



The 1994-1995 Word & World Lecture

Is there Lutheran Ethical Discourse?

GEORGE WOLFGANG FORELL

*Carver Professor Emeritus, School of Religion
The University of Iowa*

IN VIEW OF MY CAREER DURING THE LAST HALF-CENTURY, MY ANSWER TO THE question posed in the title of this presentation should be a straightforward Yes. I could claim with some reason that I have engaged in such discourse since I published *The Reality of the Church as the Communion of Saints*¹ in 1943 and *Faith Active in Love*² in 1954. Yet, it is obvious that the question is not as trivial as such an answer might make it appear. For the first time in the history of the human race we live in an age when people sincerely question the possibility of meaningful ethical discourse. To be sure, individuals have always disagreed on ethical issues, but the assumption was that such arguments were meaningful, that moral issues were debatable, and that such debate made sense.

I. IS ETHICAL DISCOURSE POSSIBLE?

We now live in an era in which many people claim that ethical discussion is futile. Some argue that the language of ethics is logically meaningless and merely an expression of our feelings. Others suggest that ethical discussions are pointless because our notions of right and wrong are determined entirely by factors over

¹George W. Forell, *The Reality of the Church as the Communion of Saints* (Wenonah, NJ: 1943).

²George W. Forell, *Faith Active in Love* (New York: American, 1954).

Luther scholar and ethicist GEORGE W. FORELL presented this essay as the second annual Word & World lecture at Luther Seminary on September 20, 1994. On the same day, in honor of Prof. Forell's 75th birthday, Word & World published Martin Luther, Theologian of the Church, Forell's collected essays, edited by William R. Russell. The volume is the second in the Word & World Supplement Series.

which we have no control. Marxists assert that ethics is a byproduct of economics; the way we earn our living determines what we consider right or wrong. Fascists claim that what is right or wrong is determined by our nationality or race as in "*Recht ist was dem Volke nützt*" [the law is whatever is useful to the "*Volk*"].

While on the surface Marxism and Nazism seem to have lost much of their appeal, the underlying doubt about the possibility of ethical discourse has, if anything, increased. Today some people insist that ethics is determined by our gender, our race, our sexual orientation, our nationality or tribe. Unless you belong to the particular group which allegedly makes you what you are, you are unable to understand what is right or wrong for this group.

A great deal of our moral confusion is the result of the loss of ethical universals. We are allowed to talk about the "clarification of values," but the fundamental assumption is that all values are equivalent, that there are no common values that could guide all people. This ethical positivism makes discussion across the above-mentioned divisions difficult, if not impossible. As Paul Rabinow observed in 1983:

All cultural differences have been both preserved and destroyed. First, difference is emphasized, the uniqueness of each culture; then it is reduced to the Same. They are all doing the same thing. All these value systems are the same insofar as they are world views, or ethoses; their content differs but there is no way to choose between them as long as they survive. The role of anthropology [and one could easily add multiculturalism] is to describe the plurality of these meaningful life worlds. Each way of life is worthy of respect because ultimately each is equally untrue. The being of man is all that we can affirm. This is everywhere the same. Ultimately, Difference (although praised) is suppressed: The Same is triumphant.³

It is apparent that at least in North America a radical individualism has taken over which subjects all ethical statements to the stipulation that they are only valid for the person who makes them. My ethical views may be true for me but if you feel differently they may not be true for you. There is no way to establish the truth of one view over against another. As James Davison Hunter puts it:

Multiculturalism (and contemporary anthropology) take this position even further, arguing that since all knowledge and perceptions of the world are social constructions, then there is no such thing as Impartiality, Objectivity or Truth. Knowledge has no correspondence with Reality. There is only knowledge and truth from the particular realities that people inhabit which serve their particular interests. It is from this that multicultural theorists derive the cliché that "all knowledge is political."⁴

As a result the only immoral action is to claim universal validity for my ethical opinions, whatever their basis. The ten commandments or the sermon on the mount may offer ethical guidance to me, but that does not give them authority

³Paul Rabinow, "Humanism as Nihilism: The Bracketing of Truth and Seriousness in American Cultural Anthropology," in *Social Science as Moral Inquiry*, ed. Norma Haan et al. (New York: Columbia University, 1983) 59-60, as quoted in James Davison Hunter, *Before the Shooting Begins: Searching for Democracy in America's Culture War* (New York: The Free Press, 1994) 205.

⁴Hunter, *Before the Shooting*, 288, note 61.

over you. The fact that many advocates of this point of view have a very rigid code of political correctness which they try to enforce by law on everybody else, assuming that their values are infallible, is only an expression of the logical inconsistency of this position. This, however, is not surprising since logic is considered an aspect of a specific culture which they do not favor.

II. THE LUTHERAN CONTRIBUTION

The question raised in the title of this presentation, "Is there Lutheran ethical discourse?" seems at first glance to contribute to the confusion we have described. Do we want to add to the chaos of multiculturalism the notion of a "Lutheran" view of the world expressed in a particular ethics? I would not dare to suggest this if I did not believe that there is a Lutheran ethical tradition and that it could make a contribution which might help us in the present ethical chaos. While it is by no means the only suggested remedy, it may contribute to and reinforce the remedies proposed. The basic resource for Lutheran ethics is the distinction between law and gospel, God's demand and God's gift, and the claim that the so-called political use of the law is available to all human beings by virtue of their reason and humanity.

1. *The Universality of the Law*

In the *Large Catechism* Luther stated this difference in a very straightforward manner: "The Ten Commandments are inscribed in the hearts of all human beings."⁵ This law, according to the *Formula of Concord*, "is to be diligently applied not only to unbelievers and the impenitent but also to people who are genuinely believing, truly converted, regenerated, and justified through faith."⁶ The *Formula* continues: "Both for penitent and impenitent, for regenerated and unregenerate people the law is and remains one and the same law, namely, the unchangeable will of God."⁷

The law is experienced in a twofold manner: It is God's gracious aid to humanity to keep, if possible, all men and women from the destructive results of sin which constantly threaten chaos. But it is also the taskmaster, the *paidagogos*, who leads us to Christ. Law in the first sense enables all people who obey it to live in relative peace. Accessible to all by virtue of their humanity, it supports their life together if they respect it. Most of the obvious problems that human beings face in relationship to their environment and to each other could be ameliorated if they would only obey the ten commandments in their most obvious sense.

This aspect of Lutheran ethics makes it possible to appreciate the positive contributions all men and women can make to the pursuit of happiness in Jefferson's sense, regardless of religion or race.⁸ Luther was eloquent in his praise of

⁵In *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959) 419.

⁶*Ibid.*, 480.

⁷*Ibid.*, 481.

⁸To the following see Forell, "Luther and Culture," *Lutherjahrbuch* 52 (1985) 152-163.

Greek and Roman culture and the contribution which the ancients made in producing a better life for all succeeding generations. Because of their respect for reason and truth they were able to make a lasting contribution to the welfare of humanity. To a certain extent he also appreciated the contribution of the Turks, the sworn enemies of the Holy Roman Empire at Luther's time, to the establishment of an orderly commonwealth. Because of their special obedience to the law, a stance available to all people, they were empowered to build a mighty empire.

Thus, Lutheran ethical discourse begins with an appreciation of the God-given potential of humanity to establish a functioning society. This is possible because, as the Apostle Paul observed:

When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all. (Rom 2:14-16)

For people in our time this insight suggests that everyone has the opportunity and obligation to cooperate with all men and women for the earthly welfare of humanity. Lutherans do not have to wait until everybody has been converted to Christianity before such cooperation is possible. They do not even have to pretend that everybody whose action they approve and with whom they want to work for the common good is an "anonymous Christian." Such people may be devout Jews or Muslims, Hindus or Buddhists, indeed agnostics or atheists. As long as they are willing to work to preserve the universe and its inhabitants from destruction, they are allies in the ethical task before all of us.

This Lutheran understanding of the importance of law for the preservation of the human race suggests that perhaps our closest ally at this dangerous time in human history may be the Pope, who in his recent encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* has made it very clear that confronted by the inescapable questions: "What must I do? How do I distinguish good from evil? The answer is only possible thanks to the splendor of truth which shines forth deep within the human spirit as the psalmist bears witness: 'There are many who say: O that we may see some good! Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord.'"⁹

In the ethical chaos that confronts all of us, the church of Rome and its foremost teacher reject the ethical individualism and relativism that relates truth and law in such a manner as to make it impossible to speak of morality in rational terms. Rejecting the detachment of "human freedom from its essential and constitutive relationship to truth,"¹⁰ the pope elaborates their mutual dependence.

While Lutherans will disagree with the official teaching of the church of Rome on certain important points (the issue of birth-control comes to mind; here our dispute would be based on reason rather than revelation), the importance of

⁹John Paul II, Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, *CNS Documentary Service* 23/18 (October 14, 1993) 299.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 300.

cooperation follows from our common claim that reason and truth are essential for ethical discourse and that human freedom and the law discovered in the structures of the universe and of human society are not opponents. Rather, human freedom ultimately depends on this law and if anomie triumphs men and women lose first their freedom and then their life. This is the lesson we should have learned from the tragic events of this century. As Vaclav Havel observed in Philadelphia on July 4, 1994:

Politicians at international forums may reiterate a thousand times that the basis of the new world order must be universal respect for human rights, but it will mean nothing as long as this imperative does not derive from the respect of the miracle of Being, the miracle of the universe, the miracle of nature, the miracle of our own existence. Only someone who submits to the authority of the universal order and of creation, who values the right to be a part of it and a participant in it, can genuinely value himself and his neighbors and thus honor their rights as well. It follows that, in today's multicultural world, the truly reliable path to peaceful co-existence and creative cooperation must start from what is at the root of all cultures and what lies infinitely deeper in human hearts and minds than political opinion, convictions, antipathies or sympathies: it must be rooted in self-transcendence.¹¹

Thus it is my claim that in the struggle against the pervasive antinomianism which characterizes this age and has massively infiltrated the Christian churches, Lutheran ethical discourse must articulate the importance of law in cooperation with all those, Christians and non-Christians, who read the lesson written in their hearts supporting reason and law against insanity and chaos.

2. The Ethical Significance of the Gospel

The second dimension of Lutheran ethics is the importance of the gospel, the good news of God's intervention through Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection on our behalf. While the law contributes immeasurably to the welfare of this planet and its inhabitants, the law does not save, it does not restore our broken relationship with nature, the neighbor and our own selves caused by our alienation from God. It is, of course, nonsense to say as one frequently hears, "You cannot legislate morality." Laws against murder, theft, and perjury, as well as all our civil rights laws are moderately successful efforts to force people to act morally. What you cannot do is to make people desire to do what is right. But the effectiveness of legislation to make people act responsibly, even against their will, is demonstrated every day when a police car enters the stream of traffic and everybody slows down. Obviously, nobody has become better, but everybody is driving more safely.

Lutherans claim that a change of heart is far harder to accomplish than the mere change of temporary behavior or even habitual conduct. Thus the human situation is more serious than that suggested by the sentimental "feel good" theology so pervasive in our circles. Feeling good about myself, "discovering the

¹¹Vaclav Havel, "The New Measure of Man," as quoted in the *New York Times*, Friday, July 8, 1994, A15.

god within me," may certainly lead to idolatry, the fountain of all sin; it does not necessarily change either my behavior or my attitude towards others. Hitler and Stalin felt very good about themselves and were sure that they had discovered "the god within" themselves while looking into the mirror.

It takes more than the law to change the human heart. Lutherans believe that it is the gospel which empowers men and women to become children of God and change their innermost selves. But while the law is accessible to all, the gospel must be accepted by grace through faith. To quote Luther's *Large Catechism* again:

The Creed is a very different teaching from the Ten Commandments. The latter teach us what we ought to do; the Creed tells us what God does for us and gives to us....No human wisdom can comprehend the Creed, it must be taught by the Holy Spirit alone.

And he continues:

The Creed brings pure grace and makes us upright and pleasing to God....We see that God gives himself completely to us, with all his gifts and his power to help us keep the Ten Commandments: the Father gives us all creation, Christ all his works, the Holy Spirit all his gifts.¹²

For Luther the gospel is not unrelated to ethics; through it the Triune God gives us the power to keep the law as well as the ability to cope with the reality of sin which adheres to Christians as long as they live in this world. Lutheran ethical discourse never loses sight of the threat to our humanity that sin represents. In Luther's own thought it is apparent that human beings are living between God and the devil though Christians know at the same time that "*das Reich muß uns doch bleiben*" ("the Kingdom's ours forever").¹³ Thus it is impossible for us to describe ourselves as part of the "moral majority" or even a "moral minority." Sin, death, and the devil remain powers that have to be confronted daily, and as Luther teaches us in explaining baptism, we must be born again every day by daily repentance.

Lutheran ethical discourse must avoid giving the false impression that Christians are unaffected by the evil that is part of this fallen world. The division of humanity into saints and sinners may be comforting to those who have persuaded themselves that in the vicissitudes of this life they are innocent victims, but it does not describe the situation after the fall. The gospel announces that sinners can be saved, not that sin has been abolished. This process of salvation with all its ethical implications is dynamic and ongoing. "Sins and evil lusts should be drowned by daily repentance and be put to death and the new person should come forth daily and rise up, cleansed and righteous, to live forever in God's presence."¹⁴

There is an attempt to create a law for Christians which does not accuse us but affirms us because we do not transgress the canons established by the political correctness of the right or the left, but it is doomed to failure. As Luther stated it in

¹²BC, 419.

¹³See Heiko Oberman, *Luther, Man between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University, 1989).

¹⁴BC, 349.

the *Heidelberg Disputation*, "Arrogance cannot be avoided or true hope be present unless the judgment of condemnation is feared in every work."¹⁵ The Lutheran emphasis on the power and pervasiveness of sin is particularly important in an age in which humanity has been polarized into sinners and righteous, with people assuming that they are innocent because they belong to the right race, creed, gender, political or sexual persuasion.

But the gospel is also the good news of the forgiveness of sins and proclaims the manner in which this forgiveness is conveyed in word and sacrament. In a world in which people discuss ethics either from the vantage point of illusion concerning the unlimited possibilities available to human beings or from the conviction that we are creatures "beyond freedom and dignity" (B. F. Skinner), determined by hereditary and environmental forces outside our control, the gospel is the good news of a freedom that transcends and transforms our human limitations. Thus Lutheran ethical discourse is always engaged in conversation with two different partners simultaneously, the utopians and the "futopians."

On the one hand we must question on the basis of our theology the ethical optimism which holds that the moral life is a simple human possibility. If we only try hard enough we can indeed become perfect. We are familiar with this position in its Christian guise. Certain fundamentalists and certain liberals who may not agree with each other on anything else will claim that they know how to live the good life. The people on the right (to use these familiar though confusing terms) are convinced that having "found Jesus" makes this holy life possible for them. The people on the left are no longer subject to sin because they have rejected this notion altogether and have convinced themselves that the moral life can be accomplished through education and political action. Adding another course to the high-school curriculum and electing another politician with the correct point of view will result in moral improvement, until we eventually achieve the perfect society. While these contestants generally do not speak to each other, Lutherans ought to speak to both sides, using the respect for the authority of the scriptures in the conversation with the fundamentalists and the common respect for reason in the conversation with the liberals.

But these two positions are not the only alternatives. We are also confronted by those on the right and on the left who have given up hope altogether. Those with a fundamentalist orientation will often separate themselves from all efforts to participate in the affairs of this evil and condemned world. Liberals, on the other hand, will participate but only on the terms of the world. Dismissing all biblical insights as hopelessly flawed by traditions they reject (e.g., patriarchalism), they follow whatever the gurus of the moment present as the truth for the day, be it euthanasia or genetic manipulation, depth-psychology, process philosophy, or deconstructionism. They say nothing that others have not said better and just a little earlier, and are usually as much out of touch with the latest trends as their much-despised opponents, the fundamentalists. Both have given up on Christ as

¹⁵Thesis 11, *LW* 31:48.

the hope for the world—one group because they are convinced that there is no hope for this world only for the next, the other because they have dismissed the unique revelation in Jesus the Christ as far too exclusive, even calling it “christofascism.”¹⁶ Both are trying to save themselves and the world with the help of the fads of the moment.

III. SUMMARY

Lutheran ethical discourse is designed to stay in touch with the entire spectrum of ethical opinions expressed in our time. In its communication with the secular world it depends on reason to articulate the law for our contemporary situation in such a manner as to make it plausible even if not acceptable for those who do not share the faith. In this effort it will find allies among all those religious and non-religious individuals and communities who see reason as the most effective tool available to human beings in their attempt to fashion a just and free society for all. These people are presently under attack by all those who have given up on the usefulness of reason and are looking for obscure and esoteric devices to explain and conduct human affairs. The “New Age” devotees with their contempt for reason are but one example of a multitude of fads that threaten to make ethical discourse or any other rational communication ever more difficult.

Luther’s rejection of reason as a way to reach God must not be misunderstood as the advocacy of non-rational measures to solve the problems that confront us in our life together. He was convinced that in the affairs of this world we must depend on reason, and he considered it one of God’s most important gifts to humankind. We have seen the results of the excommunication of reason in National Socialism, Stalinism, and the tribalism that is destroying so many parts of the world at this very time.

But Lutheran ethical discourse with its strong assertion of the law as a bridge between Christians and all of their neighbors knows also that the law is marred by human sin and its aftereffects. While it contributes to the earthly welfare of the human race and counteracts the self-destructive tendencies of sin, it is not a means of salvation. For a description of the implications of the gospel, Lutheran ethical discourse depends on the clear and biblical articulation of the action of God on behalf of humanity as revealed authoritatively in the Old and New Testaments. Thus Lutheran ethical discourse must always be grounded in the word of God. This word is primarily Jesus, the Christ; secondarily the apostolic testimony to Christ; and thirdly, in our contemporary situation, the Spirit-guided proclamation of this testimony to the present generation in preaching, the administration of the sacraments, and the daily life of the people of God in and for the world—the *viva vox evangelii*. Such discourse is Trinitarian; it depends on the vision of creation as

¹⁶See Tom F. Driver, *Christ in a Changing World* (New York: Crossroads, 1981) 19: “We fear christofascism, which we see as the political direction of all attempts to place Christ at the center of social life and history. Nor do we think Christ should be at the center of one’s personal life if not at the center of society.”

the work of God the Father, an appropriation of justification and sanctification as the gift of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and daily life as discipleship empowered by God, the Holy Spirit. Thus it is proclamation of law and gospel and the Lutheran responsibility to the ecumenical church and to the secular world. It was never more imperative than it is today.

Now Available! **WORD & WORLD SUPPLEMENT SERIES 2:**

Martin Luther, Theologian of the Church

COLLECTED ESSAYS OF
GEORGE WOLFGANG FORELL

a 280-page collection of essays by Dr. Forell on Martin Luther and the church today. Edited by William R. Russell.

PART I – ON LUTHER The Reformation and the Modern World Faith Active in Love Justification and Eschatology in Luther's Thought Luther and Christian Liberty Luther and Conscience Luther's Conception of "Natural Orders" The Political Use of the Law Luther's Theology and Foreign Policy Luther's Theology and Domestic Politics Luther and the War against the Turks Luther's View concerning the Imperial Foreign Policy Luther Today

PART II – ON CHURCH AND THEOLOGY The Future of Theology in the Church A Neglected Aspect of St. Paul's Doctrine of the Church Eucharistic Presence as the Key to Theological Understanding The Formula of Concord and the Teaching Ministry The Place of Theology in the Church Law and Gospel Justification and Justice Christ and Culture: Reflections and Questions The Significance of Being Human: A Lutheran Perspective Make Church Politics Ethical! How to Speak about God in a Pluralistic World Reason, Relevance, and a Radical Gospel: Hartford and the Future of Protestant Thought The Importance of Law for Christian Sexual Ethics Why Recall Luther Today?

**TO ORDER, CALL (612) 641-3482 OR MAIL YOUR ORDER TO:
WORD & WORLD, 2481 COMO AVENUE, ST. PAUL, MN 55108
\$14.95 (paper)
Visa/MasterCard accepted**