

The Promise of Lutheran Ethics

– Law/Gospel Grammar

[To continue the topic of Grace-imperatives (Gospel-imperatives) and Promissory Freedom, I may be borrowing some paragraphs once sent out as Sabbath Theology #18 back in 1996.]

1. From my last couple of issues reviewing “The Promise of Lutheran Ethics,” it might appear to some of you that I’m on a vendetta against the law, even against the 10 commandments. Not so. If I do have a “cause,” it’s the ancient one central to the theology of the cross—and seldom advanced without conflict among Christians, namely, to keep Moses from usurping the role of Christ and his Spirit in the area of ethics. No one, above all in the Lutheran crowd, disputes the role of Christ in justification. But when sanctification (ethics) comes up, for some Christians Christ and his Spirit seem to be insufficient for getting the job done. So Moses and the decalogue in some form are invoked as add-ons to give substance—“Gestalt,” as Huetter says—to our lives under Christ’s Lordship and the Spirit’s leading.
2. To say no to Huetter is not to be an anti-nomian, one who just says: Toss out the law! My proposal is that of Formula of Concord VI (1577): Keep the law on hand for that candidate who needs it, that Old Adam/Old Eve not yet mortified in every one of the baptized. But...(and that’s a big but) keep that law away from every “new creation” Christian. For the newness of that new creaturehood is Christ and his Spirit, who have supplanted the law in every primal relationship that we humans have according to Biblical anthropology. First of all Christ is in the middle (mediator) in our relationship to God. Few would

dispute that. The same is true with our relationship to our own selves: Christ is in the center of my new view of me. Few would dispute that either.

3. If Christ has undisputed claim in these two turfs, he cannot be displaced in our third primal relationship either, our relationship to the world and people, what we call ethics. To move Moses back in here for ethics inevitably requires Christ and his Spirit to move out. That's the simple thesis of Paul to the Galatians: to evict Christ and his Spirit from any one of the three relationships is to evict them from all three. But if Christ did not die in vain, to use Paul's language, then he claims the mediator role in all three. He is the end of the law for righteousness (our God-connection), and for how we see ourselves (faith), and for ethics (our relationships with others).
4. There are some internal factors that diminish the law's usefulness even if you did want to use it for ethics. To begin with eight of the ten commandments are negatives, telling you what NOT to do. So right from the outset they are skimpy resources for determining what to do. So I'm commanded not to commit adultery. But what resource is that in giving any positive "Gestalt" for my sexuality, chastity, celibacy or marriage?
5. The Lutheran Reformers linked this negativity in the decalogue to their axiom "lex semper accusat." The law always accuses. Said they: God's commandment never addresses us as though we ourselves are in some neutral zone, and then, after having heard, can decide to follow it or not. Rather when God's commandment addresses us, we're already over the fence in forbidden territory, already off limits. So, said the reformers, here's what the commandments say: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me—and you already have several." "Thou shalt not

kill...and you already have a murderous heart beating within you." All the "shalt nots" are accusations of where sinners already are, of what they already are. The Reformers were not original in this. They heard Jesus doing it in the Sermon on the Mount when he preached on the commandments.

6. The Reformers were serious students of God's law. They called attention to its operative verb "require," God requires this or that of the addressee in the "thou shalts." By contrast the Gospel's operative verb is "offer," gift, freebee, no strings attached. The require verb always has strings. They show up in the "grammar" of law and the contrasting "grammar" of the Gospel. The grammar of law is always: "IF you (human) do such and so, THEN I (God) will do so and such." Even when the word Jesus appears in such a sentence, the grammatical structure of "If/then" makes it law no matter what. That's grammar we understand. It's the normal grammar of human interactions day in and day out: "IF you will do that, THEN I will do this." Fulfill this condition and I will "balance" it off with stuff of equal value.
7. By contrast the grammar of Gospel is: "SINCE or BECAUSE God is doing, has done, such and so in Christ , THEREFORE you now do this or that." "Since/therefore" is the pattern of Gospel-grounded ethical admonitions in the NT. It is the grammar of Grace-imperatives. They are all over in the epistles of the NT. Not only are individual "paranesis passages" (admonition sentences) framed in this Gospel grammar of "since/therefore." Larger segments of the epistles are formatted that way. Look at the six chapters of Ephesians. Its three first chapters are SINCE/BECAUSE Gospel-indicatives. Then at 4:1 comes a big THEREFORE with three chapters of Grace-imperatives to follow. Check them out for yourself.

8. The code words “since (or because) and therefore” are not always present in the texts. But the “logic” and “grammar” of the sentences are clearly grace-imperatives. “[Since] you were bought with a price, therefore glorify God in your bodies.” The clauses can be reversed, but the grammar does not change: “[Therefore] be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as [because] God in Christ has forgiven you.” Or again, “[Since] God was in Christ reconciling the world until himself, therefore we entreat you, be ye reconciled to God (and with each other).” “I appeal to you THEREFORE [after the Gospel-indicatives of the prior chapters], siblings, by the mercies of God to present your bodies as a living sacrifice...”
9. The Law always has the specific grammar of requirements—if/then—which renders it inescapably contrary to the Gospel’s grammar. So it becomes downright contradictory to use Law as resource for living the Gospel-life. In the very vocabulary of the Grace-imperatives, it is Christ and the Holy Spirit who so dominate that when I checked recently I couldn’t find even one reference to a decalog commandment as I re-read the admonition sections of the NT epistles. There may well be some that I missed. But even when it comes to stuff for which there is a clear “thou shalt not” commandment—murderous hatred, sexual immorality, theft, slander, coveting—the commandment is not invoked. Instead Christ is, and the ethical imperative, even when it is sharp as it often is, comes in the grammar of the Gospel. E.g., on the matter of prostitution in 1 Corinthians 6, there is no mention of the 6th commandment. Instead the apostle’s ethical speech is: “Since you are one-flesh with Christ, since your body is the Holy Spirit’s temple, therefore stop fornicating.”

10. One significant place where Paul does speak of the “covet” commandment, he does not use it for ethics, but with its accusatory function in his own biography. “I would not have known sin,” he says, “if the law had not said ‘Don’t covet.’” What Paul must mean, I think, is that his big coveting was coveting righteousness. When Christ’s offer of righteousness finally came through to him (Damascus ff.) his coveting of righteousness, the law’s kind, was uncovered as the essence of sin. He’d been coveting required righteousness all along, when one day it came to him as an offered gift.
11. There may be ethical passages in the NT that show up as “if/then” in English translation, and possibly even in the original language. Even so, what’s needed is to check the theological grammar, the logic of the parts, and the operational verbs to see if it’s require or offer.
12. What’s new about Christ’s “new ” commandment for ethics, “Love one another, as [because, since] I have loved you” is that it’s different from Moses, even the summary of Moses with the word “love” at the center: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”
13. The word “you” and the verb “love” in the new commandment is always in the plural. You can’t see that in the English translations where “you” and the verb “love” can be both singular and plural. But in every instance in the NT the “one another” imperatives are such plurals. That signals that they are inner-community imperatives: “Y’all do love to each other.” It’s “ping-pong” back-and-forth loving. Lots of folks are playing the game at the same time. Not so Moses. His is a singular imperative just telling each of us to do love to the neighbor. But is that any big deal? Well, hang on.
14. The imperative for us to do this loving comes as second in the sequence. It’s framed in Gospel-grammar. Since Christ

has loved us, therefore we are mandated to ping-pong this love with each other. Not so Moses. His command is a requirement without a prior indicative about God, or from God. The "Love God" commandment often paired with Moses' neighbor commandment is equally unilateral and without a prior "since" on God's part.

15. The communitarian aspect of ping-pong loving is the consequence of each of the ping-pong players first having been receivers of the love of Christ. It is that individual reception of Christ's "ping" of love, that puts each of us in the community, now under the imperative to "pong" the same to others also in the game. We are not isolated players, but ones joined to Christ and "therefore" joined to each other in the game. There is no such community factor written into the very fabric of Moses' love commandment.
16. Finally the criterion for the loving is brand new. "As I have loved you," namely, all the way to the cross, is not only new, it's as different from "as you love yourself" as day is from night.

'Nuff for now. D.v., see you in a fortnight.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder