the past for us. For to restrain these powers he had tirelessly called upon the power which was called by divine right and available for that purpose. That was for him God's structures of governance (Obrigkeits). Governance had its commission, its worth, its power not from the Church but directly from God, and truly from Him. Therefore in the execution of its commission it is bound to God's law. In accordance with this law the earthly world is kept in order, but this order (Ordnung) is different from the "Kingdom of Christ." It is a stern law, the law of retaliation for good as for evil, the law of civil righteousness, of reciprocity of work and pay, guilt and atonement.

When "structures of governance" are spoken of here this implies no preference for a certain form of government. No matter how often the contrary is asserted, Luther did not support the principle of monarchical legitimacy. "It is all the same to God," he wrote in 1520, "where a kingdom comes from; He nevertheless wants to have it ruled." For the political attitude of Lutheranism in the following century it is necessary to take note of Melanchthon's influence at least as much as Luther's. Melanchthon as a humanist was a republican from the bottom of his heart. Especially in reference to politics one can't judge all of Lutheranism merely on the basis of German situations. Lutheran ethics allow plenty of room for very divergent political possibilities.

While in Lutheran Denmark the court preacher Hector Gottfried Masius was affirming the absolutist monarchy, the Lutheran count Emerich Tokolyi was participating in the Hungarian conspiracy of 1687. In the middle of the 19th century Julius Stahl promoted an

extremely conservative monarchy in Berlin. At the same time the Danish church leader Grundtvig was fighting for the rule of the people. In Hungary the leaders of the Revolution of 1848 had their roots in Lutheranism: Kossuth, the democratic statesman; Gregory, the military leader; Petoeffi, the poet of freedom. And at the same time the Lutheran pastors Kollar and Hurban are the spokesmen for Slovak independence. In the American Revolutionary War the Lutheran Pastor Muehlenburg exchanges his clergy vestments for his military uniform and calls his congregation to arms "against tyranny and oppression." In the Civil War of the 19th century, as the flag of the conservative Confederacy waved over the Lutheran seminary in St. Louis, the theological students of Gettysburg were shedding their blood for the liberal Union. In view of all this no one can any longer assert that Lutheranism is bound to a certain form of government.

The extrication of the Church from the political world does not mean that the Christian withdraws from world events. It was just this aspect of medieval monasticism that Luther assailed the most. Man does not have to answer before God for some abstract "self." He is placed by God in specific locations as a householder, farmer, mayor or scholar, and as he serves his neighbor in these callings he serves God. The entire "worldly" ethic retains a level of highest morality when it is performed as service to God, in contradistinction to the medieval scale of values. Thereby the medieval church's monopoly on human culture is eliminated. New fields of endeavor are opened to the temporal powers.

In the first place is the pedagogical nature of all these categories. Luther had made the support of schools a duty for rulers and magistrates. Tirelessly had he lectured to parents "that they should keep their children in school." The appropriated wealth of the cloisters was largely applied to this end. The result of it all was that Lutheran lands were the first

in which everyone could read and write. Legislation and civil administration in the Lutheran states was also done in the spirit of Christian morality. Care for the poor and sick was regulated, the practice of physicians and midwives also, Sunday work in the fields and in the mines was forbidden. One must compare this with the fact that in the Middle Ages the entire welfare program was confined to the church and political thought did not get beyond matters of law and power. When today we demand from political leaders not power politics, and not only proper diplomacy and careful attention to due process, but also a social concern aimed at the welfare of all citizens, this corresponds with the understanding of society that was at home in Lutheranism from the very beginning.

We have outlined here only a few of the political lines that signal Lutheranism's significance for world-history. What it brought about in the area of "Weltanschauung" (world-view) and "Wissenschaften" (scholarly work and research) is not less significant, but we cannot go further into that right now. From these few examples, however, it should be clear that the Lutheran church's doctrine of justification is not something that avoids the world. Anyone who has understood it knows that we are responsible before God for everything that God has given and assigned to us. If only the whole world would grasp this. For it is only those who have grasped it who can also understand what it means that in Jesus Christ we have been granted grace from God.

Erlangen
6. November 1953

Implications of Justification in the Many Contexts of Today's World

Seventy "younger" Lutheran theologians, most of them from the two-thirds world, travelled at the invitation of the Lutheran World Federation to Wittenberg, Germany, at the end of October this year to talk about the Implications of Justification in the Many Contexts of Today's World. On the last day of their meeting, Reformation Day, the 31st, they presented their theses, 12 of them, to the member churches of the LWF. And where did they post them? Not on the door of the castle church in town, as Luther himself had done with his 95 theses 481 years before, but on the Internet. Talk about new contexts for justification! What Gutenberg's printing press did for the cause of justification by faith alone (JBFA) 500 years ago, the Internet can do for it now, they said. So they put their message where their mouth was. You can see for yourself at www.lutheranworld.org/wittenberg/document/theses.html

Although professed Lutherans presented papers on the justification issue, the LWF brought in "outsiders" to deliberate the issue of cyberspace as a medium for JBFA. One of those from outside the club was Ignacio Ramonet, a leading French journalist. He warned that cyber-tech wineskins come already partially filled with their own wine. The brute fact of inequality between the "info-rich" and the "info-poor" marginalizes millions of people, he said. Information technology is not immune to original sin. The "brave new world" of "a perfect market of information and communication, completely integrated . . . without borders and functioning permanently in real time" is just that, a utopia more akin to Dante's inferno

than anything else.

But another speaker—maybe not really an outsider since, like Luther once, he's a Roman Catholic monk—sounded a more cheering note. This came from a very different context, namely, a monastery in the middle of the New Mexico desert. The monks of the Monastery of Christ in the Desert (Albuquerque, NM) have picked up the tools of the Internet to create a global community on the World Wide Web. Their site now averages 20,000 "hits" per day, though they once got a million a day when CNN featured them and the New York Times gave them a front-page story. What they offer is chants, homilies, prayers, information about the monastery, links to other resources and even information about sustainable building and renewable energy.

Two of the monks answer the prayer requests, while another, originally trained to illuminate manuscripts, provides images for the site, drawing on the artistic traditions of New Mexico and other streams of south-west US culture. Only a minority of the Web-visitors are Roman Catholic, and many say they have no religion at all. Their latest project is to set up an on-line prayer calendar. The monks are working with IBM to replace their prayer books with computer panels, so that people around the world can log on and pray with the monks in "real time." Brother Aquinas Woodworth, the architect of all this, relished the irony of explaining the virtues of new communication technology to Lutherans in Wittenberg.

The reports in Lutheran World Information (LWI) and Ecumenical News International (ENI) don't reveal whether last October's "younger" Wittenbergers actually got around to crossing today's internet context with JBFA theology. Can the Reformation Gospel exorcise the demons that Ramonet warned about and run on the internet as it once did on the printing press? And vis-a-vis the New Mexico monks, can JBFA good news go on-line as readily as

their prayer calendar does? Does the Gospel need not only “real time,” but a real face with a real voice in order to interface with people today as well as (it seemed to) in the past? These are the agenda items confronting our own Crossings web-spinners. Ideas and experience from any of you receiving ThTh will be greatly appreciated. We need all the help we can get.

How did JBFA itself fare at the Wittenberg gathering? Some answers can be deciphered from the twelve theses [actually paragraphs] of the “working paper” they posted on the web. Their language bulges with additional terms from today’s contexts: process, complexity, concern, today’s world, interpret anew, meaning, accents, implications.

After an opening preface on justification articulated in classical Reformation terminology—they were after all in “Lutherstadt” Wittenberg and it was October 31—the document then “tries to explicate this code language” for people today. So the 12 theses proceed under the overall caption: “What Justification could imply...” Then come the contexts.

“In the context of global economics” today we’re bombarded with the ideology of justification by production, prosperity and consumption. [I’ve seen that just today in the Christmas wish-lists our grandchildren have presented to us.] Au contraire JBFA with God’s declaration of our identity and value in Christ. “Justification frees one from the tyranny of the market, and impels Christians to care for those who are victims of the market ... and its religion of productivity.”

“In the context of global communication . . . justification implies that we oppose the messianic promises of mass communication systems and that we encourage their practical enhancement of genuine community.”

“In the context of gender consciousness . . . justification

means the equal value of women and men . . .challenging stereotyped or generalized views about gender relationships with a sensitive understanding of the real conditions of both genders” in widely different contexts throughout the world. Both self-righteousness and self-deprecation are manifestations of sin. Justification liberates sinners of both kinds.

“In the context of pluralism...we as justified people can remain open-minded towards understanding other people, religions and beliefs.” Why? Because “our righteousness is not inextricably linked to the code language by which we communicate the faith, but is ensured by the Christ whom we confess.” This suggests, it seems to me, that if Paul could be a Jew to the Jews and a Greek to the Greeks, then being a Muslim with Muslims and a Buddhist with Buddhists is not beyond the pale for Christians today.

Thesis nine notes that “secularity is part of the world’s pluralistic character.” Though it can strengthen freedom and solidarity, secularity pushes its own justification agenda. “People are forced to justify themselves vis-a-vis others and are therein both accusers and accused.” The modern pressure to justify oneself is itself a global problem. Here JBFA is timely. “In this situation justification in Christ offers God’s freedom from the awful compulsion to demand and to accuse, and to justify and protect ourselves.” Here too the challenge is to “communicate the good news in terms adequate to the context,” which must mean—though the document doesn’t say so—as a secularist to the secularists.

The document is “good Lutheran” in pinpointing the justification agenda that comes in the guise of secularity. Even “better” Lutheran would be to say that this pressure to justify ourselves, though mediated by the contexts we live in, does not come finally from those contexts, but from God’s own self—as Adam found out in the context of the bushes in Genesis 3. And it

is in the face of God's own demand that we justify ourselves that JBFA is the deepest good news of all.

"In the context of the church" the new Wittenbergers say: "The church is a consequence of justification. . . . When the church lives in the certainty of justification, it can risk prophetic witness and need not feel obliged to mimic culture's criteria of success." It need not maintain a chronic defensive attitude. It can acknowledge its failures and guilt. "Finally, the justified church need not justify itself even by reference to its theology of justification, but can and will expend itself for the communication of justification through all the world."

The final thesis is a "Conclusion: Justification as the call to Apostolic Witness."

Curmudgeon that I sometimes am, I was grumpy after my first reading. Maybe because I was too old—and too unknown—to get invited to the party. But I softened up when I went through the text a second time (almost) rejoicing here and there, as you can detect above. However, had some of us "older" folks been there, we might have put in a plug for one significant element in the 16th century context for justification talk missing in this message.

These younger Wittenbergers speak of justification as somewhat "flat." Sinners are OK with God when they trust Christ; nothing more is needed. That's true. But in Luther's day justification by faith was a phrase that jolted. Justification was not merely a courtroom term, but a gallows term. Capital criminals were "justified" (=given their due justice) when they were executed. The big deal about JBFA is that sinners get justified (put to death) in their union with Christ. He dies our death with us and for us. Then just as he was raised at Easter, Christ-connected sinners survive their own executions to walk in newness of life.

That's hardly flat. Yet for sinners it is very flattering.

Linking justification as a new way of dying to today's contexts probably calls for another conference. Maybe it could be done next year in Wittenberg on the occasion of Katie (von Bora) Luther's 500th birthday. She was born on 29 January 1499. Celebrations are in the works at the "Lutherhaus" which she managed during her and Martin's time in Wittenberg. Oftentimes better than Martin himself, he said, she lived in the death-defying freedom of JBFA.

And apropos of dying, while writing this I got a phone call with the news of the death this evening of Carl Volz at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota. A Seminex colleague from days gone by and a gutsy JBFA contextual theologian, Carl relished the flattery of having already died with Christ. He signalled the new life in Christ already operational in the vitality with which he carried out his callings. He'd patently gotten his second wind, the Holy Gust. Requiescat in pace.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

The Promise of Lutheran Ethics – Law/Gospel Grammar

[To continue the topic of Grace-imperatives (Gospel-imperatives) and Promissory Freedom, I may be borrowing some paragraphs once sent out as Sabbath Theology #18 back in 1996.]

1. From my last couple of issues reviewing "The Promise of

Lutheran Ethics," it might appear to some of you that I'm on a vendetta against the law, even against the 10 commandments. Not so. If I do have a "cause," it's the ancient one central to the theology of the cross—and seldom advanced without conflict among Christians, namely, to keep Moses from usurping the role of Christ and his Spirit in the area of ethics. No one, above all in the Lutheran crowd, disputes the role of Christ in justification. But when sanctification (ethics) comes up, for some Christians Christ and his Spirit seem to be insufficient for getting the job done. So Moses and the decalogue in some form are invoked as add-ons to give substance—"Gestalt," as Huetter says—to our lives under Christ's Lordship and the Spirit's leading.

2. To say no to Huetter is not to be an anti-nomian, one who just says: Toss out the law! My proposal is that of Formula of Concord VI (1577): Keep the law on hand for that candidate who needs it, that Old Adam/Old Eve not yet mortified in every one of the baptized. But...(and that's a big but) keep that law away from every "new creation" Christian. For the newness of that new creaturehood is Christ and his Spirit, who have supplanted the law in every primal relationship that we humans have according to Biblical anthropology. First of all Christ is in the middle (mediator) in our relationship to God. Few would dispute that. The same is true with our relationship to our own selves: Christ is in the center of my new view of me. Few would dispute that either.
3. If Christ has undisputed claim in these two turfs, he cannot be displaced in our third primal relationship either, our relationship to the world and people, what we call ethics. To move Moses back in here for ethics inevitably requires Christ and his Spirit to move out. That's the simple thesis of Paul to the Galatians: to

evict Christ and his Spirit from any one of the three relationships is to evict them from all three. But if Christ did not die in vain, to use Paul's language, then he claims the mediator role in all three. He is the end of the law for righteousness (our God-connection), and for how we see ourselves (faith), and for ethics (our relationships with others).

4. There are some internal factors that diminish the law's usefulness even if you did want to use it for ethics. To begin with eight of the ten commandments are negatives, telling you what NOT to do. So right from the outset they are skimpy resources for determining what to do. So I'm commanded not to commit adultery. But what resource is that in giving any positive "Gestalt" for my sexuality, chastity, celibacy or marriage?
5. The Lutheran Reformers linked this negativity in the decalogue to their axiom "lex semper accusat." The law always accuses. Said they: God's commandment never addresses us as though we ourselves are in some neutral zone, and then, after having heard, can decide to follow it or not. Rather when God's commandment addresses us, we're already over the fence in forbidden territory, already off limits. So, said the reformers, here's what the commandments say: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me—and you already have several." "Thou shalt not kill...and you already have a murderous heart beating within you." All the "shalt nots" are accusations of where sinners already are, of what they already are. The Reformers were not original in this. They heard Jesus doing it in the Sermon on the Mount when he preached on the commandments.
6. The Reformers were serious students of God's law. They called attention to its operative verb "require," God requires this or that of the addressee in the "thou

shalts.” By contrast the Gospel’s operative verb is “offer,” gift, freebee, no strings attached. The require verb always has strings. They show up in the “grammar” of law and the contrasting “grammar” of the Gospel. The grammar of law is always: “IF you (human) do such and so, THEN I (God) will do so and such.” Even when the word Jesus appears in such a sentence, the grammatical structure of “If/then” makes it law no matter what. That’s grammar we understand. It’s the normal grammar of human interactions day in and day out: “IF you will do that, THEN I will do this.” Fulfill this condition and I will “balance” it off with stuff of equal value.

7. By contrast the grammar of Gospel is: “SINCE or BECAUSE God is doing, has done, such and so in Christ , THEREFORE you now do this or that.” “Since/therefore” is the pattern of Gospel-grounded ethical admonitions in the NT. It is the grammar of Grace-imperatives. They are all over in the epistles of the NT. Not only are individual “paranesis passages” (admonition sentences) framed in this Gospel grammar of “since/therefore.” Larger segments of the epistles are formatted that way. Look at the six chapters of Ephesians. Its three first chapters are SINCE/BECAUSE Gospel-indicatives. Then at 4:1 comes a big THEREFORE with three chapters of Grace-imperatives to follow. Check them out for yourself.
8. The code words “since (or because) and therefore” are not always present in the texts. But the “logic” and “grammar” of the sentences are clearly grace-imperatives. “[Since] you were bought with a price, therefore glorify God in your bodies.” The clauses can be reversed, but the grammar does not change: “[Therefore] be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as [because] God in Christ has forgiven you.” Or again, “[Since] God was in Christ reconciling the world until himself, therefore we

entreat you, be ye reconciled to God (and with each other).” “I appeal to you THEREFORE [after the Gospel-indicatives of the prior chapters], siblings, by the mercies of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice...”

9. The Law always has the specific grammar of requirements—if/then—which renders it inescapably contrary to the Gospel’s grammar. So it becomes downright contradictory to use Law as resource for living the Gospel-life. In the very vocabulary of the Grace-imperatives, it is Christ and the Holy Spirit who so dominate that when I checked recently I couldn’t find even one reference to a decalog commandment as I re-read the admonition sections of the NT epistles. There may well be some that I missed. But even when it comes to stuff for which there is a clear “thou shalt not” commandment—murderous hatred, sexual immorality, theft, slander, coveting—the commandment is not invoked. Instead Christ is, and the ethical imperative, even when it is sharp as it often is, comes in the grammar of the Gospel. E.g., on the matter of prostitution in 1 Corinthians 6, there is no mention of the 6th commandment. Instead the apostle’s ethical speech is: “Since you are one-flesh with Christ, since your body is the Holy Spirit’s temple, therefore stop fornicating.”
10. One significant place where Paul does speak of the “covet” commandment, he does not use it for ethics, but with its accusatory function in his own biography. “I would not have known sin,” he says, “if the law had not said ‘Don’t covet.’” What Paul must mean, I think, is that his big coveting was coveting righteousness. When Christ’s offer of righteousness finally came through to him (Damascus ff.) his coveting of righteousness, the law’s kind, was uncovered as the essence of sin. He’d been coveting

required righteousness all along, when one day it came to him as an offered gift.

11. There may be ethical passages in the NT that show up as “if/then” in English translation, and possibly even in the original language. Even so, what’s needed is to check the theological grammar, the logic of the parts, and the operational verbs to see if it’s require or offer.
12. What’s new about Christ’s “new ” commandment for ethics, “Love one another, as [because, since] I have loved you” is that it’s different from Moses, even the summary of Moses with the word “love” at the center: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”
13. The word “you” and the verb “love” in the new commandment is always in the plural. You can’t see that in the English translations where “you” and the verb “love” can be both singular and plural. But in every instance in the NT the “one another” imperatives are such plurals. That signals that they are inner-community imperatives: “Y’all do love to each other.” It’s “ping-pong” back-and-forth loving. Lots of folks are playing the game at the same time. Not so Moses. His is a singular imperative just telling each of us to do love to the neighbor. But is that any big deal? Well, hang on.
14. The imperative for us to do this loving comes as second in the sequence. It’s framed in Gospel-grammar. Since Christ has loved us, therefore we are mandated to ping-pong this love with each other. Not so Moses. His command is a requirement without a prior indicative about God, or from God. The “Love God” commandment often paired with Moses’ neighbor commandment is equally unilateral and without a prior “since” on God’s part.
15. The communitarian aspect of ping-pong loving is the consequence of each of the ping-pong players first having been receivers of the love of Christ. It is that

individual reception of Christ's "ping" of love, that puts each of us in the community, now under the imperative to "pong" the same to others also in the game. We are not isolated players, but ones joined to Christ and "therefore" joined to each other in the game. There is no such community factor written into the very fabric of Moses' love commandment.

16. Finally the criterion for the loving is brand new. "As I have loved you," namely, all the way to the cross, is not only new, it's as different from "as you love yourself" as day is from night.

'Nuff for now. D.v., see you in a fortnight.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

THE PROMISE OF LUTHERAN ETHICS – Back to the Decalogue?

Colleagues,

ThTh 26 continues some comments on the contents of:

THE PROMISE OF LUTHERAN ETHICS,

Karen L. Bloomquist & John R. Stumme, eds.

Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 1998. vii, 247, paper. [No price listed].

Three weeks ago (ThTh 23) I noted how frequently the essays in this volume claim the Ten Commandments as foundational for Lutheran ethics. For authors claiming to show the “promise” of Lutheran ethics, it comes as a surprise, I said, that God’s law gets so much hype. God’s promise doesn’t even come close to getting equal time. It figures in only one of the nine essays—and even there it’s emaciated.

“Back to the decalogue” is the drumbeat of Reinhard Huetter’s chapter on “The Twofold Center of Lutheran Ethics.” The two centers he finds are “Christian Freedom and God’s Commandments,” he says. And even with these two, the second one finally steamrollers over the first in Huetter’s conclusion (curiously labelled “The End”): “Christian ethics in the tradition of the Reformation serves the remembrance of God’s commandments and the interpretation of . . . our world in the critical and wholesome light of God’s commandments. Christian ethics in the Reformation tradition should, of course, end with praise of God’s commandments.” What ever happened to “Christian Freedom” here at the end? What ever happened to the “Promise” of Lutheran Ethics? It sounds harsh to say so, but Huetter’s conclusion really is “the end” of the promise of Lutheran ethics.

Wouldn’t it be more Lutheran to say something like this to sum it up? “Christian ethics in the Reformation tradition calls us to remember God’s promise and our freedom generated by faith in that promise. It calls us to interpret our world in the wholesome light of God’s promise, and to live our lives in promissory freedom dedicating ourselves to the care and redemption of all that God has made. Christian ethics in the Reformation tradition ends with doxology to God the Promisor, his Son the Promise in Person, and the Spirit who preserves us in union with both in the one true faith.” But that would be a

completely different essay from the one we have here.

In the 25-page “table talk,” an appendix to the book, the authors react to each other’s chapters. But nobody challenges Huetter’s doxology to the decalogue as the heart of Lutheran ethics. Makes you wonder who’s taking care of the store these days in Lutheran ethics in the USA.

Now it could be—though I don’t believe it—that they didn’t catch what Huetter was saying, for his chapter is the “heaviest” essay in the entire volume. One respondent told me that it fried his brains. His chapter is not an easy read. Although he has been teaching in the US for a good long while, his English prose is still a tad too Teutonic, even for serious American readers. That half of his text is in the footnotes, and that his footnotes constitute 40% of all the footnotes in this entire nine-chapter book, signals his formative years in German university theology. I should know. I did my doctorate there umpteen years ago. Not only did I have to learn German to do it. That was a piece of cake compared to the tough task of doing *Theologia Deutsch*, viz., theologizing as Germans do.

Not that that is necessarily bad—when you’re in Germany. But to transpose German theological rhetoric into American vocables, even doing so with flawless grammar (as far as I could tell), is not yet to do *Theologia Americana*. Huetter is having as tough a time communicating to American ears as I did (and still do) when I try to talk shop with Germans. But be that as it may, here’s what I think he says:

1. The 2-fold center of Lutheran ethics is Christian freedom and God’s commandments. Huetter wants to correct the “deeply problematic [that’s German for “just plain wrong”] opposition that many allege exists between freedom and law.” His thesis is that “Christian ethics in the Augsburg

Confession's catholic tradition" links the freedom arising from justification by faith to God's commandments. His thesis is: "Christian freedom is the embodiment of practicing God's commandments as a way of life."

2. One reason Lutherans have seen freedom and law as antithetical is the "decisive core fallacy of modern Protestantism," namely, a shared assumption about justification, that justification by faith alone [JBFA] is "a ceiling that has to cover everything instead of the very floor on which we stand." So Huetter wants to rehabilitate God's law, God's commandments, for use in the justified Christian's ethical life, and do so without losing the "floor" of JBFA. And while doing so he will show that this is what Luther and the Augsburg Confession wanted all the time.
3. One reason Lutheran ethics got led astray, seeing freedom and law as antithetical, comes from the Luther renaissance of the last century, a Luther research tradition that unwittingly read Luther with Kantian presuppositions, and thus read him wrong. It was wrong-headed to accept Kant's notion of human freedom as a person being "free from" all outside regulators (agents of heteronomy), who then drew on moral reason to become a "moral agent" possessing freedom within. From that freedom within arose "moral maxims" (autonomy) that shaped ethical life. When scholars blended Kant with Luther, the Gospel was understood as that liberating power which creates this autonomously free moral agent. All the while external law, even God's law, is viewed as the antithesis to the entire ethical venture. Its only "good" function is the "negative" one of accusing sinners and thus driving them to Christ, where freedom, law-free freedom, is born.
4. Huetter sees three 20th century movements that have been at work to reverse the "fallacy" that freedom and law are

antithetical. First is Karl Barth's theology which "decentered the moral subject," thus counteracting the Kantian infection of ethical autonomy. The end of the line for Barth was the unification, not the opposition, of Gospel and Law. Second is a recent movement within Protestant ethics accentuating "virtue" and "character." These accents show that "moral agents are much more complex realities than the mathematical points to which they had shrunk in the wake of Kantian ethics." Third is a "broad movement" that locates "moral agents" in human communities and creation-linked contexts, thus undermining the rational abstraction of the Kantian heritage. To this Huetter adds a fourth corrective for the fallacy: his own reading of Luther that combats today's ethical antinomianism [=no place for law whatsoever] whereby the Reformer is shown linking Christian freedom to God's commandments in his own theological ethics.

5. Allying himself to David Yeago's work on Luther, Huetter unfolds his fundamentally Barthian view of Lutheran ethics. But it's finally more Barth than Luther, and not "promising" enough to commend the "promise of Lutheran ethics." And I say that not to tar him with a Barthian epithet, but to say it like it is, since my own doctoral work referred to above was on Barth. When Huetter concludes his Luther section (p. 45) by saying: "in fulfilling God's commandments [sc. love God, love neighbor], the freedom of the Christian finds its concrete fulfillment," he has stepped onto another floor than the JBFA "floor" he early on had claimed as "the very floor on which we stand." How so?
6. Though wanting to counteract the Kantian fallacy that he says has infected Lutheran ethics, Huetter sticks with Kant at a most fundamental point, namely, when he links freedom to the law. To describe Christian freedom as

“freedom FOR the law” is Kant pure and simple. Au contraire Luther, and the NT where he saw it first—and not only in Paul—Christian freedom, the promissory kind, is “freedom FROM the law.” In the Gospel for Reformation Day (John 8) Jesus claims that “If the Son makes you free, you are really free.” Is Jesus talking about freedom from, or freedom for, the law? The context of his words makes it perfectly clear. The Judeans who challenge him are claiming “freedom for.” Jesus has the chutzpah to call that freedom slavery. To be “really free” is something else. It’s liberation from the slavery of “freedom for.”

7. But won’t that lead to antinomianism and libertinism, doing whatever you damn well please? That is the spectre, I sense, that haunts Huetter. That’s why he cannot abide Christian freedom simply under the over-arching “ceiling” of JBFA. Remember that the A here = alone. That is too scary. So Huetter adds something to the “alone.” He pays his respects, he thinks, to the Reformation core by granting that JBFA is the “floor” for the house of ethics. Yet faith’s freedom needs a “Gestalt,” he says, some concrete specs to give it substance. Otherwise, as “mere” faith, faith alone, it lacks concrete substance. [Tell that to those who heard Jesus say: “Your faith has healed you.”] The commandments supply the “Gestalt . . . the shape and form of believers’ lives with God.” But, say the Reformers, when you add anything to the “alone” of JBF, you’re constructing a different building. So the commandment-house Huetter builds on what he claims is the JBFA floor really rests on an other foundation.
8. That gets exposed when you use JBFA not simply as a doctrine, even a fundamental one, but as a criterion, a yardstick for assessing any proposal that claims to be Christian. Here JBFA sizes up such a commandment-house and detects some other flooring, some other foundation. New

Testament ethical admonition summarizes the substance, the Gestalt, of Christian freedom as having Christ as master and being led by the Spirit. These Twin Managers are the ones who constitute “the shape and form of believers’ lives with God,” not the commandments at all. It is finally Christ and the Spirit that will not abide any add-on, even one so noble as the divine decalogue. To insist on “finishing” the house that began with JBFA flooring by using “Mosaic” materials is nothing less than laying another foundation. Is it even as bad as that house Jesus once described, the one built on sand? Could be.

9. But what about all those imperative ethical statements, especially in the epistles of the NT, all those commands and commandments, even the “new” commandment coming from Jesus himself? Thought you’d never ask. Here too we need to bring in the Lutheran dipstick, this time formulated as the distinction between God’s law and God’s gospel. Are these admonitions “law imperatives” or “Gospel imperatives?” Especially when citing Luther as an ally for his commandment-house Huetter (and Yeago too) bypass this primal Lutheran distinction.
10. The Gestalt of law imperatives and the Gestalt of gospel imperatives are as different as day and night—even though the verbs in both cases are all imperatives—do this, don’t do that. There are several elements to these differing Gestalts. Here’s just one for starters: The Gestalt of law commands is that they are inescapably marked by recompense. There are always consequences for the person who is commanded, good ones for obedience, bad ones for disobeying. The Gestalt of Gospel imperatives is that there are no consequences at all for the doer. It is always someone else—sometimes even God—who is the beneficiary when the command is obeyed, and someone else the loser when it isn’t.

11. When Jesus gives his “new” commandment, it is really new. It is not Moses repeated. Christ’s new commandment has a brand new Gestalt, most significantly that he himself is both its fabric and its form, wine and wineskin. That was never the case with Moses’ commandments. Even if he didn’t exist, his commandments still could. Not so with the new commandment and its author. That’s another reason why the old commandments cannot be glued to the author and finisher of our faith. Faith’s freedom is so radically new, such theological Teflon, that Moses’ commandments simply cannot stick onto it.

Next time more about grace-imperatives and promissory freedom.

Peace & Joy! Ed

Justification by Faith Alone – Doctrine or Hermeneutic?

Colleagues,

Last week’s ThTh 24 essay prompted this inquiry from Scott Jurgens, Seminex alum (’80), currently pastor at Christ Lutheran Church in Odessa, Washington USA. By the time I finished responding to Scott’s items, it occurred to me that I had also produced ThTh 25. So here it is for this week’s offering. If nothing else intervenes, I intend to get back to that segmented book review I’ve been doing on *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998].

Peace & Joy! Ed Schroeder

Dear Scott, What a joy to hear from you.

I. You say:

“I have a couple of questions:

1. You mention that Law/Gospel [properly distinguished] and JBFA [justification by faith alone] are hermeneutics, not a doctrines. How do you come to that conclusion?
2. What is the difference in your thinking between a doctrine and a hermeneutic?”

It seems to me—

Key to both of your questions is the term “doctrine.” My take on this comes from Melanchthon’s use of the term doctrine in Augsburg Confession [AC] Article V, when he speaks of “doctrina [singular] evangelii.” There is only one doctrine, one item that must be preached, taught, proclaimed, and that is the evangel, the good news of Christ. If one uses the term in the plural, doctrines, then these need to be organized as they are in the AC, as spokes coming out from that center doctrine (singular). What the Gospel wants people to believe in is Christ, not even the “teaching” that gets Christ to them. The L/G distinction and JBFA are (almost) synonyms for “how” to get the Good News to folks. Such “how to do it” stuff these days we call hermeneutics. So L/G and JBFA fit best into that category. They are the pipelines that channel the flow of the Good News that the Confessors say must be piped to people. Jesus used the similar item in his day with wineskins and wine. Depending on what wineskin, what pipes you use, different stuff comes out at the end. For a “new wine” end product, you need a new hermeneutic, a new way of reading the Bible and reading human life in the world. You can try to use “old” skins, but they will

either ruin the wine, or the wine will explode the old skins. JBFA , L/G distinction are the Reformers proposals for wineskins for the Good News. Others in the church (for 2000 yrs) have proposed other wineskins: Peter at Antioch in Acts, the Galatian Judaizers, Arius, Pelagius, scholastic semi-pelagianism, enthusiasts, and those manifold alternate gospels spooking around in both the church and secular society today.

In Melanchthon's riposte to the critics of the AC, in Apology IV, the Reformation classic statement on JBFA, he starts at the very outset with a prolegomena, as he calls it, which today we'd call a hermeneutic. It's his pitch for L/G distinctions in reading the Bible, which his adversaries don't do, he says, and in the Confutation, their response to the AC, we see that they don't and why they don't. If you've still have a copy of THE PROMISING TRADITION [Semine's reader in systematic theology], you might read again Bertram's essay therein, THE HERMENEUTICS OF APOL. IV. which we inflicted on you back in seminary days. Melanchthon's charge contra his critics, says B. there, is that they do not use L/G piping, but instead their hermeneutics uses "opinio legis" piping. With this legalist opinion, the stuff coming out at the end of the pipe is not Good News at all. It fails to pass the "double-dipstick" test (another label for the Reformers' hermeneutic):

1. making full use of the merits and benefits of Christ, and thus
2. giving sinners the comfort/encouragement they so desperately need.

So the difference between doctrine and hermeneutics? Hermeneutics is the pipeline, the wineskin. Doctrine (singular) is the oil, the wine.

II. You say:

"I know during class you tried to get us to stop thinking [that] Lutheranism puts faith in a list of doctrines, and try to understand JBFA (i.e. Christ on the cross?) as the hub of the wheel. Does that somehow relate to the hermeneutic/doctrine view that you have?"

It seems to me—

I think you're right that it does. It's probably the same thing. The hub is the (singular) doctrina evangelii, the proclamation that is the Gospel itself. All the doctrines (plural) that deserve to be called Christian are spokes coming from that hub. Bertram likes to say: "The 28 ARTICLES of the Aug. Conf. ARTICULATE the one and only Gospel in 28 different directions." So even such articles such as the Trinity, sin, christology, justification, faith, ministry [=pipeline talk, "cater-waiter" stuff we called it way back then!], new obedience, church, sacraments, secular society, the saints, married clergy, monastic vows, church authority, etc. need to be articulated in such a way that they come out as Good News. E.g., the "doctrine" of the Trinity is not the "true facts" about God, but the Good News about God. Even AC III on sin is so presented that it signals what's at the hub, the Good News that takes away the "biggie" that sin really is.

III. You say:

"Also, in your last article, you mentioned God has two covenants. This sparked something that I remember from CROSSWAYS! training and teaching. Harry Wendt [the creator of the CROSSWAYS program], from what I remember, claimed that once the new covenant was made in Jesus Christ that the old covenant (Sinai) was null and void. He also

pointed out that both Sinai and Jesus Christ were covenants of human obligation (this might have come from Hiller's book) while the Covenant with Abraham is a covenant of Divine Commitment (no human requirements were attached). So, my question for you is this: do you see the covenants of Sinai and Jesus Christ simultaneously existing and applying to the Christian? Or is the Christian only living under the covenant made through Jesus Christ?"

It seems to me—

I don't know Wendt's stuff very well and haven't made the effort to learn about it. [Subconsciously that may be because folks regularly get our CROSSINGS stuff mixed up with his CROSSWAYS.] He once visited Seminex to show us his work and I recall having a "friendly discussion" with him on-covenant! Even so, your few lines above suggest a perspective that I wouldn't think Wendt would propose. For example, to say: "both Sinai and Jesus Christ were covenants of human obligation" surely won't wash as stated. And I don't think Hillers supports this at all. Doesn't the NT regularly connect Jesus and Abraham, but contrast Jesus and Sinai/Moses? I think so. E.g., John 6. Granted, Sinai has obligations aplenty, and not just obligations toward God but even more deadly, our obligation to die for not carrying out our part of Sinai's bargain. But Jesus too as a "covenant of human obligation?" Something's screwy there, isn't it?

Seems to me this is what needs to be said instead: Sinai OBLIGATES sinners, Jesus LIBERATES them. He liberates them from Sinai's life of obligation and from the laundry list of unfulfilled obligations Sinai leaves us with. That concludes with Christ liberating us from that deadly obligation at the end when God "visits" the ones who

mucked up on covenant obligations and now are obliged to die. "God was in Christ reconciling, not," as in Sinai, "counting trespasses." But does Jesus then impose new obligations (or maybe even the old ones again) after he has liberated sinners? Not according to the Bible when read with the Lutheran hermeneutic, which the Reformers claimed was the Bible's own hermeneutic. "Jesus plus obligations, Torah obligations" was what the Galatian Judaizers claimed as their Gospel. Paul dumped his anathema on them for this "other" Gospel that they were hustling, saying that it was really not good news at all. Even stronger, he claimed that if our Christ-connection were to lead us back into obligation, then "Christ died in vain."

The rhetoric sometimes heard in evangelical circles, "Christ as Savior and [then afterwards!] as Lord," seems to me to follow this pattern. As I hear it the term "Lord" is seen as bringing in obligations again, and that seems to me to follow the pattern of the Galatian Judaizers. Either Christ has set us free (free indeed!) or he has returned us to obligations—even if they are seen to be different obligations. It is not only with the Galatians that Paul hangs tough: you are either under law and obligations or under Spirit and freedom. There's no third option.

And with the word "third" we're at the "third use of the law," your last item in the paragraph above. You say: "my question for you is this: do you see the covenants of Sinai and Jesus Christ simultaneously existing and applying to the Christian? Or is the Christian only living under the covenant made through Jesus Christ?" Even though Formula of Concord VI on this topic was itself a "flashpoint" in the battle of Missouri, I hold

to what FC VI “really” says. Namely, for the Old Adam (Old Eve too) still evident in every Christian, the law of God has a candidate where the law’s first two jobs—two uses—need to be done:

- 1. compelling a minimal amount of rightful civility in order to preserve creation now that it’s populated with human sinners, and*
- 2. accusing us Old Adams/Eves of our unfaith and thereby driving us to Christ.*

The second self in every Christian, that Christ-trusting “new creation,” is law-free, taking his/her ethical coaching from Christ’s “follow me” and from the Spirit’s leading. When such new creations recur [literally “run back”] to Moses, they give a vote of no confidence in Christ as Lord and the Spirit as Leader. “If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law,” someone once said. He was right!

Cheers! Ed

THE PROMISE OF LUTHERAN ETHICS – Forgiveness, Faith, Freedom

Colleagues,

Today’s essay continues the book review begun last week as ThTh #23.

THE PROMISE OF LUTHERAN ETHICS,
Karen L. Bloomquist & John R. Stumme, eds.
Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 1998. vii, 247, paper.

The three Bible readings appointed in the lectionary for Reformation Day (Oct. 31) are Jeremiah 31:31-34, Romans 3:19-28, and John 8:31-36. No surprise, there is a key Reformation message in each one. Curiously the key terms in those three texts all begin with the letter F in English: God's new covenant of FORGIVENESS (Jeremiah), justification by FAITH (Romans) and FREEDOM—"If the Son makes you free, you are free indeed" (John).

These three "F-words" pop up all over in the essays presented in *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*. But they are not used for all the goodies that the Reformers found in them. To illustrate that I propose to take these three terms and link them to the essays in this volume, beginning here with ThTh #24 and then, d.v., on some of the Thursdays that follow. So we begin with Bob Benne's opening chapter: "Lutheran Ethics—Perennial Themes and Contemporary Challenges."

Benne's essay is the most "classically" Lutheran one in the book, and may strike some readers as the book's most conservative. His aim is twofold:

1. to "identify the basic themes of Lutheran ethics," first personal ethics, then social ethics,
2. to examine "the points at which the modern world challenges" Lutheran ethics.

These modern challenges are theological (exposing Lutherans' overreliance on justification by faith [sic!]); ecclesiastical

(little sense of the church as a “community of character”); and epistemological (post-modernism’s various forms of the “hermeneutics of suspicion”). Animating his essay is a “sense of urgency [that] Lutheranism as a living tradition is at risk.” In another generation or two it may be gone.

Benne’s “basic themes” are classical Lutheranism. For “personal ethics” he lists justification by grace through faith, Christian morality as response to that justifying grace, twofold use of God’s law, orders of creation [or Benne’s preferred rendering of the term, which I like: “places of responsibility”], realism about human sin, theology of the cross, the “happy exchange,” and more. For the “Lutheran ethical tradition as it applies to public life” Benne has four themes:

1. a sharp distinction between salvation offered by God in Christ and all human efforts,
2. a focused and austere [sic!] doctrine of the church and its mission that follows from the first theme,
3. the twofold rule of God through law and gospel, and
4. a paradoxical view of human nature and history.”

So far, so good. Now enters a non-Lutheran theologoumenon that is dear to Benne: covenant. It’s not that this Biblical term was unknown to the Lutheran Reformers. But it was not a primal term of their vocabulary, and when invoked always was read with the hermeneutics of the distinction between law and gospel. Benne himself wants to hang on to law/gospel lingo, but he lets his covenant theology slip through the cracks without pushing it through the law and gospel sieve. He doesn’t let on—though surely he must know—that there is a law covenant with God and a gospel one. Therefore you can’t simply talk about “covenantal existence” as he does frequently, and still be talking Lutheran. I imagine that he also knows about “covenant theology”—aka federal theology (from Latin for covenant, “foedus”)—that arose

in post-Reformation times as a conscious alternative to confessional Lutheranism. But if you want to do covenant theology and try to be Lutheran, how do you proceed?

Enter Jeremiah 31:31-34, the first reading for the Festival of the Reformation. The big news, says the prophet to the Jewish exiles, is that God is working on a "new covenant." Main point of the new one is that "it will not be like the covenant" at Sinai. Chief "unlikeness" in this new one is that God pledges to "forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more." Sinai was never like that. Just read the specs of that old covenant in Exodus 20 & Deut. 5. Sinai's covenant had no place for forgiveness. Sinai is bad news for sinners, good news only for non-sinners. You got what you had coming. God "shows steadfast love to those who love me and keep my commandments," and "visits" iniquity all the way down to the 3rd and 4th generation (yes, here God does indeed "remember") of those doing the opposite.

So when Benne says that "we are meant for covenantal existence," that is true as Biblical anthropology, but is not ipso facto good news for sinners. Only one kind of covenantal existence is good news for the offspring of Eve and Adam. The other was the sort that when first announced brought no hallelujahs, but only cries of terror from the audience (Ex. 20:18f).

In pursuing his own "classic" presentation of law and promise in Galatians, St. Paul too (chapter 4) reaches for two-covenant theology to hype justification by faith. These two covenants are not identical with the two parts of the Bible, which we (erroneously) call Old and New Testament. Since "testament" is just another term for covenant, God has two of them, says Jeremiah, already on the scene in dealing with Israel. Paul joins Jeremiah in Galatians 4 to use this two-covenant theology as his hermeneutic for interpreting the Galatians to themselves,

as well as his lens for reading the scriptures. For a scholarly treatment on this, see Del Hillers' masterful work, "Covenant. The History of a Biblical Idea." He traces 2 covenant paradigms in the Hebrew scriptures, the "old" one operating at Sinai and Shechem, with the "new" one—new because it offers forgiveness to sinners—on the scene in God's transactions with David, Noah and Abraham.

Well, what then comes "new" with Jesus? Answer: He is the fulfillment of both of God's ancient covenants. He fulfills the old one (Sinai's law) as he dies our sinner's death on the cross, & he simultaneously fulfills the new one (new, that is, all the way back to Abraham) as he interprets his death on Maundy Thursday as the "blood of the new covenant shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." All of that, both covenants fulfilled, then gets ratified when God vindicates Jesus at Easter.

This bi-covenantal perspective has resources for ethics which would help Benne make an even stronger case for Lutheran ethics in our day. He could do worse than learn from Paul and his "grace imperatives," his replacing Moses as "ethical coach" with Christ as Lord and the Spirit as Leader, his insistence that Christians are not "free FOR the law," but "free FROM the law."

But Benne takes a different route. In order to get more concrete ethical action he urges Lutherans to "say more about the Christian life, whether shaped by the Decalogue and/or the Spirit." He surely knows that he's here "joining together" what St. Paul urges kept "asunder." Decalogue and Spirit are opposites in Paul's ethics throughout his letters. Nowhere is the antithesis sharper than in Galatians (5:18 & 22). "If you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law." Concerning the "fruits of the Spirit, there is no law touching such things." If however Decalogue and Spirit can be merged,

then the Galatian Judaizers had it right, and Paul had it wrong.

You wonder if Benne is desperate when he concludes: "Lutherans need a more specific notion of the Christian life if they are to respond to this chaotic world. They cannot do that by relying solely on justification." Granted, he wrote this essay before the Lutheran Brotherhood survey appeared documenting that over half of US Lutherans say that they do NOT rely on justification by faith at all. So much for over-reliance. As an astute observer of the Lutheran scene Benne doubtless had a hunch that this was so. So overreliance on justification can hardly be afflicting Lutheran ethics.

More serious, I'd say, is that too many Lutherans (Benne too?) view justification by faith alone [JBFA] as a doctrine, and not as a hermeneutic, the gospel's own criterion, for both proclamation and ethics. We discussed that in ThTh essays earlier this summer, where Edward Kennedy, chief respondent of the Vatican to the "Joint [=Lutheran and Roman Catholic] Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification," just couldn't see how JBFA could be the criterion for all doctrine that claims to be Christian. One important doctrine, yes, but surely not criterion for the whole ball of wax, he opined. But if JBFA is indeed the gospel's own criterion for doctrine, isn't it also the criterion for what counts as Christian in ethics? I think that the Lutheran reformers thought so.

More on that next time as we hook up the pericopes for Reformation Day with other essays in The Promise of Lutheran Ethics.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

MATTHEW 1: 18-25 (Fourth Sunday in Advent)

A Crossing

Robert W. Bertram

[A Crossings Workshop in Buffalo, NY, October 26, 1998]

This is one of the most controversial texts in the gospels, dwelling as it does on Jesus' so-called virgin birth. (It's probably more accurate to speak of his virginal conception.) And if that weren't already politically incorrect enough, what's worse is that the text features not Mary, the real heroine, but Joseph, "poor" Joseph, as if he were the one with the big worry, and he the hero who comes through after all. But that Matthean upstaging of Mary by Joseph may already tell us something about her. It certainly tells us something about us, females and males alike, who all may be more like him than like her at least in one respect.

The half-dozen questions which follow won't be truly open questions. They're leading questions. They're meant to lead us down through The Problem in this text, all the way down until we've shown how profoundly "necessary" is the biblical Christ. And then, once we've hit bottom – drained the swamp, so to say – we'll ask our way back up, up through the text's Solution, to show how this Christ does in fact meet our (Josephian) necessity. In that way we'll be tricking out the whole Dia-Gnosis/Pro-Gnosis sequence gradually, not all at once but a step at a time. Else it's like trying to drink from a fire hose.

THE PROBLEM (Dia-Gnosis)

1) Initial Diagnosis.

First, I assume that Joseph's most glaring problem was that his fiancée was pregnant, no thanks to him. The text records that already before Mary and he "came together, she was found to be with child," (v. 18b.) Is the sheer fact of this problem pregnancy – a fact no one denies, as far as I know – our problem, too? Else it would be hard to make a "crossing" out of it, from Joseph to us. If it is our problem as well, do you see us somehow caught between the same two alternatives to which Joseph was limited? (v. 19)?

2) Advanced Diagnosis.

Next, we move from Joseph's problem as an outward fact to his internal problem. The angel spots it as "fear" (v. 20), the sort of fear which Matthew elsewhere describes as unfaith. So afraid, so unbelieving is Joseph – as who wouldn't be! – that he hadn't even considered the third alternative the angel proposes (to take Mary home with him as his wife), let alone the angel's preposterous explanation (the fetus had come from the Holy Spirit.) Presented with the angel's statement, we too are incredulous. But afraid, afraid to believe?

3) Final Diagnosis.

Finally, if Mary's baby was allegedly conceived by the Holy Spirit and by no man, wasn't that already more than enough for poor Joseph to swallow, just at the level of biology? But no, biology is not the worst of it. He's expected to believe that this whole virginal conception is necessary for people's salvation, that that's how badly off they are. If the "God-with-

us” is really going to be with us, fallen sinners, and still be God, then this “Emmanuel” dare not be the offspring of just another sinner. For that’s exactly what this Emmanuel is coming to “save” sinners “from,” “their sin.” So Joseph could not dismiss the virgin birth on merely biological grounds. That would’ve been too easy. He confronted a whole incredible soteriology as well.

Putting it bluntly, the angel’s announcement sounds like an insult not only to Joseph’s intelligence but to his very self-worth. For the baby to be properly conceived, an outside Donor will have to be brought in, “the Holy Spirit,” since Joseph cannot be trusted to beget his own son. How humiliating! What he must have been tempted to tell the angel was not just, “Look, I know how babies are made,” but rather, “That desperate we are not, to need my paternity and my whole patriarchal ancestry bypassed.” The announcement gave Joseph far more to disbelieve than just “the virgin birth.” If he had a disbelieving bone in his body he must’ve shrugged, “Who needs it?”

And come to think of it, isn’t that the question exactly? Who needs it? Joseph isn’t the only one being humbled. How fitting for Advent – for us.

THE SOLUTION (Pro-Gnosis)

4) Initial Prognosis.

If that finally is how the text diagnoses us, by so humiliating us as to make the virgin birth what we need as sinners, isn’t that likewise where the text does the very opposite: begins our recovery? The Solution commences at the very pit of our humiliation, not before, except that now the humiliation is no longer ours alone. Not even ours first of all. Look who is now humbled in our place: “God with us.” That this God should ever

have been an offspring in the first place, a dependent God, when any proper God would stick to being The Supreme Parent on whom everything else depends, and that this Child God should furthermore become a human infant with all the dependence, the indignity, yes the mortality this incurs, and that on top of that he should then be so vulnerable as to need a stepfather like Joseph to adopt him and provide him a cover of respectability – all this seems at first glance to be so unbecoming of God as to be degrading. At first glance. How about at second glance?

5) Advanced Prognosis.

Perhaps even more remarkable than Emmanuel's humiliation/exaltation for us is that Joseph believed it and, believing it, acted on it. In one of Luther's Christmas sermons he quotes Saint Bernard to the effect that the angel's Announcement to Mary entailed three miracles: that God becomes a human being, that he is born of a virgin, and that she is able to believe that. Of those three, the miracle which most astonished Luther was the third. Similarly, within the short space of our gospel lesson we watch Mary's husband undergo the same wondrous change from a merely "just

man," yet afraid to believe, to a heroic "son of David" whose faith must have been tested unimaginably, and not just on the subject of Mary's virginity.

You and I've known others like that, none of whom had the benefit of Joseph's nocturnal angel. Still, they did claim to have the Holying Spirit, the same Donor Parent who conceived Emmanuel. For ordinary believers, that's not bad ancestry, would you say?

6) Final Prognosis.

Our Prognosis climaxes where our Diagnosis began, out in our overt behavior, in the world of observable fact. We had said that Mary's out-of-wedlock pregnancy might embarrass Christians today into treating it much the way Joseph was tempted to: not to repudiate it outright but, as he was inclined to do with Mary, "to dismiss [it] quietly." (v. 19) But then the text went on to create a new, third alternative, at least for those of faith: bring Mary home with us as our own, embrace her publicly as the Mother of "our" Child – Matthew does call him "the Son of [all] Humanity" and he is after all our brother – and be proud that he adopts our lowly family names and family histories as his own when we know full well Who it is who really conceived him.

But what if skeptics start asking nosy questions about his virgin birth? I'd suggest, pursue their questions only if they're nosy enough, that is, nosy not just about the biological embarrassments but the soteriological embarrassments as well, and embarrassing not only to us but to God, God-with-us, the God who would stoop so low to save people from their sins. If on the other hand the skeptics (or their counterparts, the biblicists) refuse to get that nosy, I'd just tell them nicely, "Sorry, it's a family secret." Still, there may be a very different, better response than that. What do you advise?

RWB

Buffalo, 10/26/98

[Matthew1 \(PDF\)](#)

THE PROMISE OF LUTHERAN ETHICS, Karen L. Bloomquist & John R. Stumme

There could be more promise in "The Promise of Lutheran Ethics." By that I mean the Biblical term "promise," the term chosen by the Lutheran reformers to pinpoint what the reformation was all about. Melanchthon put it simply in his *Loci*, the first "systematic theology" to come out of Wittenberg: "Evangelium est promissio. The gospel is a promise." If there were more of THAT promise in this volume, it would be even more promising for its intended audience, today's USA Lutherans in the mish-mash world we live in as the millennium turns. More of that promise, I'd be audacious enough to say, would also make the ethics proposed here more Lutheran.

It wasn't just Melanchthon's one-liner that put promise at the center. It's the linch-pin for the whole discussion of Justification by Faith in the confessional texts of 1530-31. It's fundamental to the difference between law and Gospel. No matter how you calibrate the law, its basic verb still comes out "require," say the confessors. Au contraire the promissory Gospel where the fundamental verb is "offer." Promises are offered. They are gifts, freebees. "Thou shalt" are requirements. Their grammar is reciprocity. Rewards for doing what thou shalt and sanctions for doing the opposite.

In this volume on Lutheran ethics more than one of the ten contributors makes a plea for the restoration of the commandments into Lutheran ethical consciousness. Say they, it's the place to go after justification by faith has taken place. And in the fascinating final chapter, a 25-page "Table Talk on

Lutheran Ethics," a bull-session among the authors, no one challenges that claim.

Return to the decalogue is most forcefully promoted by Reinhard Huetter in his chapter "The Twofold Center of Lutheran Ethics," namely, "Christian Freedom and God's Commandments." None of the other nine challenges Huetter's reading of Lutheranism: "Christian ethics in the tradition of the Reformation serves the remembrance of God's commandments and the interpretation of the innumerable challenges, complexities, and perplexities that we encounter in our world in the critical and wholesome light of God's commandments. Christian ethics, in the Reformation tradition should, of course, end with praise of God's commandments." What ever happened to the "Promise" of Lutheran Ethics? Except for one of the essays, the term doesn't even surface as an item for consideration. O tempora, O mores!

And in that essay where promise does surface, "Ethics and the Promise of God," by James Childs, it is not the "Gospel is a promise" of the Reformation era. Childs understands promise as one of the gifts of "the recovery of the Bible's historical-eschatological character, [which] placed new emphasis on the promise of God's coming future reign as the fulfillment rather than the antithesis of history." Promise and God's reign, God's dominion, God's future are his constant corollaries. So trusting the promise is trusting that God will indeed win when it's all over. It is trusting that "[the] coming reign of God is not dependent on our achievements, but on the faithful promises of God."

Now if the "reign of God" were understood as Luther does it in his catechism's explanation of the Lord's Prayer's second petition, that still might pass for Lutheran. "The kingdom of God comes indeed without our prayer, of itself; but we pray in this petition that it may come unto us also. How is this done?

When our heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe His holy Word and lead a godly life, here in time and hereafter in eternity."

Childs implies that newer eschatological readings of the NT have expanded the "kingdom of God," as he too expands the "promise," to cosmic dimensions. Thus he can say: "The promise and hope of eschatology is for the transformation and fulfillment of the world in the kingdom of God." Now that too might not be too bad if some distinctions [There's that Lutheran word again!] were noticed. Every reference to "kingdom of God" in the synoptic Gospels is linked to what God is up to in Jesus. And the narrative context for all(?) of them is Jesus' "mercy-management" with sinners.

Au contraire the "kingdom talk" throughout this entire volume. Its cardinal term is "justice"—oppressed peoples getting a fair shake, getting equity instead of a raw deal—as articulated in the liberation theologies of our generation. Which is not exactly what Jesus gives sinners when he offers them forgiveness. Fairness for sinners is the opposite of forgiveness. Now linking justice to this kingdom that Jesus inaugurates could be kosher—but again only if you make distinctions. To wit, the distinction between law-justice (=people receiving what they deserve, sinners too) and mercy-justice (the kind of justice the Suffering Servant "executes" in Isaiah 41). It is this sort of justice, say the gospel writers, that Jesus fulfills when he forgives sinners.

Childs' and Huetter's essays articulate a different Lutheranism from the one proposed in these ThTh weekly essays, although both authors acclaim primordial Lutheran building-blocks: justification by faith, the distinction between law and gospel, God's ambidextrous—left hand, right hand—works in creation, and more. I propose to address all the essays in this important

volume, d.v., in future issues of ThTh, including a more detailed look at the two mentioned above. It has been widely distributed (free!) throughout the ELCA, as a prize product of its Division for Church in Society.

A dozen years ago, a doctoral thesis presented at Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago by Tom Strieter found several different types of Lutheran ethics on the scene in US Lutheranism. All but one of them, I think, are represented in the essays in this volume. Missing is the one that Tom calls “a struggle-resistance model within the church.” He mentions the theological ethics of the Seminex tradition as a sample of this genre. The next issues of ThTh will seek to show the promise of that perspective for Lutheran Ethics as we look at the writers in the volume that has that name.

Peace & Joy! Ed Schroeder

Responses to “What Lutherans really believe.”

Colleagues,

ThTh 22 brings you responses to last week’s edition, the report on Lutheran Brotherhood’s survey of what US Lutherans say they really believe. Despite the tumult–yea, in the very face of it–Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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1. From Robin Morgan, St. Louis MO. Robin, ELCA pastor, Crossings Website Manager, is my teammate in ThTh production.

Hi, I need to say a couple of things in response to ThTh 21. I guess I didn't find that Lutheran Brotherhood news as horrifying as you did because, on a gut level, those statistics have been obvious to me ever since I've been hanging around Lutherans. Or maybe it was even more obvious before I joined the Lutheran church when I lived up in "Lutherland" of Wisconsin and Minnesota. Lutherans are really NICE. Maybe that's why I was never drawn to the church when I lived up there, I knew I wasn't nice enough to be Lutheran. Lutheranism is a lifestyle that has Jesus embedded in it, but it's the form of the culture that's the most important thing. I believe that part of our Babylonian captivity today is our ethnicity. You don't need theology of the cross inside our clean, safe German/Norwegian clubs. In fact, in trying to shake our immigrant status and be Americans, it makes sense that we'd push it away. We've become wrapped in our prosperity just like everybody else. Living out here in the suburbs where raising children is our purpose, church going is important because that's what nice people do, but more important than that is the retention of the status quo.

My sports-loving husband helped me understand why so many people seem to have a religious passion for sports during one of the myriad of times I have griped about the immorality and stupidity of professional sports. He said that it's safe to be passionate about sports because they're really not important. You can let out your aggression, your passions because you aren't going to

damage anything significant, nothing that will rock the boat of society by painting your face the colors of your team and howling like a banshee when they win...or lose.

We all seem to know, on some level, that we're living on borrowed time here in the U.S. Believing that God wants us to treat each other decently, that all major religions are speaking about the same God, that the Gospel is about rules for right living fits with our first priority – keeping the boat afloat.

Theology of the Cross is too damned scary – people get fired, people get ostracized, people get killed.

Robin

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2. From Tom Hanks, Buenos Aires, Argentina. Tom is a PCUSA pastor, Scripture scholar, President of OTHER SHEEP, an ecumenical Christian ministry to sexual minorities.

Dear Ed, If it is thus with the Lutherans, you can imagine what is is amongst Presbyterians. You might find additional consolation (and significant perspectives) from Elsa Tamez' Orbis book on justification as inclusion of the excluded (my former student, now head of the Univeridad Biblica of Costa Rica, and an Other Sheep board member). My Princeton review called it the most significant book on justification since the Reformation. Basically, of course, she's trying to show why/how justification by faith in Paul was Good News to the Poor, which may be a more significant question than the kind traditionally asked in the survey.

Abrazos, Tom

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3. From Wayne Holst, Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Wayne is a Lutheran pastor, Prof at the Univ. of Calgary in missiology and related subjects.

Ed: Thanks for sharing what I would suggest is not so much a bombshell as a form of 'get real'. Americans and Canadians are more influenced by what is going on out there in the general culture than what they are hearing from the pulpit or academic lectern. I believe that Lutherans may have been protected longer from the influence of mainstream culture because there were certain ethnic and traditional forces at work.

Now, much of that has broken down. I see the same forces at work in Catholicism, and other 'minority' elements in the non-AngloSaxon dominated elements of CanAm societies today.

As much as I would like to think that my Lutheran heritage and traditions have much to offer our respective cultures in Canada and the United States, I sense we must face the reality that general social forces will be more influential than those which are provided by the churches themselves.

Wayne

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4. From Cynthia Fazzini, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Cynthia is an ELCA pastor.

Thanks for this, Ed. I am always happy to receive ThTh. I went right to the Luth. Broth. website and copied out the whole thing. I had never heard of this survey and wonder why it was not distributed by LB to all pastors! I'd like

your permission to distribute your summary to a group of senior students at the [Lutheran] Philadelphia seminary, whom I lead each Monday in a section of the required senior class "Pastor as Theologian." We talk about internship experiences, and I try (VERY HARD!!) to get them out of psychobabble and into talking theologically. Your summary would be a good way to illustrate to them just what the people in the pews believe!

Cynthia

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5. From Michael Borgas, Tanunda, South Australia. Michael teaches both religion and physics (I think that's his combo. Maybe it's math—or "maths" as they say in the Commonwealth.) at Faith Lutheran High School near Adelaide.

I greatly appreciate your ThTh listings. It always challenges me to think and think deeply. I'm really struggling here with students that I teach. It is just a theoretical gospel, even if they hear it. It is a malignant church. A church too busy to grow deep. A church too busy to grow at all. . . . Lutherans would be shocked by Luther. Christians would be infuriated by Jesus. They would silence Luther and kill Jesus all over again. But they so rarely hear Luther or Jesus. We are all so busy with the crazy circles that we rush around in. Have you seen the Truman show? A brilliant film. We too must break out of our phony worlds and learn the hard truth.

Michael

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6. And finally this teasing riddle from John Roxborough in Auckland, New Zealand. John is a Missions Prof at Bible College of New Zealand. A super-cyber-whiz, he manages the website for IAMS, the International Association for Mission Studies.

Dear Ed. In the light of your summary of the state of Lutheran theology – and probably everybody else's as well – I think you need to do something about the name of your list server. SABBATHEOLOGY@SOMETHING.COM Has the "L" got anything to do with "legal" or does the softness apply more to its homophone?

John