

# Law and Gospel Theology: An Unused Resource for Social Ministry

Colleagues,

First off, A REQUEST FOR FUNDS.

Robin Morgan, Ed and Marie Schroeder have been invited to “do Thursday Theology” at an international conference middle of January 2003 at the University of Aarhus in Denmark. “The Future of Lutheran Theology: Charisms & Contexts” is the conference theme. Folks already registered (61 so far) are from all over the planet.

Both Robin and I, d.v., will be presenting papers there. Today’s ThTh posting is the current draft of Robin’s paper. Next week’s ThTh will show you mine (if I get it done.). After the Aarhus event Marie and I travel further east to St. Petersburg, Russia, for some Thursday Theologizing with Lutheran seminarians there. [Yes, in the middle of winter, that is crazy. But they asked.]

The price tag for the whole ball of wax comes to \$3,000.

So we hold out our tincup and ask for your help to put Thursday Theology into these venues. **Contributions to Crossings are tax-deductible in the USA.** If we get more than we need—wouldn’t that be something!—we’ll earmark the extra for similar sorties next year. E.g., there’s one pending for the Lutheran Seminary in Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia. If promoting this cause is your cuppa tea, **send your check—payable to “Crossings”** – to

***The Crossings Office***

***P.O.Box 7011***

***Chesterfield, MO 63006-7011.***

Designate your gift "Aarhus Conference." Thanks.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## **Law and Gospel Theology: An Unused Resource for Social Ministry**

**[A Presentation for the Aarhus (Denmark) Conference, Jan. 16-20, 2003]**

**By Robin J. Morgan**

One of the ongoing struggles in Christian life is the transition from Sunday to Monday. What does our relationship with God mean the other six days a week? Especially in our social ministry endeavors, how do we live as Christians? There are many factors, which are relevant to these questions, but I am going to look at only one – our theological foundation.

Lutherans have two useful theological categories through which we can read and understand the Bible and the world – law and gospel. The law is how we learn what is God-pleasing and how God shows us our sin. How we learn what is God-pleasing is called the civil use of the law. How God shows us our sin is the theological use of the law. I will be focusing on the civil use of the law. One scripture verse to keep in mind is Micah 6:8, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?" The civil use of the law is how God gets creation cared for.

The gospel is how we learn what God has done through Jesus

Christ to forgive our sins and reclaim us as God's own. Through Christ we become worthy through no effort of our own. We are redeemed, bought back from Satan by Jesus Christ's sacrifice on our behalf. The gospel is the means by which God gets redemption of the world done. . Even though these definitions very clearly distinguish law and gospel from each other, it is important that we continue to remember these differences when we begin to look at our lives as Christians in the world.

Many Christians think about social ministry by beginning with Christ's admonition to reach out to the world in love. ('as the Father sends me, so send I you"). Though love is a result of Christ's work of redemption in the life of a Christian, it is the civil use of the law that calls each and every human being to care for creation.

The civil use of the law had been in operation long before Jesus of Nazareth came on the scene in first century Palestine. Care of creation has been going on since the beginning. Human beings were first called to care for the world in Genesis ("The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it." Gen. 2:15). Adam and Eve were the first human beings, not the first Lutherans nor even the first Christians. Our first parents were charged with the care of creation as every human being since them has been charged. There is no difference here between Christian, Jew, Hindu, Atheist, Muslim or Wiccan when it comes to this calling. We are all, as human beings, called to care for creation. This care for creation is the civil use of the law.

To narrow the focus to a specific social ministry concern, let's look at Luther's explanation of the seventh commandment in the Large Catechism:

"But beware of how you deal with the poor – there are many of

them now – who must live from hand to mouth. If you act as if everyone has to live by your favor, if you skin and scrape them right down to the bone, if you arrogantly turn away those who need your aid, they will go away wretched and dejected, and, because they can complain to no one else, they will cry out to heaven. Beware of this, I repeat, as if it were the devil himself. Such sighs and cries are no laughing matter, but will have an effect too great for you and all the world to bear. For they will reach God, who watches over poor, troubled hearts, and he will not leave them unavenged. But if you despise and defy this, see whom you have brought upon yourself. If you succeed and prosper, however, you may call God and me liars before the whole world.” [Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000, 419:247]

Luther places care of the poor in the seventh commandment, “You are not to steal.” Luther’s words here and the commandments, which he was explaining, are not exclusively addressed to Christians, but are addressed to all human beings. The Creator’s law, as Luther used it here expresses both uses of the law as the Reformers articulated them: the civil use and the theological use. Caring for the poor is part of our responsibility as human beings, that is an expression of the civil use of the law. Then Luther goes on to use the law theologically by warning us of the consequences of rejecting this responsibility from our Creator. There is no mention of Christ, of his love, of our faith in Him as impetus or motivation to care for the poor. These commandments apply to us whether we are Christians or not. Each and every human being has been mandated by the Creator to participate in the care of creation.

It is the second mandate from God to which Christians alone are called. As human beings, we are responsible for the care of

creation, the civil use of the law. As Christians, we are also called to participate in telling the world of God's promise in Christ, the redemption of creation, through preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments.

Here I believe we can learn from our Pentecostal sisters and brothers. Clodovis Boff, a Brazilian liberation theologian, says that even liberation theology has not been effective with the poorest of the poor in Brazil. As he was exploring the success of the new Pentecostal churches among these people, Boff asked a Baptist cab driver what he thought of the Pentecostal groups and he said, "They are intensive care units for those in misery." [Clodovis Boff, [www.sedos.org/english/boff\\_1.html](http://www.sedos.org/english/boff_1.html)]

Though there are many reasons the Pentecostals are effective with the poorest of the poor (hospitable atmosphere, strong sense of identity, ethical rigor, institutional flexibility, overflowing emotions – Boff), it is their core theological message that reaches to the very depths of their misery. "You think you have no value, you think you are worthless; but you are wrong. For Jesus, your value is infinite." [John Burdick, *Blessed Anastacia*, New York: Routledge, 1998, 125]

It is vital that we don't let law and gospel blur in our thinking as we work to make sense of the myriad of circumstances which we encounter every day. Christians who have become aware of and committed to care of creation issues through social justice ministries run by other Christians often assume that care of creation is a responsibility of Christians as Christians. However, the fact that we are now finally aware of our responsibility does not change how God originally set up the world and our place in it. I believe that Christians who continue to avail themselves of the nourishment of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Eucharist, prayer and fellowship with other like-minded Christians, can bring a unique perspective to social

ministry, to social justice work. Those of us who know that our worthiness is based on what Jesus Christ did, not on our own actions or inactions, and who know that for Jesus we have infinite value, have a unique kind of freedom to give our lives on behalf of the world. But again, our freedom in Christ does not change the first mandate we were originally given as human beings. Our freedom may enhance our ability to carry out that mandate, but it doesn't change it.

It also doesn't change the second mandate we were given in our baptisms to participate in sharing the good news of our Lord with others. This doesn't mean we coerce people to be baptized, it doesn't mean we force our beliefs on anyone else or that people who are not Christian are somehow sub-human. Instead we are free to offer the joy and peace of our relationship with Jesus to anyone who wants to hear about Him.

When we keep a clear understanding of the differences between law and gospel while also understanding how they work together, they can be useful resources for ministry, particularly social ministry, in our world today. A clear understanding of the civil use of the law, as distinguished from the theological use of the law and as distinguished from the gospel, can help Christians work side by side with all other human beings who respond to the Creator's mandate to care for the creation. By distinguishing social justice issues (care of creation) from our mandate to share the gospel of Jesus Christ (redemption of creation), we are able to move freely among our fellow human beings as fellow workers in the multitude of individual and collective activities that need doing to keep some semblance of social justice and peace in place in our world.

Likewise, our mandate to speak the gospel of Jesus Christ, to participate in the redemption of the world, can be undertaken as Christians who have been set free by the work of our Lord.

Speaking the gospel is not a substitute for taking care of the world, nor is care for creation a substitute for telling hungry souls about the healing power of Jesus. As Christians we have both of these mandates from our God. Law and gospel theology, properly distinguished, is the touchstone we need to carry out both of our responsibilities with integrity and respect for all with whom we live and work. We can stand side by side as equal partners with whoever is working to make the world a better place and when someone asks us about the hope that is in us, we can be ready to give an answer with gentleness and reverence. We have the resources to live our lives as God through Christ would have us live them.