

THE PROMISE OF LUTHERAN ETHICS, Karen L. Bloomquist & John R. Stumme

There could be more promise in "The Promise of Lutheran Ethics." By that I mean the Biblical term "promise," the term chosen by the Lutheran reformers to pinpoint what the reformation was all about. Melanchthon put it simply in his *Loci*, the first "systematic theology" to come out of Wittenberg: "Evangelium est promissio. The gospel is a promise." If there were more of THAT promise in this volume, it would be even more promising for its intended audience, today's USA Lutherans in the mish-mash world we live in as the millennium turns. More of that promise, I'd be audacious enough to say, would also make the ethics proposed here more Lutheran.

It wasn't just Melanchthon's one-liner that put promise at the center. It's the linch-pin for the whole discussion of Justification by Faith in the confessional texts of 1530-31. It's fundamental to the difference between law and Gospel. No matter how you calibrate the law, its basic verb still comes out "require," say the confessors. Au contraire the promissory Gospel where the fundamental verb is "offer." Promises are offered. They are gifts, freebees. "Thou shalt" are requirements. Their grammar is reciprocity. Rewards for doing what thou shalt and sanctions for doing the opposite.

In this volume on Lutheran ethics more than one of the ten contributors makes a plea for the restoration of the commandments into Lutheran ethical consciousness. Say they, it's the place to go after justification by faith has taken place. And in the fascinating final chapter, a 25-page "Table Talk on

Lutheran Ethics,” a bull-session among the authors, no one challenges that claim.

Return to the decalogue is most forcefully promoted by Reinhard Huetter in his chapter “The Twofold Center of Lutheran Ethics,” namely, “Christian Freedom and God’s Commandments.” None of the other nine challenges Huetter’s reading of Lutheranism: “Christian ethics in the tradition of the Reformation serves the remembrance of God’s commandments and the interpretation of the innumerable challenges, complexities, and perplexities that we encounter in 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 the “Promise” of Lutheran Ethics? Except for one of the essays, the term doesn’t even surface as an item for consideration. O tempora, O mores!

And in that essay where promise does surface, “Ethics and the Promise of God,” by James Childs, it is not the “Gospel is a promise” of the Reformation era. Childs understands promise as one of the gifts of “the recovery of the Bible’s historical-eschatological character, [which] placed new emphasis on the promise of God’s coming future reign as the fulfillment rather than the antithesis of history.” Promise and God’s reign, God’s dominion, God’s future are his constant corollaries. So trusting the promise is trusting that God will indeed win when it’s all over. It is trusting that “[the] coming reign of God is not dependent on our achievements, but on the faithful promises of God.”

Now if the “reign of God” were understood as Luther does it in his catechism’s explanation of the Lord’s Prayer’s second petition, that still might pass for Lutheran. “The kingdom of God comes indeed without our prayer, of itself; but we pray in this petition that it may come unto us also. How is this done?

When our heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe His holy Word and lead a godly life, here in time and hereafter in eternity.”

Childs implies that newer eschatological readings of the NT have expanded the “kingdom of God,” as he too expands the “promise,” to cosmic dimensions. Thus he can say: “The promise and hope of eschatology is for the transformation and fulfillment of the world in the kingdom of God.” Now that too might not be too bad if some distinctions [There’s that Lutheran word again!] were noticed. Every reference to “kingdom of God” in the synoptic Gospels is linked to what God is up to in Jesus. And the narrative context for all(?) of them is Jesus’ “mercy-management” with sinners.

Au contraire the “kingdom talk” throughout this entire volume. Its cardinal term is “justice”—oppressed peoples getting a fair shake, getting equity instead of a raw deal—as articulated in the liberation theologies of our generation. Which is not exactly what Jesus gives sinners when he offers them forgiveness. Fairness for sinners is the opposite of forgiveness. Now linking justice to this kingdom that Jesus inaugurates could be kosher—but again only if you make distinctions. To wit, the distinction between law-justice (=people receiving what they deserve, sinners too) and mercy-justice (the kind of justice the Suffering Servant “executes” in Isaiah 41). It is this sort of justice, say the gospel writers, that Jesus fulfills when he forgives sinners.

Childs’ and Huetter’s essays articulate a different Lutheranism from the one proposed in these ThTh weekly essays, although both authors acclaim primordial Lutheran building-blocks: justification by faith, the distinction between law and gospel, God’s ambidextrous—left hand, right hand—works in creation, and more. I propose to address all the essays in this important

volume, d.v., in future issues of ThTh, including a more detailed look at the two mentioned above. It has been widely distributed (free!) throughout the ELCA, as a prize product of its Division for Church in Society.

A dozen years ago, a doctoral thesis presented at Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago by Tom Strieter found several different types of Lutheran ethics on the scene in US Lutheranism. All but one of them, I think, are represented in the essays in this volume. Missing is the one that Tom calls “a struggle-resistance model within the church.” He mentions the theological ethics of the Seminex tradition as a sample of this genre. The next issues of ThTh will seek to show the promise of that perspective for Lutheran Ethics as we look at the writers in the volume that has that name.

Peace & Joy! Ed Schroeder