Book Reviews

Joel D. Biermann, A Case for Character: Towards a Lutheran Virtue Ethics

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The author, a theologian of the Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod) who teaches at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, undertakes in this book to demonstrate that the Lutheran theological tradition, irrespective of its central emphasis on justification

(i) has genuine space for the concern of moral formation,
(ii) is hence open to core concerns of virtue ethics such as habituation, maturing, and exercise of faith in good works,
(iii) yet offers a healthy safeguard against aspects of virtue ethics such as development of the self that become problematic when transplanted into the sphere of coram mundo,
(iv) offers a rich source of insights into the unity of justification and sanctification that are best represented in a creedal Trinitarian framework that corresponds with the teaching of a threefold righteousness as it occurs in both Luther and Melanchthon.

Chapter 1 offers an analysis of the rise of virtue ethics in contemporary theology, which the author finds commended by its comprehensive portrayal of the moral life, one ‘encompass[ing] the concerns and contributions of both deontological and utilitarian ethics’ (p. 20). The author introduces the work of Stanley Hauerwas as representative of a newer trend in theology to embrace an ‘ethics of character’, giving particular attention to the ‘flight from ethics’ (p. 3) that Hauerwas associates with Lutheranism in particular, as a result of its insisting on a principled ‘tension’ between law and grace (p. 32).

Chapter 2 presents a number of contemporary US-American Lutheran voices that have sympathetically responded to this charge by describing both ways in which and reasons for which Lutheranism has been afflicted with ethical paralysis. The range of key words with which these authors offer their respective diagnoses includes Protestantism’s ‘soft Gnosticism’ (David Yeago) that equates order and form with enslavement (p. 41), its motivational reductionism (Robert Benne, pp. 43–44) that isolates love as the sole criterion, its ‘antinomian capacity’ (Reinhard Hütter, p. 7), which makes justification the ‘ceiling that
has to cover everything instead of the very floor on which we stand’ (quoted p. 46), and the tendency immediately to dismiss any concern for growth and progress in the moral life as a token of meritorious self-righteousness (Gilbert Meilaender, pp. 48–50).

The author discusses the various therapies these critics suggest, from Yeago’s emphasis on a ‘necessity of consistency’ (p. 55), by which a renewed life is to follow the gift of salvation, through Meilaender’s stress on the simul that needs to be accepted this side of the eschaton as a perennial challenge for the justified to battle the sinner she still has in herself (p. 55), to Hütter’s call for a renewed understanding of God’s law as a proper object of love (p. 59). A particularly promising hint, though, he finds in Benne’s remark that ‘Lutheran ethics will have to be more trinitarian’ (p. 58), which Biermann is happy to adopt and elaborate in his own constructive proposal in the second half of the book.

Chapter 3 serves as a reminder of the rich matrix for a theologically grounded ethics that is found in the Lutheran Confessional writings, with special attention given to the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* and Luther’s *Small* and *Large Catechisms*. The author traces how the sixteenth-century Reformers characterised good works as organic and necessary aspects of the Christian life. He highlights the prominence they give the language of ‘good fruits’ that ‘faith is bound to yield’ (*Confessio Augustana* [CA], Art. 6: ‘The New Obedience’), with the added caveat that these works are not done to ‘earn grace, but for God’s sake and to God’s praise’ (*CA*, Art. 20: ‘Concerning Faith and Good Works’). Biermann draws attention to the historical context that from early on saw the Reformers’ stress on sola gratia drawing charges of libertinism or neglect of ethics, which necessitated an in-depth rebuttal such as the one Melanchthon undertook in his lengthy treatment of the issue in article 4 of the *Apology*. Here, we find him adopt the terminology of exercere that was prominent also in Luther, and which for Biermann suggests that concerns of character-building were never far from the Reformers’ minds. As he quotes Melanchthon, ‘Likewise good works ought to follow faith so that faith is exercised in them, grows, and is shown to others, in order that others may be invited to godliness by our confession’ (quoted p. 69). In an analysis of the *Smalcald Articles* the author points out Luther’s move to clarify that ‘Christ justifies not only the person, but also that person’s work’ (p. 69). Luther, when partaking in the 1528 Church visitations of electoral Saxony and Meissen, was made acutely aware of the need for proper catechesis, precisely as he found that ‘the common people take the gospel altogether too lightly’ (Luther, quoted p. 70). The Reformer responded to this diagnosis with the production of his two catechisms, in which the need for training in the faith was practically acknowledged by giving the people a book that combined doctrinal education and liturgical formulae for domestic worship with instruction on the moral life, as particularly apparent in the *Haustafel* or ‘table of duties’ that Luther appended to the *Small Catechism* (p. 71).

Biermann examines the degree to which the two major Lutheran Reformers allowed Aristotle’s ethics a place in their accounts. He demonstrates how Melanchthon (following Luther) used Aristotle’s own scheme of the ‘four causes’ to point out both the legitimacy and limit of philosophy within Christian instruction: while relevance must be denied in any question that concerns the original and final causes (coram Deo) of world and humankind, there is ample space to heed the wisdom of the philosopher(s) in questions that concern the formal and material causes (coram mundo) of world and humankind. In a section on the *Apology* (pp. 82–91) Biermann demonstrates how, for Melanchthon,
Aristotelian concerns of forming character were safely at home in the realm of ‘civil righteousness’, where pointing people to virtuous exemplars and breeding good habits was seen as a necessity that united believers and others. As Biermann shows, the problem that led later Lutheran thinkers to distance themselves from the Aristotelian tradition in toto was in Melanchthon’s mind not a fault of Aristotle’s but of improper use that medieval theologians had made of his insights when importing his ideas into the alien territory of coram Deo.

Chapter 4 turns to the conceptual question of how the concern for moral formation can be accounted for in a theological framework that supports and situates it appropriately. Here Biermann first portrays a number of common yet not satisfactory frameworks such as ‘love-motivation’ and, ‘law and gospel’, before turning to the more promising distinction of different forms of righteousness that he finds in Luther (1535 Galatians Commentary) and Melanchthon. This leads the author to offer his own synthesising account of a threefold righteousness: the righteousness of faith (coram Deo) as categorically different from two other forms coram mundo: civil righteousness that is expected of and possible for all people, Christians and others, and another righteousness that is specific to followers of Christ, in which good works are forthcoming as fruits of faith active in love. Biermann notes the proximity of this threefold scheme to the Reformation teaching of three uses of the law (curb, mirror and guide), but more importantly a correspondence with the three parts of the Christian Creed, which allows him to prepare his own constructive proposal.

Chapter 5 offers an exposition of a diagram (p. 149), in which the vertical righteousness of faith is related as ‘justifying’ to two horizontal types of righteousness that the author dubs ‘governing’ and ‘conforming’. These are described as parallel but separate (p. 132), both to various degrees open to the concerns of an ethic of character formation. Biermann sees the concern for moral formation best embedded in a framework given by the Christian Creed, as it was formulated in the early Patristic era. He distinguishes his adopting of a Trinitarian framework from current accounts of ‘Social Trinity’ in the wake of Moltmann’s work. ‘The Christian life is shaped not by God’s Trinitarian nature as model, but by God’s revealed word and work for us’ (p. 139). Adopting a creedal framework allows, as the author sees it, for a fuller answer to the question of the telos of human life, which Biermann, quoting Hütter, characterises as ‘the truthful enactment of created existence’ (p. 155). In relation to the first Article and on the plane of ‘civil righteousness’, virtue becomes intelligible, then, as pursuing the ‘restoration of God’s creation’, and good works as the apt business of God’s redeemed creatures (p. 156). For the converted Christian, more specifically, good works mean, in one sense, simply to continue in the way of virtuous behaviour as first adopted in the context of civil existence, and in another sense, to take this to ‘a higher, yet parallel plane’ (p. 161), in which the acquired civil virtuousness is refined, reconsidered or transformed, depending on what the gift of grace signifies for each respective aspect of the former.

In order for the essay to be ‘practically useful’ (p. 9), Chapter 6 makes somewhat predictable suggestions towards application of the insights presented, such as giving renewed attention to catechesis and spiritual exercises. Over against James Davison Hunter’s grim account of the ‘Death of Character’ in liberal societies, Biermann concludes with a more hopeful outlook based on his conviction that the Church is ‘the ideal
community for the cultivation of character’ (p. 192), ‘capable of producing the people of character and moral conviction that society desperately needs’ (p. 6).

Some critical remarks: For all the emphasis placed on ‘civil righteousness’, it is astonishing to find the author almost completely silent on what was rather central for Luther’s moral theology: the concept of elemental social forms of life or ‘estates’ that the Reformer understood as ‘fellow creatures’ (concreaturae) with humankind. According to Luther, God makes the believer selig (justified) through faith, but heilig (sanctified) through faith and the created orders as spheres within and means through which faith is active through love. This train of thought is taken up in the famous formulation used in CA, Art. 16: ‘in talibus ordinatis exercere caritatem’ (to practise love in those estates). It is precisely with this emphasis on the created estates that the Reformers managed to keep the ‘moral ground’ tied to God’s own activity.

This neglect appears to ground what to this reviewer appears the most problematic shortcoming of Biermann’s account: that irrespective of the emphasis it puts on the non-separability of justification and sanctification, its over-reliance on the ‘coram mundo—coram Deo’ distinction leads to the assumption of separate ‘spheres’ with corresponding separate centres of agency. Whereas for the coram Deo sphere Biermann conceives of divine ‘monergism’, the coram mundo is circumscribed exclusively in terms of human activity and human responsibility: ‘within the created sphere … the ones redeemed are entirely responsible for the lives they live’ (p. 183). In fact, the coram semantic is not helpfully rendered using the language of ‘spheres’, since the imagery that grounds it assumes one-and-the-same human being as he or she faces either the world or its creator. Even when facing or being faced by different types of objects, these distinct directions or relations should not be interpreted as constituting what Bonhoeffer called a ‘thinking in different spheres’. The ‘sphere’ logic leads the monergism in the one relation/direction to resurface in the other, so that a kind of human monergism in the realm of ethics mirrors the former in the coram Deo realm. Luther was keenly aware of this problem, which is why he conceived of a distinct non-correspondence in the relation between the two directions by speaking of cooperation between God and humans in the active lives of Christian believers. Art. 2 of the Formula of Concord puts it like this: ‘after this conversion the reborn human will is not idle in the daily exercises of repentance, but cooperates in all the works of the Holy Spirit which he performs through us’ (p. 98, emphasis added). Biermann quotes this sentence, but he puts the stress on the obligation for ‘Christians to be busy with the business of Christian living’, hence leaving the ‘operatio’ without the ‘co-’, and hence without an account of God’s activity that grounds and sustains all forms of righteousness, whether passive or active, of faith or civil life.

A corresponding neglect of the study occurs in relation to the moral role that the affections play in moral formation for both Aristotle and the Lutheran Reformers. Although CA, Art. 20 (‘Concerning Faith and Good Works) is quoted repeatedly (pp. 73, 76) in the essay, the significance of this key passage therein is constantly overlooked: ‘… hearts are so renewed and endowed with new affections as to be able to bring forth good works’ (emphasis added). For the Lutheran Reformers, it was precisely this connection between the heart and the affections that formed the anthropological hinge between justification and sanctification: justification is the creation of a new heart—the heart governs the affections—the affections govern the will and action.
Irrespective of these shortcomings, Biermann’s essay is a welcome study which succeeds in demonstrating that the Lutheran tradition holds a genuine place for moral reflection and exhortation, and which helps in reconnecting with this rich foundation. There is considerably more virtue in analysing, as Biermann does, a concrete historical tradition than there is in offering wayward reflections from a ‘post-traditional’ nowhere. Biermann’s essay does an excellent job at providing a material basis and viable direction for a ‘Reclamation of Ethics within Lutheranism’, as his most constructive fifth chapter is subtitled. Yet, for this reviewer at least, it is less clear why the ‘ethics’ that is in need of being reclaimed is so swiftly and simply equated with one specific moral language and tradition, virtue, when the ‘desirability of being able to locate within Lutheran theology a place for the concerns … of an ethic of virtue’ is stated as the ‘directing premise’ of the essay (p. 135). While it is certainly possible, as the book aptly demonstrates, to identify a degree in which the moral reflections of the Lutheran Reformers overlap with concerns that we associate with virtue ethics, another, perhaps rather more promising, route of future inquiry would be to study the potential of Reformation thought for the provision of an alternative moral language and conceptual world—one in which the reality of the Christian life, including questions of growth and maturing, can be articulated in terms that are allowed to be theological from the outset.

Jesse Couenhoven, Stricken by Sin, Cured by Christ: Agency, Necessity, and Culpability in Augustinian Theology

Eric L. Jenkins, Free to Say No? Free Will and Augustine’s Evolving Doctrines of Grace and Election

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Here we have two more, very different books on Augustine’s account of ‘free’ will, predestination and fallen man. I consider first Free to Say No? by Eric Jenkins which presents itself as a straightforward account for comparative novices in Augustine of the development of the relevant aspects of Augustine’s thinking about the nature and possibility of ‘freedom’ over the long course of his life. Jenkins identifies three stages (early, middle and later) and three different approaches by recent scholars mostly writing in or translated into English. That may seem a bit insular, though it is true that most of the more philosophically interesting recent writing on Augustine’s ideas has appeared in the English language.

According to Jenkins the three groups of scholars can be distinguished in that the first group, represented by Gilson and Portalié (the latter being Jenkins’s principal target for correction), believe that Augustine’s basic ideas about freedom of choice remained unchanged through his life. This view (though widely popular in the past) he rightly finds both mistaken and contradicted by Augustine himself. The second sort of interpretation