

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