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LUTHER'S ETHIC IN PRESENT DAY CRISIS

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The title of this essay could cause the reader some misgivings; these misgivings could occur on a variety of levels. Let me articulate some of them. First, what does Luther have to do with today's world? Have we not often made Luther a Protestant Pope who could speak on any given topic with a unique kind of authority? Second, what does Luther's theology have to do with ours? He was, after all, a medieval man. He read the Scriptures differently than we do today. Third, Luther's ethical concerns were different from ours! Luther formulated his ethic from the spirit of the Gospel in contradistinction to the work-righteousness of the Middle Age. Ethics meant for him the counter-part or result of the Gospel and not accomplishments of designated "good works." Finally, we must notice, no matter where we stand theologically, or in what church tradition, that his situation was radically different from ours. He lived in a world which was permeated throughout by Christian and religious thought. The institutional church had a monopoly even on the realms of science and politics.

Can a bridge between ourselves and Luther be constructed? Perhaps it is only confessional narrowness or stubbornness that is behind our assertion of dependence on Luther. Have we become guardians of "Luther museums"? Nothing dare be lost because it is a valued rarity and antiquity? But if it is old, does it have anything to say today? We must face these questions and these misgivings, even though such a confrontation may not be very comfortable. The acceptance of this confrontation prevents us from looking at Luther in a simple and routine way. We must not use Luther thoughtlessly by citing his thought out of context so that we can use him to support our own preconceived positions and opinions. Luther's thought must not be diluted into small "portions" and then used arbitrarily.

With these cautionary thoughts in mind, let us proceed step by step and attempt to get at Luther's ethic. First, we want to discover its center; second, we want to examine how this center can speak to our situation with reference to present day life and decision-making. Doing it this way, we shall avoid prematurely "actualizing" and "modernizing" Luther. This approach shall enable us to remember Luther's essential insights as we focus on the question: "To what extent do Luther's insights bind and obligate *us* today?"

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I.

Where is the center of Luther's faith and theology? It is primarily in the determined one-sidedness with which he seeks God and His salvation. It lies in the depth of his experience. He falls again and again as a pious man and in all his pious works and religious efforts. One could perhaps say that it was the medieval *ethic* which brought about his failure! The medieval ethic sought *justification*—which is primarily an *ethical* concept —through man's pious works. Luther's theology begins where man dismisses self-righteous and pious works. It begins where Luther no longer trusts in his own accomplishments for salvation. God wants us as his own; He does not desire "something special" such as our works, but He wants *us* to be *His*.

Luther, in line with Paul, Jesus, and the Old Testament prophets, reduces the ethical problem to one particular insight: Luther goes behind human action and work and asks about the One who has acted. This can best be seen in his reaction against medieval piety in his understanding of Christian discipleship: "It is not the discipleship which makes out of us sons, but it is the sonship which makes disciples." This is an insight which we cannot avoid if we desire to remain Christians of the Reformation! Here is a simple either/or, a choice between Law (Legalism) or Gospel. This is a choice which the church continually has to meet and make. It is not a choice of a once and for all time of yesterday's history —but a choice of today!

Furthermore, Luther, as no one else in the history of the church since St. Paul, realized and preached the questionableness of man's work before God. One has only to recall Luther's hymn based on Psalm 130. It's title is "From the Depths of Woe I cry to Thee, Lord, hear me, I implore Thee" (No. 329 *The Lutheran Hymnal* [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941]). Stanza two of that hymn has also these words: "The best and holiest deeds must fail to break sin's dread oppression." Is it possible to speak of man's self-righteous efforts in a more dispairing way? Luther prevents man from finding a possible way out; there is no hiding place in which man can escape the judgment of God, not even in the cave of man's "good works." And in spite of all of this there was hardly anyone who emphasized "good works" more than Martin Luther! But he speaks of faith and good works in a definite chronological order: "Faith is the beginning of all good works" (*WA* 5,119, 14-15). Good works are not done by calculation or to appease God. Indeed, in a real sense, it is impossible for us to do good deeds for *God*, even though God desires that we love and serve our neighbor: "Those actions which we do in relationship to God are not called good works," says Luther, "but what we do for our neighbor, those are good works" (*WA* 10 III, 98, 16-17).

Proceeding one step further, Luther establishes another important insight: ethics has less to do with the relationship between man-God than with the relationship between man-fellowman. Certainly, one dare not tear this saying out of context, but one must always recall what Luther has

to say about *faith* as the only possible beginning of all good works! Insofar as works are done out of faith, even if they are intended for fellowman, they always are related to God. Says Luther: "Every work of a Christian shall be a service to God" (*WA* 4,653, 1). When this relationship is clearly understood and when God stands in the center, then Luther is able to find high praises for man and his deeds. Often he calls the believers "fellow workers" of God in order to show that Christian action grows out of fellowship in which faith unites the believer with God.

We have here a thread in Luther's theology which permeates his entire thought. On the one hand, this thinking is marked by a radical concentration and all lines converge in a common center. Everything has to do with God and His salvation for man. And on the other hand, all these lines also move back out into the world: God desires to work through His Christians for man and for the world. The call to faith does not occur in order to free us from the world and its tasks, but it is a call to service for the world. Here Luther's Christianity and especially also his ethic receive their tremendous dynamic and power. No longer does the Greek-philosophical and medieval ethic rule.

Futhermore, every ethic lives essentially from the relation of human action to a destiny, a "telos," or a goal. In Luther's faith and thought there is no immanent, this-worldly goal which man's action is serving. Human action has only one purpose and that is to be related to God. This means that two categories of human action are dismissed: The medieval man attempted to direct man's entire action toward God and forgot that the world was also God's; the modern action which seems "purely secular" and moves as if there is no God, i.e. paying homage to a secularism which idolizes the apparent world. Luther does not know the distinction between "sacred" and "secular." He is unable to sever God from the world or the world from God. "God did not create the world like a carpenter or a shoemaker who would care less if the house were torn away by the waters or destroyed by fire. But when God creates He does not leave that creation, but He remains, He sustains, and He rules it as He has set it into motion. When it is done, He remains with it" (*WA* 45, 97, 33-98, 2).

The dynamic of Luther's world-view directs our attention to still a further aspect of his thought. It is Luther's understanding of all world events as a final battle between God and anti-God. Luther's faith and action is not guided by the Greek philosophical world-view which has the pagan differentiation between matter and spirit. The false alternative which has evolved therefrom as "this-worldly and other-worldly" is also foreign to Luther. There is only one motif: the battle between the living God and his diabolical antagonist. When Erasmus of Rotterdam claimed that man had the freedom of will to choose between good and evil in his *Freedom of the Will* (1524), Luther responded with his most thoughtful theological work *The Bondage of the Will* (1525). Of this work Luther was to say a few years prior to his death: "Besides all my books this is the most important one next to the two catechisms."

In *The Bondage of the Will* Luther is not dealing merely with medieval concerns, nor with sixteenth century theological topics, but rather with the foundation of all Protestant and Lutheran theology. The foundation of Luther's ethic is here clarified. Man is at this point not a focus unto himself, but he becomes the object of the battle between God and the anti-god. Cultural and anthropological idealism become here deceptions and insidious lies. The question of how much good a man must do is far too simple and irrelevant. We have to do with much more important and decisive things: the ethical situation of today!

It would seem today that some churches and theologians no longer know what is of priority in ethics. In Europe, since the middle of the 1960's, there has been a social-revolutionary trend. It has become decisive —as never before—in theology and in the churches of European Protestantism! Barth, Bultmann, and many theological movements and schools were forgotten overnight. New voices—but not as new as some thought —were to proclaim: "Away with sermon and Scripture! We have spoken long enough! Now we intend to change the world!"

What happened? And what is happening now? Nothing other than that once again a legalism, the law of a social-revolutionary utopia, is trying to suppress the Gospel in the church. Once again a legalism is attempting to place the Gospel on the periphery. Once again a legalism is attempting to displace *God's* great deeds so that *our* action can be placed in the center of life.

It is not enough to know what temptations Luther had to face in his time and how he was able to overcome them if we are unable to see and judge our own time with its dangers. In the medieval period many people misunderstood the Gospel because they misunderstood discipleship: they thought it was the simple imitation of Jesus' life-style. In like manner the slogans of social engagement which also have made inroads into the church have clouded and obscured the Gospel beyond recognition: the Social-revolutionary left demands emphatically that one dismiss the Gospel in order to give all energy to social therapy, to aide underdeveloped countries and other projects. Scripture, Confession, and dogma are no longer of concern. One is totally occupied with one's self and one's own actions!

In the light of these developments we can only wonder when in the past four hundred years has Luther's theology been more timely. When was his ethic as helpful and as much a directive for life as in our own generation? Are we not in danger of a new work-righteousness which is much worse than the falsifications of medieval times? Such falsifications not only compete with the Gospel: they also claim exclusiveness and try to remove the Gospel entirely. The pseudo-Christian neo-humanism speaks much of action. But it has long forgotten Luther's decisive presupposition: "faith" is the beginning of all good works.

Luther's ethic is timeless. It did not begin with the works of man, but with God's work of grace for man. It started with a chronological

order which could not be turned around. Man's action did not become unimportant. Just the opposite! Only in the light of God's grace did man's work take on meaning and become the good and necessary action. Now a work dare not cease because faith is a "living, active, busy thing."

It is truly commendable when we are courageous enough to take stock of our condition again and again. That is that we ask ourselves critically today (also in our Lutheran Churches): what is our situation; what is the relationship between the first work (God's action) and the second Word (man) accomplishing? It is difficult to speak clearly, both in sermons and theology, because we often think that in the final analysis it will still depend on the "deed" anyway. Certainly, it all depends and hinges on the "doing" or "deed." But for the church this means that we live not from *our* doing, but rather from *God's doing for us.* The escape into activism can be the surest sign for the church that she no longer knows for what purpose she exists and what she owes man. The impression is sometimes given that the European churches are attempting to cover up their need and loss of theological substance so that no one notices the crisis in which they find themselves.

Who will prevent us from making the same mistake as the church in Luther's time, insofar as we obscure the *one* Gospel on which everything depends. In our time it is by no means a luxury to ask and to face this question. Were we not to do just that, then the fact that we claim Luther's backing may mean little or nothing. For Luther did not demand this or that, but only *one thing*: that the church be first of all a place where men hear the Good News which God worked for them in Jesus Christ.

In connection with Luther's battle against the medieval "imitation ethic," let us attempt a portrayal of consequences which we can expect from Luther's faith-ethic of Christian discipleship. First of all, if we define biblical Christology as God's striving after His rulership for His world and His people, then we can only properly understand the original meaning of the Christian ethic as we see it in its given context. God deals with the world and for the world in that He sacrifices His only Son in order to bring His people home. The work of Christ is thus identical with His mission. The work of Christ in its entirety and thus in its parts is nothing other than God's own service. God gives Himself away and makes a present of Himself. In that He does this He *gains* the world. God's ethic is an "ethic of powerlessness" which as service sacrifices itself and thereby overcomes the need and the calamity of the world. God's "power" unfolds itself not as unlimited physical or metaphysical might, but as total powerlessness at the cross. This power is not demand, but self-sacrifice.

Are we not to hear Jesus' words, in reference to the church and her ethic, which says that whoever is to gain his life must first lose it? The necessary reformation of ethic is not going to occur by making our demands on the world even more emphatically. Warnings of hell-fire and brimstone for those who do not obey does not motivate. Rather, as we give our lives, our time, our strengths, our knowledge and all our oppor-

tunities as church, ourselves, do we overcome our desire for dominance over others. Then we will move steadily into the service with which and through which God turns salvation toward His world. The never-ending worry and struggle to maintain the priority of this service (diakonia) free from obscurity is far more important than the secular morality question. Real service is more decisive than a preoccupation with the many ethical accusations the church can accuse modern man with.

Secondly, discipleship-ethic does not ask primarily or even finally for the realization of norms in and of themselves (whether they are derived from nature, history or from convention). In spite of the fact that the discipleship-ethic knows of importance and meaning of norms, it follows norms neither as ends in themselves nor because they make certain non-reflective demands. Moralism with its "fanatic norms" has always been the most dangerous enemy of love and thus also of the divine plan of salvation. Moralism showed itself in the form which forced Jesus' question; "Was the sabbath created for man or man for the sabbath?" Today the question may take this form: Is pre-marital sex sin in itself; is every form of revolution in itself against God's will? While we would oppose any tendency which makes out of Jesus a revolutionist, at the same time, we would allow the possibility that one of these days the call into discipleship might in a given situation and context mean that we become revolutionaries. Such matters cannot be considered apart from the total witness of the Gospel, even though it dare not come about due to fanaticism and over-zealousness, but on the basis of serious contemplation, reflection and prayer. This decision dare not be based on an ethical-ideological system, but rather must come out of the synthesis of obedience and situation; it must never be institutionalized. The Gospel is neither the basis nor the reason for the *ideology* which claims, "all revolution is against God's will," nor for the anti-ideology which says, "the Gospel questions ideology and anti-ideology radically after its content of service." The Gospel grants legitimate competence and reason for existence only to both ideologies insofar as they demonstrate service (diakonia) content. "Old morality" and "new morality" are in this antagonism step-sisters in that they either see it as their first duty to force eternal norms or they scorn and fight them just as seriously. While all this is happening little time and strength is left for the real man with concrete problems. Thus the decisive and all important task is never tackled. This is especially to be seen with regard to the modern sexual revolution. Here some want to defend "God's eternal order" and others display immeasurable hate against this supposed order. The consequence is not only that problems are unsolved and arguments remain, but more important, people are left without aid. They are left as living, searching, questioning, straying, and helpless people. God's salvation, however, is meant for no one else than these people.

Third, a discipleship-ethic moves away from ideology and also from the variety of Christian ideologies. It directs the man who wants to live responsibly to a new basis and relationship for his action. Discipleship-ethic differentiates itself thereby unmistakably from the mechanistic

"Imitation of Christ" of earlier times. Nor does it have its basis in the demand and coercion of norms, but is grounded in the service of the God who has brought the discipleship-ethic into existence. This service (diakonia), as all action of God, has no infinite characteristic, but is always contingent, situationally related, and close to reality. This separates the ethic basically from all ideology, which by definition would always have to be and is utopian without locality in our present-day world. For the indispensable situational relationship of the discipleship-ethic includes an impartial competence with which we can face and solve the problems of our time. Wherever today or tomorrow there is a claim to the "Holy Ghost," in favor of an ideology and at the expense of man and his salvation, as an attempt to force decisions, there we will have to unmask such a ploy. Discipleship-ethic does not fall to a prevailing situation or fadism, in that it dogmatizes the situation and gives it the status of norm. This ethic incarnates itself and its action in this situation. Of course, this can only happen in that other synthesis which one could call the "new synthesis of the Holy Spirit and impartiality." Faith, for the sake of true discipleship, has to turn from being an "opponent of knowledge" to being a "partner of knowledge." And this will not occur to aide faith by pseudoprops, but to keep faith from becoming a "faith outside of our worldly reality," and which would force faith into an utopian mold.

Fourth, discipleship-ethic is a polar and dialectic ethic. That is to say, its distinguishing marks, contrary to all ethical enthusiasm from left to right, are that of the New Testament message of justification. Geometrically this ethic is "elliptical." One focal point can be circumscribed in Luther's formulation: "Our best and holiest deeds must fail, even in the best of our lives." And the other focal point is given in Jesus' words: "You are the salt of the earth....You are the light of the world" (Matt. 5:13f.). Paul speaks of it in Ephesians 2:10, according to which the Christians are "God's work": "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

In this fruitful tension faith lives as real faith, that is, as trust in God's past, present, and future action and becomes itself enabled to demonstrate the "action of the righteous" (so Bonhoeffer). Ethical quietism and ideological-utopian revolutionism in an ethical, social, and political view misunderstood basically this tension and fail to understand not only the Gospel of Scripture, but also the reality of this world.

"Discipleship of Christ" consists of this: trusting God we again and again dare to enter this field of tension; with all of our strengths and possibilities—in theology, in thought, and in the scientific endeavor of higher education—we contribute in our time to our fellowman. We do this as believers on their way, people who are not finished, but who are becoming and have not as yet reached their destiny. Their action, though itself not convincing and radiating, reflects without our being in charge of it the light of that kingdom which it is not our duty to create nor bring about. It is that kingdom toward which we may travel as those who

believe and hope, and only because of this kingdom are we also able to undertake a courageous risk and action in present day crisis.

The "light" of this kingdom which has risen over church and world causes and brings about simultaneously and steadily the "total crisis" of all human action, of all "norms" and "order," of all ethical fantasies and utopias. It is this "light" which pulls us out of a complacent non-activity, laziness, or non-real exuberance. It calls and places us through this crisis of the steadily new encounter with God's service (diakonia) in His servant Christ into the believing, hoping, and active service for that world. For this world is in ethical need and in crisis. And it is as world in need the only object of love and of God's ethic.

Let us conclude: We began with the question where the center of Luther's ethic was and discovered that in the first and final instance he allows only faith to be the "beginning of all good works."

We believe that especially our Lutheran churches have to maintain the Reformer's basic starting point and dare not overlook or sidestep this decision factor. In the ecumenical movement there are at times voices suggesting that the church should place less weight on dogma and teaching, sermon and education, and occupy itself more intensively with the ethical problems of the present: the race question, underdeveloped countries, de-escalation politics, etc. There is no doubt that these are important tasks also for the churches and the individual Christians, and everyone of us should carry his responsibilities in his given situation. However, Luther has at this point a very decisive and non-ignorable word: namely the word of the absolute priority of the Gospel as a message of salvation in which God gives us the benefit of His good deed for us.

There is no doubt that in many things we will decide differently and go our separate ways from the Reformer who was a man of the sixteenth century. Luther was not faced with the issues of population explosion, birth control, nor with the integration of the races. For many of our specific and modern questions he never intended to give answers. And it would, indeed, be an error to seek those from him. Luther was not all-knowing and he was no pope. Nevertheless, there was one question, which he has forced upon us and which we cannot side-step: "What can and must the church do in order to remain true to its original mission command, or how to return to it if it has gone astray?"

Furthermore, Luther's ethical reasoning is still also valid for us: "Those are not good works which we do for God; but those which we do for our neighbor, those are good works."

The decision about which good works are most important in our situation must be prepared for and made by each congregation of Christians. The seriousness and conscientiousness which accompanies our decisions in given situations is the measure of how much the Gospel has given to us and in turn is asking of us in that we are its mission and messengers. There is no room for compromise—this no one was better able to demonstrate and help us to understand than Martin Luther.