

Family Ethos in the Light of the Reformation

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[From Family Relationships and the Church, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, 1970, later published in The Promising Tradition: A Reader in Law-Gospel Reconstructionist Theology, ed. By Edward Schroeder, St. Louis, MO, 1973. Reprinted with permission.]

The previous chapter discloses the medieval data on the *family* strictly speaking. Concern for “family” in the Christian Middle Ages focused on marriage and the issues of sexuality, the relations of the sexes to each other inside and outside of marriage, and the celibate alternative to marriage. Insofar as the children figured in the consideration, the view was something like this: Family is a marriage to which children have been added. Medieval theology emphasized marriage by making it a sacrament and at the same time rated celibacy above marriage. Nothing so sacral was predicated to family. That fact itself is curious. Every man in his own biography finds himself first of all in a family. He is initially in biological relation to the other humans— father and mother—who brought him to life. Why was this basic datum of human existence so unattended in medieval Christian theology? Whatever the reasons may have been, the opposite was true for Reformation theology.

The Gospel and the Family

At the heart of the Reformation was of course the rediscovery of the Gospel—not the rediscovery of the family. Yet in the case of

Luther himself the latter (the disclosure of what God is doing in families) came to be seen related to and yet distinct from the former (what God is doing in the Gospel).¹ The Reformation insight into the Gospel was precisely this, that in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ God was doing a work that was distinct from and at one fundamental point contrary to *all* His other works in creation, including His work in the human family. In the Gospel God does indeed create a new man: but this creation—via forgiveness—is distinct from the way He creates and preserves human babies. The one point where the Gospel is “clean contrary” is at the point of forgiveness; it is contrary to all the critical evaluation God makes of mankind via the normal structures of the creation wherein He criticizes man for being a sinner. In Luther’s own rhetoric God’s operations in the “normal” contours of parent-child relationships were subsumable under the caption of God’s left-hand kingdom: His twofold work of creation and criticism. He could also sum up this double work under the single word “law.”

THE FAMILY: GOD’S CREATION IN ACTION

It is patent especially to us moderns that the “laws” of biology and genetics are operative in the procreation of children. We know even better than the Reformation age did how the “laws” of psychological and sociological interaction give shape to children and parents as they live together in family units. To call this the work of God’s law is to see that God’s “law” encompasses much more than just God’s legislation.³ For Luther it was an obvious way of making sense—contemporary and practical sense—out of the First Article of the Christian creed. This primordial biological operation is the agency whereby “God has created me...has given me and still sustains my body and soul, all my limbs and senses, my reason and all the faculties of my mind.”⁴ The family is the agency whereby I am created and then

preserved for the first 10, 20, or more years of my life. God does this for every man via his parents. This operational sequence is part of the Creator's law.

Thus family is the operational and functional relationship of parents and children. It is a process of God's creation in action. It has validity in that God Himself keeps it going, and does so apart from any linkage to Jesus Christ and His Gospel. Even where Christ and the Gospel are unknown, God still keeps families happening. He continues to work through this medium. But then that raises the question: What all is God up to in this medium?

We have already touched on the fact that families are the agency for the continuation of God's human creation. In his expanded explanation of the First Article of the Creed and the Fourth Commandment of the Decalog in the Large Catechism,⁵ Luther spells out how I am the recipient of my own existence (in fact, my identity) via my parents. The biggest gift my parents bestow on me is *me*! God through them gives me my existence, and once given, He through them keeps it going.

The Family "Places" Us

But there's more to it. By means of this channel God does more than just bring me into existence somewhere in the cosmos. He puts me via my family ties into a specific place. Existence bestowed via parents is *placement*, God's placement. God places me in a particular family, with a particular father and mother whose particular hereditary qualities transfer to me. He may place me with particular siblings, and with this goes particular placement in the "stepladder" of this particular sibling group. I am placed into a particular century, a particular race and nation, a particular economic and social class, and so forth. All of that is "given" to me by the "accident" of my birth.

Luther's own German words for this placement were *Ordnung* and *Stand*. He uses them practically as synonyms. So does the Augsburg Confession when it speaks of them as "ordinances of God," "orders of God," and "stations of life."⁶ They constitute the actual space where God has placed me in my particular life, the "estate" where God stations me. In English we still talk about the "estate" of marriage. For Luther the family was also an estate, as were the other placements into which God moves people by the natural operation of the laws of human society.

God's "Order" for His Work

But God is doing more than just putting me down in a particular place in His creation. Having given me placement, He calls me to work—to work for Him. Operating from my particular station, I am called to be God's own operator performing His *opus*, His work. And now the term "order" helps give shape to the work I do in my stance. Order means that the context in which I exist is not unspecified, is not completely at random, is not first of all to be created by myself. I come into the world already placed in a family order, a sibling order, a racial and national order, and so on. Whether these orders are themselves healthy or not is secondary to the inescapable fact that they are indeed in operation—in operation upon me.

Luther did not envision the orders as primeval standard blueprints or organizational chart boxes into which God places people. Rather his own focus was on their dynamic operational character—for good or ill—to give concrete shape to the particular placement, and that means the particular biography that every man has. It is via these particular orders, in short, that God has made me, and has made me the particular, peculiar, unique individual being that I am. The orders are the instruments of the Creator in bestowing creation to my own creaturely existence. And above all they are the framework in

which God calls me to carry out His work.⁷

The actual shape of one of the orders which is God's instrument for concretizing my existence, is variable. Nevertheless what God is up to in the national, social, economic, familial, and matrimonial order—that does remain constant. He is keeping His creation going, concretizing and criticizing it. The historical shape of any given order is open to historical development simply because it is a piece of history.⁸ The key question of any order, whatever shape it has, is: Is God's law in its twofold work being carried forward in creation?

The family as order and as placement for doing God's work in the world, along with all the other orders in which God places every man, stood in sharp contrast for Luther to another kind of "order" in particular: the specious religious and monastic orders.⁹ Apart from their worksrighteous piety, perhaps their second most objectionable characteristic was that they were an order of "self-chosen works." This criticism Luther levels throughout his treatment of the Ten Commandments in the Large Catechism, but it is especially explicit in his treatment of the Fourth Commandment.¹⁰ Here he chastises the works which the monastics think up for themselves to do (shaving their pates, going on pilgrimages, etc.) in place of the "work" God calls them to do as responsible children of their own parents and responsible parents for the next generation. Both responsibilities they escape by virtue of their entry into the monastic "order." When God originally places us in the order "family," He thereby ordained much good and terribly urgent work for us to do.

How God Orders the "Orders"

But where is it that God ordains this work for us? How does He "order" it? Simply in the Bible? In explicitly worded commands

and prohibitions? Although the monks laid claim to Biblical injunctions for “leaving father and mother” and avoiding the anxiety of family affairs, Luther did not go to the Bible to get specific “orders” for whatever work is to be done in the world. Luther’s natural orders are not patterned ways in which God, so to speak, “gives orders,” as a police officer issues traffic orders, “ordering” drivers to do this and that. This is not at all what Luther means by the “orders which God commands.” A better rendering of this might be “the orders which God *ordains*, institutes, establishes.” By virtue of God’s natural placement of us in this order, He assigns us our work—often without a word of command or a moral injunction so much as uttered.

Take the order of marriage. How does God get young people to do His continuing creating “work” of falling in love, marrying, having intercourse, and the like? By giving them Biblical injunctions to this effect? Hardly. Do Christian young folks court and marry each other and have babies because God once said in the Book of Genesis, “Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth”? Not really. What prompts them to do this creational work is the way God has arranged them. He put them in “order,” one male and the other female with powerful sexual drives and romantic interests and mutual attractiveness. (The Lutheran Confessions emphasize this point very earthily.)¹¹ Only the moralist would pretend that a “Christian view of marriage” must mean a Christian set of marital prescriptions and advice. Because so much of this is simply “doin’ what comes natcherly,” Luther’s orders are indeed the “natural orders,” as opposed to the moralistic monks’ “*self-chosen* orders.”

The same sort of “naturalness” is operative with respect to parent-child relationships, where the work assignments likewise emerge, often enough without specially revealed commandments from God—right out of the already existing child-parent relationship. For many a vexing parental problem Luther would

say: The place to go for help is not the Bible, but some wise, experienced Christian mother. Moral injunctions already presuppose a prior, highly complex set of orderings. This is very obviously true of the Fourth Commandment. "Honor your father and your mother" takes for granted that I already *have* a father and mother, indeed that there already is an "I" brought into existence by this father and mother. We can be sure that Bible passages and Christian morals advice were not the prime movers in bringing this about.¹²

The role which the Biblical commandments *do* play in Luther's view of the family must still be discussed. We shall do so later, after looking at the critical element of the twofold work which God gets done via His natural orders in creation.

THE FAMILY: GOD'S CRITICISM IN ACTION

In Luther's model all the orders of creation were lumped together under the rubric of God's lefthand kingdom. This kingdom, like its correlative kingdom of God's right hand, is not viewed as territory or as a particular location, but as the regnant action which God Himself is taking with all the valid, authorized authority that a human king has in rightly reigning over his subjects. Thus as Luther portrays it, the kingdom of the left hand is not only a kingdom for getting God's creating done, but simultaneously, for getting sinful creatures *accused*. "The law *always* accuses,"¹³ and so does God's left-hand kingdom, very concretely and life-relatedly. Accordingly, by seeing the left-hand kingdom as the regime of an accusatory law, Luther's understanding of "calling" and *Stand* can be seen at a still deeper level of meaning than we have exposed above.

Up until now we have seen order, calling, *Stand* (Luther himself often uses them interchangeably) as the placement where we are concretely put, and put to work, or at least called to go to

work for God. A man's calling is not just his being called to do godly work and to give godly witness through his labor, both in his professional vocation and in the multiple wageless works he does for people in the various natural orders where God has placed him. No, his calling is also his being called to *account*, and this by God. That is his *Stand*, his witness stand. And it is precisely by these flesh-and-blood human relationships that a man, as father or as son, is bound. They serve as God's prosecuting attorneys against him.

The "Critical" Function of Families

A man's own children are the accusing finger of God for him. Their protestations of injustice ("Daddy, that's not fair!"), their retributive responses, or their silent, twisted personalities are God's law in action, evaluating the work of one of God's ordered parents. Not from somewhere on high but from one's children come the scales that weigh, approve, or find wanting a man or woman as God's agent for fathering or mothering one of His creatures. And of course the same critical action operates in the opposite direction. God's critical (judgmental) evaluation of children occurs through His fatherly and motherly workmen who call these children to account— and call them to account not just in general, but in that particular order which links both of them to each other. What are they criticized for? For not obeying mother's instructions to clean up their room? Yes, but more than that. For being unloving to their parents? Yes, but more than that, too. Finally, if parents in the family order really are instruments of God's always accusing law then they are accusing these people (to be sure, "their own" children) of what God accuses them, namely, of *sin*. Parents are God's agents for accusing these God-created children of being sinful sons and daughters. Accusing a person of sin does not, of course, mean carping at a person for his mistakes, but passing

on to him the verdict that he is not the person God wants him to be.

To be sure, parents as prosecutors, who are themselves equally and mutually prosecuted by their children, may well distort the purity with which they carry out their role as God's prosecuting attorneys, since they too are sinful also in their prosecutors' role. Nevertheless, even though they are prosecuted prosecutors, they convey God's accusation of sinners: "You are not the persons I wanted to you to be in this particular placement where I put you, that is, linked to these parents whom I called you to serve as their sons, and to those siblings whom I called you to serve as brothers. You are not sinners in general, but in this particular ordered relationship you are sinners—sinners as sons." Father and mother likewise get accused by their own offspring functioning as God's prosecuting attorneys to pass on them His verdict: "You are not just a sinner in general, but a sinner-father, a sinner-mother, and your works do follow you."

God's Left-Hand Kingdom and His Inscrutable Forgiveness

What does God have in mind with this left-hand kingdom and its multi-ordered regime of criticism and accusation? That question, of course, is no minor issue. The fact is: It is *the* question of the universe. Just what is God up to in the whole of His creation—not only in the galaxies and among the planets, but also in human history, in families and in marriages, and in the intimacies, intricacies, agonies, ecstasies, and the mortality of human existence? Perhaps we could have deduced His creational and critical work in the world by careful and keen observation and analysis. St. Paul thinks so in the opening chapters of Romans. But that doesn't yet give us any answer to the question: What for? Yes, what is the kingdom of the left hand for? For

just keeping the wheel of creation going but then, as far as man's sphere is concerned, critically cutting it down to size, finally to the size of a box that's buried six feet under? There is a rationale to that; it does make sense, the kind of retributive legal sense that operated when Adam and Eve were evicted from God's garden. But why continue creation and criticism, if the upshot of it all is that all God gets out of it is one disobedient sinner after another?

In Luther's own career it was the writers of the Old Testament Psalter and the apostles John and Paul in the New Testament who were his major mentors in getting an answer. St. Paul said: "For God has consigned all men to disobedience, that He may have mercy upon all. O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways!" (Rom. 11:32-33). The incredible thing that no one would ever have guessed is that God is really out to *redeem* His incriminated world. What makes this so incredible is that this is in substance the exact opposite of what He is actually executing via the left-hand operation of His orders of creation.

There is no unambiguous evidence in creation itself that redemption is what God is really up to. And if it weren't for one thing, there would be no grounds at all for such an incredible conviction. That one thing, of course, is the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Incredible (for Paul, at least) is not the "minor" miracles associated with Jesus' life and ministry, but the major "coup" that God Himself executed when He let His Son be executed in the immutable operation of His own divine criticism. In that very event He executed the agents for criticism themselves: His own judgment of sin, His own wrath, His own verdict of death. That's what Paul is marveling at in the verses cited above. "How inscrutable!" (Rom. 12:33). Who would ever have guessed it? Who would have thought

that God would trump the cards in His left hand with the Person who sits at His right hand (Christ), and do it in that deep, inscrutable way?¹⁴

It is this insight into the Gospel that was at the basis of Luther's way of relating the two kingdoms (God's ambidextrous works: the creational criticism of His left hand and the Christcentered forgiveness of His right hand) to each other.¹⁵ The distinctions between these two kingdoms is for Luther fundamental for his understanding of families. The family as God's creation is God's work, but it is not Gospel. Therefore it is the work of God's left hand. What makes the left-hand kingdom left-handed is not its structured character (as is sometimes erroneously ascribed to Luther), in contrast to the notion that the right-hand kingdom operates without structure, by means of some sort of grace-full osmosis or just at random. No, it is not the family's structuredness that makes it left-handed, in distinction from God's right-hand operation. Rather it is the fact that the family is a *family*, which puts it into the kingdom of the left hand. What makes it left-handed is the sort of things that happen in it: the creating and preserving of human life, the factual inequality and subordination of one human being to another, the mutual criticism and retribution that are carried out, the legal modes that operate to generate and preserve life.

The Left-Hand Kingdom and the Right-Hand Kingdom

After looking hard at the Gospel, Luther's eyes see more clearly what the end of all things is—all things already now in operation in God's creation. The family is God's work, but it is not Gospel. It is a component of the "heaven and earth [which] shall pass away." Family life as such is for Luther's

eschatology¹⁶ a strictly interim arrangement; it is strictly provisional. In the new kingdom of the *right* hand, *which is already present* though far from consummated, there is neither male nor female. In it people will neither marry nor be given in marriage. There are no distinctions there of parents and children. This is reflected in Gal. 3:28 and Matt. 12:46-50. Families, like the left-hand kingdom to which they belong, are in that sense a makeshift.

But this does not mean that in the right-hand kingdom there is no "structure." For example, this right-hand kingdom's very essential "order" of brotherhood and mutual forgiveness ¹⁷ is for Luther a highly structured thing. In fact, it is the kind of new and revolutionary structure which is already at work in, with, and under the structures of the left-hand kingdom, ultimately to *subvert* them. It doesn't only support them and help fulfill them. Grace doesn't only enable us to "keep" the Law. It also begins to undermine the Law and its whole vast order of judgment. For example, in the family the distinctions between husband and wife, parents and children operate not only to provide for and sustain one another, but also to keep each in his or her place ("Stand"), thereby to identify each one's unique responsibility and thereby, in turn, to expose each one's sin. But when, say, a father repents to his daughter for having been unreasonable with her and she absolves him of his sin—perhaps even absolves him in the name of the triune God—behold what "subversion" is going on! Now already the whole legal order of subordination and superordination is giving way.

At first it sounds incongruous to talk about subverting and undermining God's left-hand kingdom with His right-hand one. Worse yet, it sounds impertinent. And indeed it would be so if men set about doing that on their own. But the one who initiated this subversive revolution is God Himself. In Jesus Christ God Himself is at work turning His own left-hand worldly operation

upside down. Christ is the one who really initiated the leveling of important, lawful differences. What a “threat” His forgiveness is to the whole authority structure! See how one whole kind of authority—and a God-ordained authority it is—is being subtly revolutionized into a new and opposite kind of authority, one which *ultimately* makes the family and all other natural orders obsolescent.

This subversion (literally, “turning under” one reality for the sake of another) is not complete until the consummation of God’s eternal plan, the *eschaton*. But then it will indeed be complete. And the slow phasing out of all the old left-hand orders has already been in process for two millennia. Luther’s revolutionary eschatology saw marriage, family, state, and all the rest already being marked for replacement, precisely by the way in which Christians *lived* in these orders. Christ’s people do not jump out of the left-hand orders once they’ve been grafted into Christ’s new order of love and forgiveness. But they cannot and do not treat the left-hand orders as ultimates. They have a foot in the new age, and what they still have in God’s left-hand old age is had “as though they had none...For the form of this world is passing away” (1 Cor. 7:29ff.)¹⁸

TWO SPECIFIC EMPHASES

This is the foundation for Luther’s perspective on the order of the family. One needs to comprehend this larger picture in order to make sense of specific elements in his rhetoric on the family. We shall look at two such specifics. The first is: What are the implications for family life of Luther’s (that is, the Scripture’s) view of God as “Father” and of human beings as His “children?” The second is: What does Luther do with the Fourth Commandment in his catechisms?

God as Father

There's really nothing very obvious about casting God in the masculine gender, except insofar as God is thought of as man's progenitor, ancestor, creator. But who, especially today, would pick the metaphor of "father" to describe God's compassion and His forgiving love? Today, if we picked our God-metaphor from family life at all, we'd be more apt to think of "mother" as more suggestive of love, mercy, and kindness. More likely, we'd look outside the parent-child relationship altogether, perhaps to the love relationship of courtship and marriage: the "lover," the "bridegroom," the "husband."

The trouble with these metaphors, Biblical as they also are, is that they fail to convey how God is *superior* to us, especially in view of our egalitarian way of thinking nowadays about husbands and wives, namely, as equals. And what makes the mother-metaphor deficient is that, for Luther's time at least and of course for Biblical times, it did not sufficiently convey the implication of divine *authority*. (In our own more matriarchal society it may be that the mother attains more and more to the authority figure once represented by the father.) For Luther "father" helps to describe God, because within family organization the father is presumably the one who has the last word, so to speak, as the household magistrate or judge.

But then, notice what it does mean to call a *loving, forgiving* God "Father." He is not forgiving in the sense that He is nonjudgmental. He is unstintingly judgmental. His forgiveness is not an *absence* of criticism. No, it is the *overcoming* of His criticism, the *trumping* of His judgment with His love. This characteristic of what Luther understood to be the real depth of fatherly love—the father not ignoring the fault of the children but chastising it, yet in such a way that the chastisement itself could then be upstaged, one-upped, superseded by the

father's forgiveness— is of course primordially demonstrated in God's relation to the death of Jesus. Here God and Jesus are related as "Father" and "Son." And so also in the human family the "apple" is to the "rod," not as a weakening of the punishment or a balancing of it, but as Easter is to the Cross—as a *victory* over the rod! That sort of dialectical interplay between judgment on the one hand and forgiveness on the other—not just *both* forgiveness *and* judgment, rather forgiveness as the triumph over a likewise valid judgment—had real implications for Luther's view of familial superordination and subordination. Because the father was the family *judge* par excellence, his love was the family's love par excellence because of what all this fatherly love overcame in its opposite: fatherly judgment. Luther's favorite way of describing the conflict between divine criticism and divine mercy—and a conflict it was, not just a nice, pragmatic balance—was as "this very joyous duel."¹⁹ When he spoke this way, his thoughts about the parallels with human fatherhood in the Christian home were often near at hand, as his illustrations prove.

Another example of how Luther's view of the family, especially the father-child relationship, is derivable from his doctrine about God appears in the way Luther finds the doctrine of justification by *faith* being expressed in the Johannine part of the New Testament. Luther finds John describing "faith" often enough as "love." Our faith in Christ can also be expressed as our love for Him. But how does such love, that is, such faith, justify us before God? Well, God is to Jesus as a father is to his only son: very fond and very proud of him. And as also happens with such fond fathers, they warm up to people who have the good judgment to admire their sons. (Just see how much the baby-buggy-pushing father likes you when you stop to compliment his young offspring!) Accordingly, the Johannine writer sees the disciples as "loving" this only Son of God, and the Son's Father

likewise loves them as lovers of His Son, even though the very same disciples (as Luther marvels) are accused by Jesus as being in all other respects “sinners.”²⁰ In connecting this view of the divine Father and His divine Son to human father-son relationships, we might smile and say: How daringly anthropomorphic Luther was willing to be in his picture of God! But that is only half the story. The other half is the way in which Luther was willing to see some of the features of *human* behavior, for example, a father’s fond pride in his son, as a reflection of the *divine*.

The Fourth Commandment

Luther’s exposition of the Fourth Commandment in the Large Catechism is an extensive and intensive treatment of the family.²¹ Fatherhood and motherhood are here designated “estates.” The persons standing in these estates are “God’s representatives,” and they deserve to be treated as such. This is not to deify them or to idealize away their failings, but to recognize what God is doing for children through them, in short, to reckon with the “hidden majesty (God’s own) within them.”

Luther laments that in his day this divine vocation which parents execute is “despised and brushed aside, and no one recognizes it as God’s command or as a holy, divine word and precept.” This is the “commandment in its full glory,” but that glory has been unseen, and the counterglory and “order” of the monastic life, so rampant by the end of the Middle Ages, is evidence enough for Luther that this commandment is not understood. It is not the insubordination of children to parents that is at issue. Instead it is the “work” God wants done in the world. Here Luther contrasts “their self-devised works” with the family task “that God has chosen and fitted you to perform...so precious and pleasing to him.” He paints the picture of the monks on the Last Day, who shall “blush with shame before a

little child that has lived according to this commandment and confess that with the merits of their whole lives they are not worthy to offer him a cup of water.”

A superficial observer might read Luther’s lament as a typical oldster’s complain about the generation gap. But he is really aiming at what we today call cultural criticism. Although the Middle Ages had sacramental things to say about marriage, it had lost its antenna for the godly character of the family.

No one will believe how necessary is this commandment, which in the past was neither heeded nor taught under the papacy. These are plain and simple words, and everyone thinks he already knows them well. So he passes over them lightly, fastens his attention on other things, and fails to perceive and believe how angry he makes God when he neglects this commandment, and how precious and acceptable a work he does when he observes it.²²

Luther’s point is not that children are flagrant fourth-Commandment breakers. Instead his analysis shows him that the medieval heritage has left parents in the lurch by not showing them God’s work via the family. Thus since no set of parents had themselves been shaped by such a family ethos at the time when they were children, “one fool trains another, and as they have lived, so live their children after them.” And yet Luther notes that it ought to be a most obvious fact to common-sense observation that “God feeds, guards, and protects us and how many blessings of body and soul he bestows upon us” through the family order. But here again the devil rules in the world; children forget [this estate of] their parents, as we all forget God.” If it weren’t for that, the commandment would never need to have been given. But this “perversity of the world God knows very well. By means of commandments, therefore, he reminds and impels everyone to consider what his parents have done for him.

Then everybody recognizes that he has received his body and life from them and that he has been nourished and nurtured by them when otherwise he would have perished a hundred times in his own filth."

What about the promise attached to this commandment, and to this one alone: "that you may have long life in the land where you dwell"? This promise is not like the promise of the Gospel. This promise is valid, to be sure, but it applies only to those who perform the qualifying conditions. Such a promise in fact is implicit in all the commandments. If you keep the commandments, you will be rewarded. But the hidden hook in this promise is its inversion for those who are commandment-breakers. Long life for commandment-keepers, but "penalty for him who disobeys." And the ultimate penalty is the antithesis to the promised reward, namely, "the grim reaper, Death! This, in short, is the way God will have it."

What we see in this survey is Luther's clear statement that the family is an operation of God's left-hand kingdom, a reign of law, where a man gets what he's got coming. Even promise and reward are his only if he fulfills the stipulations. In the human-to-human realm of family operations Luther is not so pessimistic as to doubt that reward situations ever arise. They do, and he acknowledges them. He is much more graphic, however, in sketching the way penalties for nonperformance are extended in the normal operations of multi-ordered daily life.

The Fourth Commandment's promise of long life, of course, is not to be confused with God's own gift of life in His Son. That life no one merits by performance in any case. That life God gives not to people who have fulfilled the performance prerequisites, but to those who have not, to sinners. And the reason He *does* do it is "for the sake of Jesus Christ."

Authority and the Parental Office

As Luther concludes his treatment of the commandment, he moves into the subject of authority. Here we see the grounds for his earlier affirmations about the “special distinction...which God has given parenthood above all estates that are beneath it.” Concerning the multiple placements we have with fellowmen, “the first and greatest” is that of our family ties to our parents. Life in left-hand kingdom relationships is lived in authority—authority under which we stand and authority which we exercise in our manifold placements. “Out of the authority of parents all other authority is derived and developed.”²³

Human existence in the world depends on the valid operation of authority in all the ordered placements where God locates us. Authority does not mean dictatorial tyranny. It is the authorized operation of God’s own representative in a particular order. But life under authority must be learned. Another way of saying it is that obedience (not servility) must be learned. Man needs to learn to live on the receiving end of someone else’s valid authority. Both, the one exercising authority and the one obeying it, are called into this placement and to this work by God Himself.

When he sounds his jeremiad on the general state of public affairs (“the world now so full of unfaithfulness, shame, misery, and murder”), Luther sees the cause of it all in the fact that “everyone wishes to be his own master, be free from all authority, care nothing for anyone and do whatever he pleases.” In short, people don’t know the Fourth Commandment. Apparently for Luther it is in the family—and perhaps here alone—that authority can be learned. Here parents have a workable given context for practicing their authority. And above all, here the matrix of love and trustworthiness on the part of the authority figures can be experienced by the children as they

learn to live with authority in both its creational and critical functions. For the recalcitrant one, who refuses obedience to valid authority, God's agencies—in extreme cases, the hangman—can by physical power enforce authority anyway. But a man finally delivered to the executioner can hardly be said to have learned to live under authority.

But are all such authority figures as “fathers by blood, fathers of a household, and fathers of the nation” inclined to carry out *God's work* with their authority? Or are they, too, tempted to exercise it in their own self-chosen works? Indeed they are so tempted, and they do succumb. So Luther devotes his concluding paragraphs to that very problem. He does not conclude on a very cheerful note. Indeed the whole kingdom of God's left hand by itself does not conclude cheerfully either. Any order, when populated by sinners, will not balance out to be total good news. Nevertheless a family can function well as God's left-hand agency without any Gospel or Gospel-trusting people in it. But what happens when Christ's people are present in a particular family? That we must yet examine.

Is There a “Christian” Family?

God's redemptive purpose, His right-hand work, realized in the cross and resurrection of Christ, are much less patent than the worldwide operations of the divine left hand. But they are not inoperative in, with, and under the orders of the left hand. Yet they operate only when they are concretely inserted by some agent for God's right hand. For wherever there stands a Christian—in family, marriage, economic, or political “order”—there God's right-hand kingdom has its agent present. It authorizes him to operate right within the contours of the orders of the other hand. A Christian uses his left-hand kingdom station—the factual placement and concrete linkage with people that are given him—as the platform for initiating and, if it has

already been begun in the person he is linked with, for continuing *the new order of God's own love and forgiveness*. In short, he injects Christ into the operating creational-critical order and assists God in generating the new creation at that very spot.

Consequently for Luther one must be careful in talking about a "Christian" family. As family it is God's left-hand kingdom work. It is, as it were, "non-Christic." When Christ has become "all in all," the "natural" family will have passed away. What Luther can comprehend under the combined terms of "Christian" and "family" is one or more Christians bound to one another in the natural order of a family. But then, strictly speaking, what is on the scene is not a new kind of family, but the operational body of Christ, the new creation, the new order of God's love and forgiveness. This new order uses the interpersonal linkage which this particular family configuration (an old order) provides, but uses it ultimately for nonfamily purposes—for tying people into Jesus Christ, and thereby tying them into the family of their heavenly Father.

There are no resources in the normal family "order" for doing this. The only resources anywhere are the means of grace that come from the Lord of the cross and of the empty tomb. So the only necessary perceptible difference between a family where Christians are present and one where they are not is this: In the former the Gospel will be "happening," Jesus Christ will be talked about and commended to family members and His forgiveness exchanged, even as the normal critical operations of the parent-child vocations expose the sinner still functioning in the other member. That is the only palpable difference that Luther would see as necessarily present in a "Christian family." He would expect, as does Christ, that the exchanged forgiveness would work to "subvert" other facets of family operations, but even if this subversion were scarcely palpable, the new creation is

there in that particular order of the old creation. It is there because Christ is there, insofar as even one or two (or more) are gathered at that placement *in His name*, naming Him as Lord and talking His name to one another.

CONCLUSIONS

1. In Reformation theology the family is seen to be the work of God, related to, yet distinct from, God's final word and work in the Gospel. In the distinction between Law and Gospel, between God's kingdom of the left hand and kingdom of the right hand, the family always belongs to the former.

2. The family is the primordial agency for God's placing a human being into His creation, and doing so with specific concretization—temporally, spatially, relationally. In this placement (order) the individual is given his station (*Stand*) and is called to work (*Beruf*).

3. The work of God to be carried out in these placements (the family is the only one of the many placements every man has) is twofold: God's continuing *creational care* and His *criticism of sinners*.

4. The inscrutable character of this circle of creation and criticism is resolved in the cross and resurrection of Jesus, God's right-hand Man, through whom God trumps the twofold work of His own left hand.

5. The right-hand work of God in Christ brings a new order and structure into the old orders of the creation. This new order is the order of God's Gospel of love and forgiveness. The important element in this new order is Christ, the Head of the body, from whom the whole structure lives and grows. The Gospel lifts life to a new order.

6. In this new order, as in the old ones, God's agents for His operations are people. The operations differ by virtue of what the agents are administering, whether God's law or God's Christ.

7. Because of the very character of God's right-hand operation, the orders of God's old creation are relegated to penultimate, provisional, makeshift significance. They are components of "the form of this world," which by God's own new action in Christ "is passing away."

8. When the grace of Christ operates in a person whose placement is in the family order, he is not only being supported in fulfilling the work of this order, but is also ultimately subverting the very order itself. This "subversion" begins when the Gospel is operative, and it comes to completion with the consummation of all things in eternal life.

9. For Luther the word "father," when applied to God, evokes both the image of authority (for God's creational and critical work) and the image of forgiveness (God's action in Christ trumping judgment with mercy.)

10. Luther's exposition of the Fourth Commandment in the catechisms illustrates many of these theses.

11. Any Lutheran discussion of the "Christian family" must reckon with the fact that these two words are on opposite sides of the line that distinguishes God's two kingdoms.

NOTES-CHAPTER 5

1. Curiously enough, much of the secondary literature on the *family* in Reformation thought neglects to draw the picture in relation to the specific impact of the Gospel in Reformation theology. In addition, the family is often actually relegated to secondary consideration while the subjects of marriage and

sexuality dominate the discussion. This is true, e.g., of the chapter, "Reformation Perspectives on Family Issues," in Roy W. Fairchild and John Charles Wynn, *Families in the Church: A Protestant Survey* (New York: Association Press, 1961), and even of William H. Lazareth's *Luther on the Christian Home* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960). An exception to this is Helmut Begemann, *Strukturwandel der Familie* (Hamburg: Furche Verlag, 1960), who draws on Luther's "two regime" view of God's actions to analyze what happens in human family structures. Central for the perspective on Luther reflected in this chapter are the works of Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1962), pp. 59 ff, and *The Christian Ethos* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), pp. 81 ff.

2. The twofold function of God's law: preserving and continuing creation while at the same time exercising the divine criticism upon it, represents Luther's standard exegesis whenever he addresses the subject. Yet both of these functions of the Law are distinguished from the novel function of God's Gospel. See, e.g., his commentary on Galatians in *Luther's Works* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963 and 1964). Vols. 26 and 27, passim. A concise summary both of the Law's twofold function and the Gospel's alternative is Werner Elert, *Law and Gospel*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967).

3. The extensiveness of the territory covered by the term "Law" in Luther's theology is documented by Gerhard Ebeling in his *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), pp. 391 ff.

4. From the explanation of the First Article of the Apostles' Creed in the Small Catechism. *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959), p. 345.-Cf. Werner Elert, *The Christian Ethos*. In Ch. 3, "The Natural Orders," Elert clarifies the term "orders": "The orders which the Decalog presupposes in its command and prohibitions are orders

designated as orders of creation. We belong to them by 'nature' through our creatureliness. In His relation to these orders God is not so much a lawgiver as a creator and ruler. The term 'order,' however, is somewhat ambiguous and requires clarification before we continue to use it" (p. 77). "The order of creation is not a product of the creative but the regulative activity of God, it is existential situation." (P.78).

5. Ibid., pp. 379 ff., 411 ff.

6. Ibid., pp. 37-38.

7. See Elert's treatment of the orders in Luther's ethics, *The Christian Ethos*, pp. 77-81.

8. It may well be that Luther did not enunciate this as clearly as we historically conscious moderns would wish to have it. Nevertheless Luther has no theological investment to protect by denying the mutability of the orders. See the section "Die Familie" in Elert's as yet untranslated Vol. II of *Morphologie des Lutheriums* (Munich, 1953), pp. 80-124. (The Structure of Lutheranism referred to in n.1 is Vol. 1).

9. See the recent work by Bernhard Lohse, *Monchtum und Reformation: Luthers Auseinandersetzung mit dem Monchsideal des Mittelalters*, (Gottingen, 1963).

10. Tappert, pp. 380 ff

11. Ibid., pp. 51 f., 239 ff., and passim.

12. Elert, *Ethos*, pp. 81 ff.

13. Tappert, p. 112.

14. This is the way Luther regularly preaches on this text, the standard Epistle for Trinity Sunday. See, e.g., St. Louis

edition of *Luthers Sammtliche Schriften* (1883), XII, 637.

15. Luther's two-kingdom teaching is very likely the most debated item in recent Luther scholarship. The view taken in this chapter is that of Elert, *Ethos*, pp. 289 ff., of Ebeling, pp. 386-406 ("The Necessity of the Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms"), and most recently of Ulrich Asendorf, "Die Lehre von den beiden Reichen und die Theologie der Revolution," in *Jahrbuch des Martin Luther Bundes*, ed. Johannes Schulze (Erlangen & Rothenburg ob der Tauber: Martin Luther Verlag, 1969), pp. 34-51. Spokesmen for a considerably different view of Luther's teaching on the two kingdoms are, e.g., E. Wolf and J. Heckel.

16. See Ulrich Asendorf, *Eschatologie bei Luther* (Gottingen, 1967). See also Begemann, Ch. 7.

17. See Elert's treatment of "The Order of Love and Forgiveness," *Ethos*, pp. 345 ff.

18. The author here is using "subvert" not in the modern, negative sense. From the human point of view we may use the terms "convert" or "turn around." The Gospel takes over as the ethos of the person living under God's grace. This is imperfect in this life: it comes to perfection only at the consummation of God's eternal plan. (The editor).

19. *Luther's Works*, 26.264.

20. See, e.g., Luther's sermonic exegesis of John 14:21 ("He who loves Me will be loved by My Father"), *Luther's Works*, 24, 145ff.

21. All the citations in this section are from Tappert, pp. 379-89.

22. Tappert, p. 384.

23. Fairchild and Wynn (p.6) reflect this thought, although they do not reflect Luther's two-kingdom theology, as we have sought to do in this chapter, when they say: "In its own distinct way, the family serves as an educational institution without peer throughout our culture. It is indeed, as Martin Luther named it, 'a school for living.' But the educational process of the home is seldom instruction as such: it is nearly always in terms of nurture. The home specializes in informal education. The nurturing process is found in the ordinary daily life of the home. It begins with supplying the baby's physical needs, and continues as members of the family communicate their way of life, their bases for making decisions, and their interpretation of values. It is here, in fact, that the rudimentary beginnings of faith are to be located: an understanding of what love is, of forgiveness, of relationships with persons, and gradually a relationship with God. These grow out of home life."

[FamilyEthos](#)