

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