



Daunting, Indeed! A Critical Conversation with *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*

GARY M. SIMPSON

*Luther Seminary
St. Paul, Minnesota*

“THIS DAUNTING CHALLENGE”! JUST SO HAS JOHN STUMME APTLY CHRISTENED *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*¹ (hereafter *PLE*). The Division for Church in Society of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America commissioned this volume “to examine in a fundamental way the nature of Lutheran ethics today” (4). Daunting, indeed! Seven major essays make up the heart of *PLE*, introduced by two short introductory essays by the co-editors and concluded by a “Table Talk” involving all the authors. *PLE* has been distributed free of charge by the ELCA to any of its pastors. With this in mind I will initiate a critical conversation with each of the major essayists.

I. ROBERT BENNE

Robert Benne, presently teaching at Roanoke College and formerly at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, opens *PLE* with “Lutheran Ethics: Perennial

¹*The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*, ed. Karen L. Bloomquist and John R. Stumme (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998).

GARY M. SIMPSON is professor of systematic theology.

The seven essayists in The Promise of Lutheran Ethics provide material for a fruitful conversation with the reviewer, which in turn provides food for thought for readers of the volume and the review.

Themes and Contemporary Challenges.” Under “perennial themes” his primary task is “to identify the basic themes,” to recognize “what is common and recurrent in Lutheran ethical reflection” (11). He discerns these perennial themes under two dimensions: “The Christian’s Calling in the World”—what he deems “personal ethics”—and “The Church’s Calling in Public Life”—what he deems “social ethics.” When I read Benne, I almost always find myself in an approach-avoidance situation. On the one hand, much of what he says impresses me as quite solidly Lutheran. I admire his endeavors here and in other venues to give voice to the Lutheran witness and to do so in the American context of the late twentieth century. On the other hand, I find myself avoiding some of the formulations that overlay his Lutheran themes.

Benne is always at his best when he lights up the theme of the vocation of ordinary saints, as he does in this essay. He notes that the gospel of the justification of sinful mortals happens in a context “preceded by the law—by the workings of God as creator, lawgiver, sustainer, and judge...in world history” (13). Lutheran ethics, therefore, “is not simply Christomonist.” For this reason a perennial Lutheran theme is the “orders of creation” or, as Benne winsomely prefers to call them, “places of responsibility.” Within these creational and historically dynamic structures, individual, ordinary Christians find their vocations. God provides the moral direction and standards for these structures through complex interactions of—among other things—the ten commandments, natural law, and common human moral reasoning. The challenge for Christian ethics is that these ordinary structures of life remain also a battlefield subject to corporate and individual sin and to Satan. Here lies the importance of the perennial Lutheran theme of God’s twofold use of the law, the “political use” that orders our common life and the “theological use” that convicts people of sin and drives them to the mercy of the gospel. Rightly does Benne note that “[f]or the mainstream Lutheran ethical tradition, however, there is no third use of the law that stipulates a specifically Christian form of existence replete with distinctive patterns of obedience” (16). Sadly, however, Benne does not explore *why* this has been the case concerning this very significant question of Christian ethics. We will take up this issue as we explore the second essay in *PLE*.

When Benne overlays his perennial Lutheran themes with more Reformed-oriented formulations, I find myself more distanced from his contribution. Reinhold Niebuhr plays a key role here. Perhaps Benne enlists Niebuhr’s help because Niebuhr is so much the quintessential Protestant, twentieth-century American ethicist, and Benne likewise yearns—admirably I think—to speak within and to the American situation. When Benne explicates Luther’s notion of the “happy exchange” and how faith becomes active in love, he employs Niebuhr’s way of distinguishing and relating God’s “agape love” and “human mutual loves.” In the Niebuhrian template Christian “agape love” generates “an excruciating gap” with “what the world demands or allows”—notice how absent God is from these de-

mands and allowances!—or “stretch[es]’ the worldly expectations of their [Christians]’ roles in their places of responsibility”—again, note the tendency toward absenting God from the world (16). The Niebuhrian coloration too easily reduces—even distorts—Luther’s “law and gospel” heritage to a mere variant of Augustine’s “sin and grace” trajectory of theology and ethics. No wonder Lutheran ethics looks “so unworldly” to Niebuhr (15).

In one way or another far too many Lutherans in twentieth-century North America have learned their “Luther” from Niebuhr and thus have this distorting Niebuhrian-Augustinian template overlaying their Lutheran perennial themes. The template surfaces early in Benne’s essay in the manner that he retrieves the perennial Reformed theme of “covenantal existence.” Such Niebuhrian-Augustinian tendencies diverge, and detrimentally so, from the most promising perennial Lutheran themes. On the one hand, such diversions lead far too many Lutherans to indulge in Reformed inclinations toward theocratic themes of the left or right. Benne does not, of course, want this to happen, though in the face of the so-called “culture wars” he is now much sharper with the left than the right. This accounts for why he mockingly rails at and rebukes the “liberal” or “progressive” discourse of “transformation” (18-20, 178 n.17).² On the other hand, such diversions also lead far too many Lutherans to neglect developing a lively theology and practice of the “first use of the law” whereby God is not absent from the world but rather continuously and flourishingly rules the world of human mutual loves precisely in their embattlement with sin and Satan. A vigorous relation of the cruciform Christ and Christian freedom to God’s civil use of the law need not languish. We will return to these topics in discussing subsequent essays.

II. REINHARD HÜTTER

Reinhard Hütter, presently at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and soon to be moving to Duke University, contributes the second essay, “The Twofold Center of Lutheran Ethics: Christian Freedom and God’s Commandments.” Hütter’s essay is theologically the meatiest in *PLE*.³ Because of this and because most of the other authors cite Hütter approvingly on crucial issues, it is tempting to honor Hütter’s essay as the *articulus stantis et cadentis* of *PLE* (the article by which *PLE* stands or falls). That is, if a reader considers Hütter’s essay to be the theologically orienting center of the volume—as I have even heard one of the other authors suggest—then this would make a significant difference in how one interprets the other essays. In her brief introductory essay Karen Bloomquist gives

²Benne certainly wants to protect himself from that side of Niebuhr. Even though critical of the radical left because of its utopianism Niebuhr argues: “The attachment of radical Christianity to Marxian viewpoints, even though on occasion unqualified, represents a gain [over bourgeois liberalism] in religious as well as moral realism” (R. Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* [New York: Meridian Books, 1956 (1934)] 25).

³Because of the significant theological challenge that Hütter offers, I am presently preparing for publication a more detailed critical conversation with his proposal.

a hint of what is involved: “The recent turn in philosophical and theological ethics that retrieves earlier Aristotelian emphases on virtue, character, and habits (dispositions) has been stimulated especially by writers such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Stanley Hauerwas. Although in the past Lutherans have tended to view such emphases with caution, considerable appreciation of such a turn is reflected in much of what is written here” (6). As we will see, Bloomquist’s observation pertains poignantly to Hütter.

Hütter strives to discern the following: “How are Christian freedom and God’s commandments related? Does the first need to exclude any reference to the latter in order to avoid even the slightest danger of works-righteousness or legalism? Does any reference to the latter irretrievably destroy the precious good of freedom?” (40). His inquiry is worthy, and discerning the “how” is daunting! As every Augsburg-confessing catholic knows, discerning the distinction and relationship between law and gospel—or according to Hütter’s theological trope, between the gospel as Christian freedom and the law as God’s commandments—remains always that unsurpassingly worthy and daunting task.⁴ It must be done, as Lutherans confess, both for the sake of God’s law and for the sake of the gospel of Christian freedom, and especially for the proper and flourishing relationship between them. Certainly, Christian freedom does not exclude *any* reference to God’s law. Nevertheless, what is at stake is the precise nature of that relationship in order to avoid—yes, indeed—“even the slightest danger of works-righteousness or legalism.” Surely, Hütter does not want to imply with this phrase that those who take works-righteousness or legalism seriously are some kind of doctrinal or anti-ecumenist extremists. Certainly, “any” reference to God’s law does not “irretrievably destroy” the precious good of freedom, presumably Christian freedom. Still, certain ways of relating God’s law and Christian freedom do, in fact, endanger precisely how Christian freedom is *Christian* and how God’s law is *law*. Let’s probe the “how.”

On most every page of his essay Hütter declares his thesis regarding the relationship of Christian freedom and God’s commandments, though he often does so with slight variations in wording. At a key point in the essay he puts it this way: “God’s commandments are the shape and form of believers’ lives with God” (44). With this formulation he declares quite precisely the definitive purpose, function, and use of God’s commandments. They are to provide “shape and form” to Christian freedom or, as in this sentence, to “believers’ lives with God.” Sometimes he says “shape and form,” at other times just “form,” at still others he employs his na-

⁴We shall explore below two consequential aspects of Hütter’s theological trope: first, why, with precise purposefulness, he prefers to say “commandments”; second, why he purposefully orders what he calls “the twofold center of Lutheran ethics” under the rubrics gospel and “commandments” rather than under law and gospel. As we will discover, Hütter is quite forthright with his theological rationale for the first aspect. However, while the theological implications of his reordering emerge forthrightly, the theological—and ecclesial (!)—rationale for this reordering remains cryptic. My critique will have to surface this hidden theological rationale and its weightiness.

tive “*gestalt*,” occasionally he will say “embodiment.” So, for instance, “Christian freedom is the embodiment of practicing God’s commandments as a way of life” (33).

Hütter leads readers to appreciate the significance of “shape and form” for Lutheran ethics by opening his essay with a broad and devastating critique of the “theological impoverishment” of modern Protestant ethics (33). His proposal—that God’s commandments give “positive and substantive” “shape and form” to Christian freedom—is the antidote to this theological impoverishment. The impoverishment arises because “in modern Protestant ethics ‘freedom’ has come to be understood primarily as ‘negative’ freedom...as a freedom ‘from’ and not a freedom ‘for.’”

In Hütter’s narrative, two characters share the fault for this situation. The first fault resides with “the ‘Luther renaissance’ that has dominated the Luther-research for most of this century” (33). He perceives “the decisive core fallacy” of the Luther renaissance and “modern Protestant ethics” to consist of “a broadly shared assumption about justification: What makes Christian ethics ‘Protestant’ is the conviction that everything must ultimately be framed by and derived from the one and only central article of Protestantism, namely, justification by grace through faith alone.” Surely it is a grave mistake to conflate in the way Hütter does “the” Luther renaissance with “modern Protestant ethics.” Both Lutherans and Calvinists can have a field day with such conflations. There are many details here with which to disagree, but they must be reserved for another occasion.

Hütter elaborates on “the decisive core fallacy,” first, by stressing that he is “not challenging the centrality of the doctrine of justification by faith alone” but rather “seeking to safeguard it from the misuse of applying it beyond and against the Reformation’s intention” (33). The fallacious conviction “regards this doctrine [justification] as a ceiling that has to cover everything.”⁵ “Instead,” the doctrine of justification by faith alone is “the very floor on which we stand.” This, claims Hütter, is “the Reformation’s intention.” This seemingly innocent metaphorical shift between “ceiling” and “floor” is anything but benign. In fact, this “ceiling/floor” metaphorical shift is being bandied about by numerous North American interpreters of Lutheranism and bringing havoc in its wake in a number of settings.⁶

Hütter argues that as a “ceiling” the doctrine of justification becomes “turned...into a systematic principle to govern and control every other element of the Christian faith” (33). Erroneously, the Luther renaissance “understood the doctrine of justification exclusively in forensic terms, which eclipsed Luther’s other

⁵Hütter offers another parallel description of the fallacious conviction regarding justification as follows: it has “turned this doctrine into a systematic principle to govern and control every other element of the Christian faith” (33).

⁶Several prominent Lutheran ecumenists employ the metaphor of “floor” over against “ceiling” regarding the doctrine of justification by faith alone in order to argue that while this “floor” is unequivocally necessary, it is after all only a floor and thus not “enough” (*non satis est*).

emphasis, namely, the very real presence of Christ in faith.” Now we are beginning to get to the core of Hütter’s critique, in which he identifies the “unintended consequences” of the Luther renaissance’s fallacious fixation on forensic terms alone. “[J]ustification’ became a purely external, formal, and juridical transaction whose only immediately tangible effect was to be in faith free ‘from’ the law’s unmasking and convicting force” (34). This, he argues, accounts for the reduction of Christian freedom to negative freedom, to a freedom merely “from” the law. It is true that many Lutherans maintain a thin construal of “forensic” justification, but need that be the case? Ironically, Hütter himself seems to have a rather thin construal of *Christian* freedom, a construal of freedom that can only receive thick “shape and form” by means of God’s commandments. Is this Luther’s path to positive *Christian* freedom? Is this Luther’s construal of *Christian* freedom’s *dilectio legis* (delight in the law)? Hardly, on both counts.

The other character in Hütter’s narrative of impoverished “Protestant lite” ethics is Immanuel Kant (36). I find myself agreeing with much of his analysis of Kantian ethics and the direction in which it has taken Protestantism in general and some important scholars of the Luther renaissance as well. Of particular note is the disastrous “eclipse” of the first use of the law (35). Further, much neo-Kantian, Protestant ethics does result in a rather empty or blank construal of Christian freedom, as I would put it. Hütter resolves this blank notion of Christian freedom by merely annexing God’s commandments as the substantive “shape and form” of Christian freedom. By doing so, he simply acquiesces to the erroneously blank construal of Christian freedom. How ironic—and tragic!

The troubling aspect of Hütter’s proposal of God’s commandments as the “shape and form” of Christian freedom is that he eventually pins it onto Luther. He attempts this feat after retrieving concepts from three twentieth-century movements: from Karl Barth’s gospel and law framework; “most notably” (184 n. 29), from Stanley Hauerwas’s rediscovery of the virtue ethics of Aristotle and Aquinas; and finally from an eclectic assortment of liberation and ecclesial ethics. With these insights in hand Hütter interprets Luther’s famous 1520 treatise, *The Freedom of a Christian*. We cannot enter into each of Hütter’s steps toward interpreting this treatise to fit his proposal. Briefly, he takes an illustrative analogy from the treatise concerning Adam and Eve in Paradise. He then jumps to Luther’s lectures on Genesis 2 from the late 1530s. At that point he employs a very long quotation from David Yaego in order to argue that Christian faith and freedom are that “to which God’s commandment gives creaturely form and shape!” (43). What emerges is yet another project to revivify the so-called “third use of the law” under the guise of an “original and proper” use, which is why Hütter would rather reserve the word “commandment” for this function, using “law” when sinners are on the scene (43, 182 n. 16, 186 n. 44).

Luther does not at all move in that direction in *The Freedom of a Christian*. Rather, he argues that the outcome of the “happy exchange” is that we “by faith

alone” “share” in Christ’s own two offices, that of king and priest.⁷ That is, the really present and agential cruciform Christ and his Spirit are the very shape and substance of Christian freedom. For not even God’s law aspires to attain the shape of the crucified God. Hütter overlooks the fact that Luther had much experience with those who toiled to “shape and form” Christian faith and freedom by means of God’s law. In fact, Luther vigorously promotes “by faith alone” as scripture’s preferential evangelical alternative to Aquinas’s proposal of *fides caritate formata* (faith formed by love). Luther argues that faith’s freedom is not merely the blank and empty floor or “foundation” of salvation that must then be formed and completed by the virtue of love. Luther argues precisely against such an Aristotelian-Thomistic framework in which one’s potentiality is teleologically actualized by the practice of moral virtues.

For Luther the cruciform Christ and his Spirit are the full, historical shape and form of Christian freedom; that’s why it is *Christian* freedom.⁸ In fact, it is love that needs the shaping and forming of Christian faith and freedom. Even in Hütter’s essay there are occasional hints, though thoroughly undeveloped, of such a direction, of “the very real presence of Christ in faith” (33).⁹ Needed is a christology—with an accompanying pneumatology, doctrine of the Trinity, and ecclesiology—for maximizing Christ in Christian freedom. With a thoroughly maximized *Christian* freedom comes a dynamic relationship of freedom from God’s law in order to be free for the law, but not in the way that Hütter suggests. Luther sometimes refers to Christian freedom being *supra lege* (above the law) in the sense of Christian caring for and ministering to God’s law. The peculiar *dilectio legis* of Christian freedom sustains and assists God’s law to discharge its civil function of protecting neighbors from the ravages of sin and evil, while preserving and promoting their temporal flourishing, and also to accomplish its theological function of revealing sin before the judgment seat of God.¹⁰

In 1992 Hütter published an entirely different kind of article on Luther’s theology.¹¹ Nowhere in that more promising proposal for Lutheran ethics is any trace of the kind of dominant discourse that we have in the *PLE* essay. What happened to Hütter in the meantime? Well, he candidly addresses that question in the essay before us. He encountered Pope John Paul II’s 1993 encyclical, *Veritatis Splendor*, with its “rich and complex notion of human freedom” and God’s law (32), and envied it, dare we say, too much.¹² If we can bracket for a time the dominant direction

⁷See *Luther’s Works* 31:353-54.

⁸See *Luther’s Works* 26:88-92, 122-136. For a thorough, though quite challenging, critique of this Aristotelian-Thomistic framework, see Eberhard Jüngel, “The World As Possibility and Actuality: The Ontology of the Doctrine of Justification,” in *Theological Essays*, trans. J. B. Webster (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989) 95-111.

⁹See especially endnote 40 on p. 186.

¹⁰See, for instance, *Luther’s Works* 26:94-97, 130-36, and *Luther’s Works* 31:366-71.

¹¹R. Hütter, “Martin Luther and Johannes Dietenberger on ‘Good Works,’” *Lutheran Quarterly* 6/2 (1992) 127-52. While published in 1992, Hütter has told me that he wrote it in the late 1980s.

¹²For Hütter’s full critical reading of *Veritatis Splendor*, see his “‘God’s Law’ in *Veritatis Splendor*: Sic et Non,” in *Ecumenical Ventures in Ethics: Protestants Engage Pope John Paul II’s Moral Encyclicals*, ed. R. Hütter and T. Dieter (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998) 84-114.

of Hütter's proposal, we can find toward the end of the essay a number of fruitful suggestions regarding the "natural law."

III. MARTHA STORTZ

In her essay, "Practicing Christians: Prayer as Formation," Martha Stortz, professor at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, is quite aware that her proposal stands on the precipice where Luther's critique of the Aristotelian ailment meets the everyday common sense question of formation (58-59). She does not, to my mind, offer a very satisfactory response. However, rather than entering again into that conversation, I want to pick up a thought that Stortz herself introduces though she does not develop it extensively. In his little book, *The Responsible Self*, H. Richard Niebuhr offers a typology of ethical frameworks beginning with the two great western heritages of teleology (the Aristotelian heritage) and deontology (the Kantian heritage). After nicely laying out the basic framework of each and pointing out their strengths and weaknesses, he begins to discern a newly emerging western ethical heritage that we might call "the responsibilist tradition." Furthermore, he points to its congruence with the major motifs of the biblical imagination. Like Stortz, I have for a long time considered this responsibilist tradition to be the more fruitful conversation partner with the perennial themes of Lutheranism.¹³

In her essay Stortz suggests that Luther constructs a "three-legged stool" of practices of formation. Luther's first leg is his catechisms, a school book. The second leg is his "German Mass," a song book. In order to fashion the third leg, she retrieves Luther's advice to his own barber when he asked Luther for "a simple way to pray." In this way she toils to carve out a practice of prayer from the trunk of our Lutheran heritage. Along the way she chisels this wonderful line onto the leg: "to a community of Lutherans [at prayer], all the world is filled with neighbors" (60). Oh, that we Lutherans might produce a theological imagination yielding such a practice of prayer.

Stortz indicates that Luther "broke with the pattern of prayer in which he had been instructed" (65). As she notes, in the middle ages contemplative prayer had the following pattern: *lectio* (reading of Scripture), *oratio* (prayer), *meditatio* (meditation), *contemplatio* (contemplation). Luther, however, "changes and rearranges this order completely" to *oratio* (prayer), *meditatio* (meditation), and *tentatio* (suffering). While she states that Luther "eliminates contemplation entirely," she does not engage Luther's reasoning on a deeper level. Luther knows quite well that his elimination of *contemplatio* functions as a critique of the entire Aristotelian-Thomistic framework of medieval spirituality.¹⁴ For Luther the theology of the cross permeates especially the Christian life of prayer. Witness his treat-

¹³For an engaging African-American interpretation of the responsibilist tradition, see Darryl Trimiew, *Voices of the Silenced: The Responsible Self in a Marginalized Community* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 1993).

¹⁴For a comprehensive account of this framework, see Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Random House, 1956); see especially 3-7, 351-356 for the "supreme" function of contemplation.

ment of the Lord's prayer in the catechisms. Is it, then, such a great surprise that the making of "a real doctor" comes by way of the devil? And is it, again, such a surprise that a cruciform life of prayer would have a world so "filled with neighbors"? For these reasons and others, Stortz is right on target to note that "[r]ather than recruiting Aristotle...Luther turns...to the 'marks of the church'" (71). Surely it is true that through these very "marks" a neighbor-filled ethos of prayer in the Spirit proceeds from the agency of the sinner-bearing God in Christ, a point that Stortz does not, in this essay at least, explicitly make.

IV. RICHARD PERRY

The burden that Richard Perry bears in his essay, "African American Lutheran Ethical Action: The Will to Build," is to retrieve a lost, or perhaps silenced and suppressed, Lutheran heritage of moral agency. Here, Perry is preeminently a historian of African-American Lutheran moral agency. Competently and gently, the professor from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago shepherds those Lutherans who are not African American—surely most of us—into the rapidly emerging motherlode of African-American religious scholarship.

Borrowing from Peter Paris, Perry identifies four types of Christian moral agency. "Priestly" agency has roots reaching to Africa (81). "Realistic accommodationism" is its hallmark. Programmatically, the priestly focuses on racial self-development within a society that is perceived to be good despite the racism practiced by some. Soul care is a prime practice accompanied by political work "behind the scenes." The "prophetic" rises up in nineteenth-century antebellum America. While the prophetic recognizes society as good, it emphasizes confrontation and nonviolent social reform under the rule of a God of justice. Building this-worldly social and racial justice is its premier practice. "Political" moral agency emerges in the nineteenth-century period of reconstruction. In the face of powerlessness, it focuses on problem-solving and compromise. Know the broad political system and use it to accomplish the goals of the African-American community. "Nationalist" agency is the response to colonization. It views the reigning social institutions and society itself as evil. Total change is necessary. Nationalist moral agency supports separation. Racial self-definition and self-determination mean embracing a "race first" ideology and solidarity.

Perry shows how each type of American moral agency can be "compatible" with the Lutheran heritage of "two kingdoms" (82-83). To do so he employs the scholarship of James Echols, now the president of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. Borrowing from Echols, Perry observes that "Lutherans have placed an emphasis on Romans 13" leading to quietism and conservatism. Perry stresses that African Americans, particularly of the prophetic type, have invoked Acts 5:29 and advanced a "resistance tradition" (95). In the face of what has certainly been the case among most Lutherans, a significant companion essay to Perry's would be an in-depth analysis of the vibrant dialectic of Romans 13 and Acts 5 in Article 16 of

the *Augsburg Confession* and the ensuing moral heritage of “critical participation,” as John Stumme puts it (4). A second aspect that this companion essay could investigate is the resistance tradition that sprang from Article 10 of the *Formula of Concord* and that, beginning in the city of Magdeburg during the 1550s, lengthened itself across particular sectors of western society.

Perry now retrieves biographically three African-American Lutherans who embodied the priestly, the political, and the prophetic in one combination or another: the Reverend Jehu Jones, Jr., the first African American ordained by a Lutheran church body in the United States and the Caribbean; Sister Emma Francis, the first African-American Lutheran deaconess; and Bishop Alexander Payne, the second African American ordained as a Lutheran pastor. Perry culminates his historical retrieval by analyzing the formation of the Franckean Synod as an antislavery synod in 1837. He demonstrates that the Franckean’s “implicit understandings of the two kingdoms and law and gospel” led them to be “reformers of the world” (91-92).

Two motifs from Perry’s essay endure in my mind. First, each of Perry’s three African-American Lutherans venture “to build” emancipatory social institutions. Here he seizes Benne’s perennial theme of the orders of creation or places of responsibility. Christian vocation entails the generation, preservation, and renovation of the institutional places of responsibility. In our current context it is incumbent to investigate the moral meaning of civil society institutions for the prevention and promotion of this, that, and the other thing.¹⁵ Second, Perry exhibits a lively use of perennial Lutheran themes in order to mend and amend modern and postmodern American life, as distinct from certain more or less anti-modern motives—now in vogue in some quarters of Lutheranism—for retrieving our perennial themes.

V. JAMES CHILDS

In “Ethics and the Promise of God: Moral Authority and the Church’s Witness,” James Childs addresses the tension between “society has lost its moral compass,” on the one hand, and “the church must speak clearly and forthrightly to the growing moral anarchy,” on the other hand. But does the church still have a “grip on its own moral authority and moral courage”? A significant question!

Childs begins his essay by noting an “ambivalence” that has “seeds...in the thinking of Martin Luther himself,” though Childs quickly concedes that these seeds are “most especially in subsequent interpretations of Luther” (98). By ambivalence, Childs means that Lutherans “have usually been somewhat more comfortable and confident in the personal sphere than in the realm of public policy.” This has unquestionably been the case for far too many Lutherans in some countries and at some time periods, while it has not been true for other Lutherans in

¹⁵For an initial foray into that subject, see my “Civil Society and Congregations as Public Moral Companions,” *Word & World* 15/4 (1995) 420-27.

various countries and times. However, it is anachronistic for Childs to lasso and hog-tie Luther for social dynamics that arose primarily in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Ernst Troeltsch, of course, is the one who erroneously interpreted Luther according to a private/public template. Furthermore, far too many American Lutheran ethicists learned their Luther from reading Troeltsch or from reading the Niebuhr brothers as they mediated the Troeltschian interpretation of Luther.¹⁶ While Childs is rightfully striving to be self-critical of his own heritage, he ought simply “to disavow this [Troeltsch’s] mistaken ‘dualistic’ interpretation” of Luther.¹⁷ In order to address adequately the truly important question of the public/private split, we would have to scrutinize critically, at least, classic liberalism’s response to the Thirty Years War and third-use-of-the-law Protestant pietisms.

Childs points to “Luther’s well-known distinction between God’s two governments” as the source of this dualism (98). “Certainly,” claims Childs, “the impulses toward dualistic and quietistic interpretations of the two realms are there in Luther himself” (99). He then enlists Helmut Thielicke as an ally of this interpretation. However, Thielicke’s interpretation is more textured than Childs’s formulations suggest. For instance, Thielicke repeatedly says things like: “Now if this were in fact Luther’s view...” or “If Troeltsch’s interpretation of Luther were correct...” then we would have to renounce the heritage. But Thielicke thinks otherwise. Finally, too, Childs credits the reappraisal of Luther’s thought for helping Lutherans to “find their way into the church’s social witness in our time” (101).

Childs strives for “a more unitive vision” than he finds available in Luther (104). He adopts the eschatological perspective developed by Wolfhart Pannenberg in Germany and distributed in North America by Carl Braaten, Childs’s teacher. Childs argues that the eschatological perspective, advocated also by Thielicke, transposes Luther’s “spatial” dialectic of God’s law and gospel into the “temporal” “interplay of the ‘now...not yet’” (104-5). The eschatological thesis raises, of course, many new and interesting questions, only one of which we can here pose. Luther’s law and gospel dialectic is not so much a spatial dialectic as it is a “political” dialectic. That is, it thematizes God’s two modes of “governance” of the world. The crux of the question is the dialectical shape of divine lordship. No wonder Luther, when he comes to the second article of the Apostles’ Creed in the *Large Catechism*, so forthrightly poses the question: “What is it to ‘become a Lord’”? The eschatological theologian with the most to offer on this front is Jürgen

¹⁶Many prominent post-WWII American interpreters of Luther have offered thorough critiques of the Troeltschian-Niebuhrian interpretation of Luther. See George Forell, *Faith Active in Love: An Investigation of the Principles Underlying Luther’s Social Ethics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1954) esp. 50-52; Forell, *Martin Luther, Theologian of the Church: Collected Essays*, Word & World Supplement Series 2 (St. Paul: Word & World, Luther Seminary, 1994) 66-82; Karl Hertz, ed., *Two Kingdoms and One World: A Sourcebook in Christian Social Ethics* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976) 74-75. Hertz collects the writings of many American Lutheran interpreters who counter the Troeltschian-Niebuhrian mistake. Hertz (p. 70) also notes that the western public/private dichotomy “belongs” in the nineteenth century. See also William Lazareth, *A Theology of Politics* (New York: Board of Social Missions, United Church in America, 1960) 10-15.

¹⁷Lazareth, *A Theology of Politics*, 15.

Moltmann. Moltmann's eschatological thinking is more cruciformly shaped than is Pannenberg's. The most promising aspect of Childs's essay is his proposal for dialogical ethics, and a more cruciform eschatological perspective would add epistemological depth and breadth to that proposal. Also, since Childs cites Ronald Thiemann (113), perhaps it is not too unfair of me to offer Thiemann's notion of "public reason" as a friendly amendment to Childs's dialogical ethics.

VI. DAVID FREDRICKSON

Our next essayist is David Fredrickson, who teaches New Testament at Luther Seminary. In "Pauline Ethics: Congregations as Communities of Moral Deliberation," he offers an innovative and fruitful perspective on Paul. First, he notes that Paul, as "a founder and nurturer of congregations,...placed congregations at the very center of his thought" (115). Further, he argues that "Pauline ethics grow out of the apostle's vision of the church as persons gathered and empowered for moral deliberation by the Spirit in the name of Jesus."

Congregations are the very places where moral reflection, formulation, and action actually "occur" (115). Congregations are neither simply sinful and retrograde "obstacles" to God's self-evidently true moral order of the cosmos nor merely "passive recipients" of the same. Fredrickson finds that Paul himself imagines that God is really up to something—that God is agential—in the very activity of moral deliberation that occurs in Christian congregations. Oh, that Lutherans might practice such a "theological" imagination of what God is up to in the world through them! For Paul a principal "moral task that lies before the church is the testing of all things by those who must bear the consequences of the decisions reached" (116). Further, he finds this congruent with "the reforming work of Martin Luther." We could, perhaps, strengthen Fredrickson's hunch by reminding him that Luther, repeatedly throughout his life and at crucial confessing moments no less, invokes Paul's appeal: "Test everything."

The way ahead, claims Fredrickson, lies in exploring "the political dimensions" of Paul's thought. Paul uses the term "*ekklesia*" specifically because it was the term for the democratic, decision-making "assembly" of the Greek city-state. Fredrickson opens us to this Pauline world by close readings of 2 Corinthians 3, Phil 1:27-2:18, and Romans 12-15. As he points out, modern translators are, unfortunately, "usually deaf" to these dimensions of Paul's theological thinking. Paul imagined a previously unheard of "extreme form of democracy" because he "tore down the barriers to full participation through his conviction that the Spirit grants free speech [*parresia* in 2 Cor 3:12] to all who belong to Christ" (117). Paul's message to the Corinthians: "shame [normative in the Greco-Roman world for the poor, women, and slaves] brings silence; the Spirit brings speech" (118).

Fredrickson tenders another innovative "theological" jolt to the usual readings of the Christ hymn of Philippians. He argues for a relational not a substantialist notion of "equality." To be equal with God means that God and Christ Jesus

“exist with one another” and enjoy “equal participation in the governance of the community” (121). Fredrickson knows that Paul is on the way toward a more trinitarian confession of the biblical deity. Christ, rather than keeping this equal participation with God for himself—grasping—“extends” it to others. Ironically, perhaps, Paul has Christ innovatively taking on the form of a slave precisely in order to extend equality to others. In several long endnotes (202-203 notes 23, 25, and 27) Fredrickson suggests several key congruencies, as well as differences, between Paul and Luther. Readers will want to attend to these.

Fredrickson points out that both 2 Corinthians 3 and Philippians 2 deal with internal actions of the congregation. Romans 12-15 by contrast entails bearing to the world “a way of carrying forth in unity in the presence of conflicting moral claims” (125). Romans 13 is, of course, a *locus classicus* in theology and ethics, and Fredrickson offers again an innovative and complex rendering of it, a reading that demands more attention than we can give it here, unfortunately. Perhaps here is the place to state that what *PLE* needs is a companion volume, *The Promise of Lutheran Theology*. Numerous times throughout the essays important ethical conceptualizations needed more theological exploration than the authors were commissioned to provide. There is only so much space with which to work. In other venues Fredrickson has written at more length on Philippians 2 and there is much to harvest. Not many exegetes are as “theologically” fruitful as is Fredrickson. David Kelsey’s book, *To Understand God Truly: What’s Theological about a Theological School*, signals a theological turn to congregations and Fredrickson’s approach befits that salutary turn.

VII. LARRY RASMUSSEN AND CYNTHIA MOE-LOBEDA

Larry Rasmussen of Union Seminary in New York, along with his doctoral student Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, submit a fourfold “perhaps” in their essay, “The Reform Dynamic: Addressing New Issues in Uncertain Times.” They begin with “Where We Are, Perhaps” and then move to “What the Tradition Offers, Perhaps.” After alighting there briefly they proceed to “Some Theological-Ethical Resources, Perhaps” where they expend the goodly share of their interpretive energy, and finally culminate in “Conclusion, Perhaps.” Certainly, uncertainty inundates their world! “For us the task is the long, difficult transition from an unsustainable way of life to an economically, environmentally, politically, socially, morally, and spiritually sustainable world” (133). They imagine the style of a Lutheran ethic “is that of a reformed church always reforming.” They argue that the reformation offers both a “settled deposit” and a “reform dynamic” (134). They perceive the deposit clustered around “creation, cross, sin, and human response and action,” and they excavate this deposit sequentially.

First, they excavate creation and find a “deep fault line” running all the way through Lutheran ethics, including the reformers themselves. There is a critique of anthropocentrism. They find that while the “circumference” of Luther’s and

Calvin's theologies took in the entire created order, the center of their theologizing was restricted to God, the human, and justification. Even though that was "quite understandable in the medieval world," it now needs "serious reformation" (136). Who could today with a good conscience disagree? Further, they trace how the "Protestant derailment of the doctrine of creation" unwittingly led to the reduction of creation to nature. Rightfully, they discern in Luther's thought a sumptuous notion of God's thoroughgoing immanence in all creation. They expend a lot of energy along the way distinguishing quite sharply Luther and Augustine. I applaud this! Too many Lutherans grub around in far too much muck, and unnecessarily so, because they reduce Luther so facilely to Augustine. It is erroneous and menacing, however, to tag Luther as having "a sacramentalist, panentheistic notion of creation"—with "sacramentalist" being the more menacing.

Rasmussen and Moe-Lobeda then move their excavation toward a theology of the cross that brings a reality check into construals of creation too "smoothly continuous" (141). Still, as they rightfully stress, the cross is more than a reality check on the depth of evil and human sinfulness. The cross is "a witness to the depth of God" (142). As insights from Moltmann's theology of the cross could aid Childs's construal, so also here. Not so much a "witness" is the cross, rather it is the cross that constitutes the depth of God. Much could be said. But we'll have to leave it for another time, "perhaps."

By way of conclusion, *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics* should have had one more essay. We all need—desperately(?)—to have a deeper recognition of those American Lutheran ethicists who have gone before us to prepare the way. Several of the essayists spoke of formation into a tradition, into "a socially embodied, historically extended argument." In his brief introduction Stumme mentioned the three-volume set, *Christian Social Responsibility* (1957), and authors such as Sittler, Lazareth, Forell, Bergendoff, Carlson. There are others such as Bertram and Burtness and Sherman. Stumme did produce the best—absolutely the best—"Bibliography of Lutheran Ethics" for the English language. Kudos!! Someone—Stumme, perhaps—should have also assembled the heritage narratively so that we have one to bear, so that we have one to honor. ⊕