

More Artifacts from Earlier Days in Australia. Ethics

Colleagues,

Digging around in those old Aussie file folders (from 1994) some more—this time the one on Ethics—I found these two items. The first was an imagined letter to Dietrich Bonhoeffer—and then, his response! The class was reading DB’s Ethics book. The second is a “crossing” of John Stott’s book on ethics (also a class textbook, chosen before I was assigned to teach the course) with St. Paul’s epistle to the Galatians. Here they are.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

P.S. Also in that Ethics file was a 13-page “Vademecum for Bonhoeffer’s ETHICS,” literally a “Go-with me” step-by-step as we walk/talk our way through his entire ethics book. Maybe that could be posted somewhere on the Crossings website.

August 18, 1994

Dear Dietrich,

We’ve just finished the first 37 pages of your Ethics book, here in our class at Luther Seminary in Australia. On the very first page your “Stations on the Way to Freedom” brought to mind a man you probably never met, Martin Luther King, Jr. The titles of your four stanzas are also the four cornerstones of MLK’s theology of freedom. And that includes the jolting title to stanza four, “Death.” I wonder if his theology of freedom borrowed these four elements from you. I don’t know if MLK ever

saw or named you as his teacher. If not, he doubtless got this quartet of terms for freedom from the same source you did, the Christian Gospel.

For ThTh readers today (2010), here's the DB text for "Stations on the Way to Freedom."

Discipline

If you set out to seek freedom, then you must learn above all things discipline of your soul and your senses, lest your desires and then your limbs perchance should lead you now hither, now yon. Chaste be your spirit and body, subject to yourself completely, in obedience seeking the goal that is set for your spirit. Only through discipline does one learn the secret of freedom.

Action

Not always doing and daring what's random, but seeking the right thing, Hover not over the possible, but boldly reach for the real. Not in escaping to thought, in action alone is found freedom. Dare to quit anxious faltering and enter the storm of events, carried alone by your faith and by God's good commandments, then true freedom will come and embrace your spirit, rejoicing.

Suffering

Wondrous transformation. Your hands, strong and active, are fettered. Powerless, alone, you see that an end is put to your action. Yet now you breathe a sigh of relief and lay what is righteous calmly and fearlessly into a mightier hand, contented. Just for one blissful moment you could feel the sweet touch of freedom, Then you gave it to God, that God might perfect it in glory.!

Death

Come now, highest of feasts on the way to freedom eternal,
Death, lay down your ponderous chains and earthen enclosures,
walls that deceive our souls and fetter our mortal bodies, that
we might at last behold what here we are hindered from seeing.
Freedom, long have we sought you through discipline, action, and
suffering.

Dying, now we discern in the countenance of God your own face.

DBWE [=Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English] 8, Letters and Papers
from Prison, 512-14 German text available
at <http://www.helmholtz-bi.de/projekte/religion/Nationalsozialismus/html/texte.HTM>

All four of these terms, Dietrich, are the clear opposite for
what freedom means in our common culture today. We use freedom
as our word to avoid discipline (do whatever you want). And when
you talk about “action” (stanza two) our culture thinks freedom
is not to “have to do” anything, or to be so paralyzed in trying
to decide the right thing to do that we do nothing. And no one
connects suffering with freedom as you do and surely not death.
We see freedom to mean escaping suffering and postponing death
as long as scientifically possible.

MLK and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference made
discipline, and training in discipline, a fundamental piece of
the civil rights movement. The movement’s motto was “nonviolent
direct action.” Members of the movement trained themselves to
endure suffering. They anticipated it and when it came they
endured it in a way that mystified Americans, both secular and
Christian. Aware that, like you, he could expect to be killed
for his practice of freedom, he articulated the link between
death and freedom many times, including his words on the eve of
his assassination.

Both his written and spoken theology was less clearly Christocentric than yours is, but given the fact that he was a Baptist preacher who did his graduate studies at a Methodist university that taught him a liberal American protestantism, it is surprising that his Christology was not even poorer. Yet his enacted theology looks very similar to your own and your "stations" is a marvelous point of crossing between the two of you – even though in those four stanzas you don't mention "the Name" either.

But the opposite is, of course, the case in the first 35 pages of today's text where you are radically Christocentric. Your opening statement is jarring: that the attempt to do ethics at all is a sign of our fallenness, our fracture with the God who created us. To know (or want to know) good and evil, you say, shows that we already are disconnected from God in the pattern of Genesis 3. Were we connected, we would not have to ask.

If I read you aright, you then pick up two common realities that all of us know only too well, shame and conscience, and you demonstrate how these two realities also verify our disconnection from our "origin," as you like to say.

You then offer a radical rehabilitation of the Pharisee (11 pages, in fact) to show him not at all to be the scoundrel that our own moralist piety has made of him. Instead he comes out as a tragic figure. He is inescapably hung up on "being good." Real freedom for him – and for all of us so concerned about ethics – would be to let Jesus liberate us from the very quest to be good and do the right thing. That means to be liberated from doing what is usually called "ethics" at all.

You formulate a jolting conclusion: disciples of Jesus are no longer concerned about ethics, but about doing the will of God. Yet we are so brainwashed by our own Pharisee-heresy that we

think "doing the will of God" is ethics. That you to do ethics, you say, is what Jesus seeks to overcome.

By reconnecting us to God, Jesus removes from us any need or desire to "try to be good." Therefore knowledge of good and evil is irrelevant to this new Christ-connected hook-up with God. Who needs it? Farewell, ethics!

Jesus Christ himself, you say, is the criterion in me and for me for my own doing. Insofar as I deliberate and even wrestle with the business of "doing," the agenda is not that I look "good" after the doing gets done, but that what God and Christ want for this person gets done. If anyone should come out looking "good" in the process, that one is God and God's Christ. They get the glory.

Your twist on the Mary and Martha story is illuminating. Martha is not the doer and Mary the hearer, you say, since hearing and doing are all of one piece for a Christ-connected disciple. Martha's hang-up is that she is still "doing ethics," by giving "not-good" grades to her sister and even to Jesus. Her kitchen-work under those rubrics does not serve Jesus at all. It's another version of the Pharisee-heresy.

You wind up our section for today with an exegesis of the N.T. term "agape" wherein you use that one word as the good news opposite for all the bad news in the preceding 30 diagnostic pages. Your summary statements (first two paragraphs, page 36) pull it all together, but they are still overwhelming.

Okay, now my question. With all the radical theocentrism and Christocentrism, with God the active one and we humans passive, does that not feed the hang-up we Lutherans have about being inactive and passive, and letting God (or other activist Christians) care for the world's ills? Doesn't your chapter here, where you knock ethics in the head as signal of our

fallenness, reinforce do-nothing Lutherans never to get off their duffs to do anything Christian in the world we live in?

Sincerely yours,
Edward Schroeder

[And then, miraculously, an answer arrived from the other side!]

Lieber Edward:

Thanks for your letter. I'll let your fellow students decide whether your exegesis of my chapter is on target or not. To your question I'll say the following:

If your Lutherans in 1994 are like "mine" 50/60 years ago, then:

1. They are already "doing" all sorts of things, but not in freedom, not in Christ, not liberated from the Pharisee-heresy, the "do-gooder" cancer.
2. They are in bondage to one kind of activity that is coupled with bondage to a Christ-less kind of passivity. I ask you: what is all the activity going on in the Lutheran Church of Australia and in Lutheran churches elsewhere today?
3. The passivity that I am promoting is the posture of faith, namely, receptivity in our encounter with Christ. It does not entail doing nothing, but entails abandoning Pharisaic activity.
4. From that posture of receptivity no one can just sit there. Remember my Mary and Martha exegesis. Or the classic "Lutheran" passage, John 15:5, "without me you can do nothing," and its affirmative mode, "with me you can NOT do nothing." Or look again at my two paragraphs on page 36 with that definition of love I gave. It is indeed active, active in the same way an electric motor is active when the switch is turned on. The motor is passive in that

all the current it runs on comes from the power-generating station, but it in no way does nothing when the current moves through it.

I wish I could be there to listen in to your students continuing the conversation. I'll be looking forward to their letters in the days ahead.

Pax et gaudium!

Dietrich

Ethical Issues Class
Luther Seminary, Adelaide
March 15, 1994

Crossing John Stott's "Ethics of the Workplace" with Galatians 4 & 5.

[Stott: chapter 9 – Work and Unemployment]

The ethical issues of the workplace are negative attitudes toward work (it's a curse, it's meaningless) and the trauma of unemployment. For the first he proposes the Bible's idea of work as fulfillment, as service to the human community, as co-operation with God's purpose (=worship).

With work so important in Biblical ethics, the trauma of unemployment is today's big ethical issue in the workplace. It humiliates, depresses, demoralizes, dehumanizes. What to do? The real solution lies in the realm of macro-economics. Yet even there no solution seems to be in sight that looks obviously good or possible. Are there then palliatives (short-term remedies)? Yes, but they are micro- and piecemeal. They don't impact the macro-economy. Here the role of the Church is this: 1) Change people's attitude (church people's attitudes and that of society) about the unemployed. 2) Take its own initiatives

(numerous samples given). 3) Publicize and act upon the distinction between “work” [=in the 3-fold Biblical sense] and “employment” [=getting paid].

“A More Radical View” of some futurologists is to brainstorm about work in the 21st century (only 6 years away—when our children/grandchildren are adults). There simply will not be work for everyone to do—no matter how the economic pie is divided. What then? Three scenarios: 1) business-as-usual, but that’ll be impossible; 2) a society even more radically divided (between the haves and the have-nots); 3) a Sane/Humane/Ecological one, which sounds like it would need Christ-connected sinners to populate it. For the changes it calls for are changes in people’s thinking—actually people’s hearts, equivalent to what the NT calls metanoia.

Stott summarizes on p. 183. He does not seek to “cross” the radical reality of unemployment in any of the 3 scenarios he reports on.

[Stott: Chapter 10 – Industrial Relations]

The ethical problem is “industrial civil war.” The Biblical Principle of Mutuality (mutual service, mutual respect) is violated by the “them vs. us” of industrial war. To apply that principle to industry means:

1. Abolish discrimination in the wage differentials between top and bottom wage-earners.
2. Increase participation by moving from an “institution” mentality to a “community” perspective in the factory, i.e., moving from being an “inmate” (someone else decides everything for you) to being a “person with self-determination, autonomy and freedom of action.” The code word is “industrial democracy.”
3. Emphasize Co-operation (It is after all only just, and it

works— see the management success of Japanese industry.) Co-operation is a product of shared vision and values. Which brings up key terms as accountability (responsibility) not merely to shareholders, but to workers, consumers and the community at large. Look at the language of Stott's final page and a half: social audit, responsibility (again and again), responsible = just, "If you serve them, [then] they will serve you." [Question: isn't this the language of "usus politicus legis," the law's use in human society? Isn't Stott's last paragraph more of the same, even though he mentions Jesus Christ? Is Stott being a Lutheran here?]

Crossing Stott's material with our Crossings paradigm from Galatians 4 & 5

His own key terms are so close to St. Paul's that it looks almost contrived: work as a curse, meaningless; the bondage worked on people by unemployment; industrial civil war; "them vs. us" mentality; wage-discrimination; the "inmate" mentality of the factory as "institution," accountability; "just-ness" in the workplace; the "If..., then..." axiom of law imperatives.

Stott is describing the workplace today, St. Paul might say, as Life Under the Law of God. The alternatives are slavery and freedom. Stott proposes the kind of freedom that is possible when the law is rightly used in its usus politicus (even though he seems to think such freedom comes from the Gospel, but that is another issue.) His own diagnosis goes only as deep as D-1 and D-2 in the Crossings paradigm. He has no D-3. All the solutions he poses are plausible in terms of God's law as society-preserver, are they not?

Stott's paradigm goes something like this:

D-1 THE UNFREEDOM OF DAILY WORK (The curse in human relations at

the workplace today)

It's dog-eat-dog in the workplace today. Work itself dehumanizes (Paul's word "devours") people. It's a curse; it's meaningless. Unemployment dehumanizes even more. People measure each other by them-vs.-us categories of performance. Industrial war is negotiated in "If you . . . , then we" terms. You get treated as though you really are an "inmate" in a prison.

Worse still is

D-2 THE SLAVERY IN THE HEART (The curse in the heart)

Mentalities and attitudes about work, about "them," about "us." These are what people believe, what they hang their hearts on; what they fear, love or trust. Relying on work, on pay, on prestige, on the responsibility you have—all of these as the measure of people's worth, or the measure of their unworth when they don't have it. Believing that you really are an "inmate" owned/controlled by the company. Relying on such "laws" as the measure of your worth, your "right-ness," your being "OK."

Even worse than that is

D-3 SLAVERY AT THE GOD-LEVEL: GOD'S CURSE, Paul says. But Stott does not go that deep. Instead he starts now to propose solutions.

Note that he begins at his own deepest level of diagnosis—in our language D-2 (what's going on in people's hearts). His key terms for this inner arena are "attitudes" & "mentality."

Stott's P-2 (to remedy the D-2 he has exposed): ATTITUDE CHANGES (FREEDOM) IN PEOPLE'S HEARTS

These new attitudes are from the Bible: work is for human fulfillment, for service, for co-operation with God; "change people's attitude about the unemployed;" move people from inmate-mentality to community-mentality. He urges all to rely on

them. The grounds for all of them are in the law of preservation (of the workplace itself and therefore of the shareholders, the managers, the workers, the customers, society at large), the law of fairness (equity, justice), and the priority of the larger social fabric over the vested interests of management, or of the shareholders.

Stott's P-3 (to remedy the D-1 he began with): From these changes in human hearts flow CHANGES BACK IN THE WORKPLACE: no more industrial war; work has value; even non-paid work is valued; humans find fulfillment in the workplace; service to others happens; God gets co-operated with; no more "it's a curse," for work has meaning; more equitable wage differentials; the workplace is community with participation and co-operation; a "social audit" unfolds to the 4 parties involved: shareholders, workers, customers, society. The operating axiom is "IF you serve them, THEN they will serve you."

Now, can we in this ethics class do any better, with the biblical/confessional resources we bring to bear on the ethical issues of today's workplace?

Try this: Add St. Paul's own D-3 from Galatians: the workplace problem is even worse than Stott diagnoses it to be. It is God's curse on sinners, on their faith-less slavery in the heart, working itself out on a macro-economic scale. As this continues, with no repentance at this D-3 level, all remedies drawn from the law will never cure the whole problem. The law can, however, be a resource for interim stop-gap remedies. Stott's "social audit" actually has One More Auditor operating: God. God is "auditing" (Latin audio = listen) for our answers to his audit of our responsibility at all 3 levels: D-1, D-2 and especially our D-3 responsibility to God. Doubtless that is far too much responsibility for anyone to bear! Call it The Curse beyond all curses. How to survive? How to get freedom from God's audit?

Answer: P-1, the Curse-swapper—in his body on the tree. [Sadly absent from Stott's consideration.]

From Christ those under God's curse get un-cursed and receive instead God's Blessing, God's promise to Abraham. Call it freedom with God.

From that follows a P-2 different from Stott's P-2: faith's kind of freedom in the heart.

Then follows what in Paul's model is P-3:

Thoughts, words and deeds of freedom lived out publicly in the workplace. How to do that concretely? For the Christ-truster Stott's remedies are still good options—now to be done with even greater freedom than Stott mentions. For unbelievers (who might hold this faith-stuff to be nonsense) there are still the motivators in God's law to urge support for many of the same workplace actions. Altho Christians are different, they have theological reasons for making coalitions here for such actions. That won't stop God's final Apocalypse, but can preserve a piece of creation from an Apocalypse Now.

Colleagues,

FYI. The remaining items in that Aussie file from 1994 are:

- A. Three syllabi: Ethics course, course on theological prolegomena, course on sanctification.
- B. [Egghead lecture] Who suffers in the Trinity? Theopaschitism then and now.
- C. Good News/Bad News in the NT
- D. Barth and Luther in Bonhoeffer's theology
- E. David Bosch: The Missionary Paradigm of the Protestant Reformation
- F. Concept of Authority (exousia) in the NT

G. Kerygma & Dogma

H. Ecclesiology in the Aug. Conf. and Apology

I. R. Bertram's Theology of Mission

J. Bosch (again): What the Enlightenment did to Christian Mission

K. Study helps for doing ethics

L. Ethics: Homosexuality, Different views from our assigned readings

M. From the Murray to the Mississippi: Aussie Lutheranism and the LCMS

N. Some sermons

These might be bunched into 4 or 5 ThTh posts. Could serve as fillers when a dry spell comes.

EHS