# Learning to Be What You Were Created to Be

Joel Biermann

## A Place for Virtue

I WAS CONVINCED LONG AGO TO THROW in my lot with those who reject a facile division between theory and practice or doctrine and ethics or thinking and doing. What one believes is manifest in what is done, and what is done forms and shapes what is believed. It is the patent anthropological/sociological truism at work in the *lex orandi lex credendi* axiom that categorically undergirds all human existence. Of course, making that commitment clear is necessary only to the degree that modernity with its privileging of a siloed intellect and rationality still holds sway over Christian thinking. Scripture and faithful Christian confession have never operated with tidy divisions between heart, head, and action. Good teaching must attend to both right thinking and right acting together without prioritizing or emphasizing one or the other, much less trying futilely first to establish right thinking and theory with the vain hope of achieving the splendid outcome of good practice. From this perspective, the best pedagogical frameworks, or paradigms are ones that faithfully capture and present basic truths about reality (i.e., theory) even as they orient and direct concrete specifics of people's lives (i.e., practice).

This means, then, that Christianity should be understood as far more than a religion that helps a person keep his spiritual house in order, or a set of beliefs and practices that focus exclusively on fitting a person for eternity. Andrew Lloyd Webber has his Judas sing bitterly about the followers of Jesus being deluded and oblivious to earthly realities because they have "too much heaven on their minds." The same can be said of Christians content to maintain their eternal life insurance policy against the eventual day when it will matter, but taking little to no account of the impact that God's truth is meant to have on God's creatures right now in the lived reality of the present. Thus it is that ethics should be understood not as an add-on or embellishment for the Christian life, and certainly not as a necessary element to be mastered or at least practiced in view of the still pending eternal life.

Works righteousness is ruled out, of course. But this exclusion should not also rule out righteous Christian living in the present temporal realities.

Ethics matter to Christians because living the way that God intends matters to Christians. Discussions about personal character, the sort of behavior that is commensurate with people of excellent and upright character, and the virtues that attend and aid the cultivation of that behavior and the resultant character should all be topics that are of keen interest to followers of Christ. Such discussions should not be limited to lovers of ancient culture and their now classic wisdom. Nor should considerations of character and virtue be confined to the particular expertise or provenance of Thomistic (i.e., Aristotelian-friendly) or legalistic, blessing-seeking traditions within the Christian confession. Every Christian should be thoroughly interested and invested in being the creature God intended, so every Christian should care about virtue and character.

## Luther and the Christian Life

Being a Lutheran, it should come as no surprise that I read and quote Luther. And when it comes to virtue and the formation of human character, Luther has a good deal more to offer than conventional portraits might lead one to believe. To be sure, a researcher will look in vain for Luther to present a *theory* about virtue or human character or formation or even sanctification. In fact, Luther was not particularly inclined to offer theories or hypotheses about much of anything. Luther was not a philosopher or a pure humanist; and I would argue that he was less an academic than he was a churchman. While he may have been a professor of the Bible, he was driven most of all by a pastoral heart. Luther cared about people. He cared about people living in the peace, security, and confident joy that God intended for his creatures. He cared about people knowing God's truth so that they could receive and live in the fullness of the gifts that God freely offered.

While Luther was supremely interested in God's truth about salvation and eternal life, he was also keenly interested in God's truth about life in this world, right now. He was convinced that human life was not only a matter of preparing to die, but also a matter of learning to live well now in the present in the light of God's plan for his creation. Luther was interested in all of these temporal and material things not for their own sake, or for the sake of maintaining political or ecclesial authority, or for the sake of academic inquiry, or even for the sake of personal justification. He cared about them because they were God's truth and God's truth made life right and made life matter for everyone.

In light of this foundational context shaped and driven by pastoral concerns, it is important to make two things clear. First, when it comes to the virtues, Lu-

therans—well at least this Lutheran and, I would argue, any other Lutheran rightly shaped by the teaching of our namesake—are not necessarily interested in a virtue ethic for its own sake. Nor is there a great deal of enthusiasm for promoting any particular ethical theory or even for crafting a new Lutheran one. A Lutheran interest in virtue or even ethics is not a matter of sorting out and choosing between competing theories or ideas or thinkers. Lutherans should hold little enthusiasm for fights about ethical systems or methods or even foundations. Rather, the Lutheran interest in virtue and in ethics is content with helping people to receive and embrace all of God's truth and then to live the sort of meaningful, purposeful, and joyful lives that God's truth creates and sustains. As it was for Paul, the resurrection of Jesus is more than enough foundation for us.

The second significant consequence of Lutheranism's typical pastoral approach and emphasis is the overwhelming centrality and primacy of the gospel above all else. I have learned the hard way that the gospel and its proclamation should never be counted as safely assumed and left unsaid. So, please indulge this pastor's inveterate proclivities for just a moment or two as I recount the heart and center of Christian proclamation as Lutherans like to tell it. Nothing, absolutely nothing, matters more than the fundamental reality that in Jesus Christ God himself joined his creation in order to reclaim his creation. Though the entire creation was broken, corrupted, languishing, and destined for destruction because of the willful rebellion and sin of the chief creature and steward of the creation, God did not reject it, or the man who had ruined it. Instead, God acted to restore the man and the creation. Even when man's wicked rebellion culminated in rejecting and killing God's own Son, God raised Jesus, defeating sin, death, and hell, and so providing the only way of salvation for all people. This gospel work of God was accomplished, and continues still today, apart from any human contribution. God's love is granted not deserved, his grace is given, not earned. The gospel is the blessed exchange or the sweet swap: Jesus takes my sin, and I receive his righteousness. The gospel is the heart of it all, the central doctrine: we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

A teaching like that—overwhelming grace lavishly given, the ultimate rescue on the final day of resurrection, and everlasting life in God's eternal kingdom all freely and fully received—has a way of eclipsing everything else. And that's fine. God's gospel understandably and rightly surpasses and swallows up every other teaching or idea, whether pagan or Christian. The gospel truth that fallen creatures are graciously made right with their Creator, with fellow creatures, and with themselves deserves the central place in preaching and teaching. It is the core and essential teaching…but it is not the only teaching, and while it engulfs every other teaching, it does not contradict or eradicate any of God's remaining truth—not even the truth of God's law. The truth of the gospel does not compete with or defeat the truth of the law. Indeed, the gospel restores and re-centers all of God's truth. The everlasting

life given by the gospel begins now and is manifest in lives that are lived as new creatures now—creatures who delight in God's will, God's design, God's plan for his creation, God's law. The gospel puts creatures back into right relationships with God and with one another and empowers those newly remade creatures to begin living now in willing, eager, joyful conformity to God's will. It is here, in the teaching, studying, and keeping of God's will, his law, that Christians practice the art of ethics simply because that is what God's redeemed and forgiven creatures do.

## Two Kinds of Righteousness

That the gospel can be central and coexist with the law in a significant and meaningful way often beguiles and confounds not a few Lutheran thinkers, writers, and, no doubt, parishioners. Since the earliest days of the Reformation, rightly explicating and then teaching the distinction and relationship between gospel and law, between divine monergism and human accountability, between grace freely given and a Christian life ardently pursued, has confused and crippled not only academic theologians and churchmen, but also those who sit at their feet and then those who are obliged to learn from them. But the framework for keeping all of this straight has also been present from the very beginning; it's just not consistently recognized, retained, and taught. The central human reality of living at once in the gospel of freedom and in the law of responsibility was neatly articulated already in 1520 when Luther wrote his little treatise, "The Freedom of the Christian," with the intent of unpacking "the whole of Christian life in a brief form."[1] The basic premise is expressed in two pithy sentences, back-to-back:

> A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.
> A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.[2]

The two statements are often, and I would argue wrongly, described as paradoxical. But there is no contradiction, no logical imposition, no forced relationship at work here. The two stark statements are the simple reality of Christian existence, lived in light of two fundamental relationships: one with the Creator and the other with fellow creatures. Within each sphere, there is a way to be rightly and fully human. One is shaped by the gospel, the other by the law. This means there are two distinct ways for a human to be righteous or rightly related. Before his Creator, the Christian receives the grace, forgiveness, and righteousness of Christ and so is fully justified and made entirely righteous. He now lives without burden, debt, or obligation: a free lord of all. Meanwhile, before his fellow creatures, the same believer at the same time lives in relationships in which he has work to do for the sake of those around him. He is a dutiful servant of all.

The Christian is a righteous lord of all, declared so by God, and as a newly christened creature, he spends his life learning to live into that new reality in the earthly relationships into which he has been placed. Filled with God's Holy Spirit, and living in Christ, he strives to become what God created him to be: a creature accomplishing his purpose within the world. It is in this temporal sphere, where life is lived in the horizontal realm realities of relationships and responsibilities that morality, the cultivation of virtues, character formation, the pursuit of the good, and increasing conformity to a heteronomous telos all become not only exceedingly interesting, but critically important for the sheer sake of being human and living a worthwhile life that matters. There is a basic and universal telos for which every person has been created. That broad telos is then made peculiar by the myriad particularities that define each individual human being.

A person's telos is established, then, not by cultural consensus, religious tradition, scientific discovery, individual choice, or personal preference. It is established and revealed by God. Man's basic telos is to be the creature God intended for the sake of the surrounding creation. That broad goal is then evident in the countless instantiations of human being that comprise each human life. Striving to attain one's telos means, at the outset, learning to conform to the plan of God and so to attend to the design for human life that he has built into the creation itself. This plan or will of God is his law. So it is that creatures who know God's grace and embrace his plan for their lives are keenly interested in the law that God has established for the right functioning of his creation.

This way of thinking about the meaning and purpose of human existence finds its scriptural grounding in God's work of creation recorded in Genesis. In both biblical accounts of creation, man's purpose is explicit: man is created to care for God's creation. His very being is founded in his purpose. He exists to serve as God's representative, God's image, in the creation. He is God's steward in the creation. Man lives to serve the creation around him. So, when man does that well, he is fulfilling his purpose. And his purpose, his *raison d'être*, is manifest in his very being: a creature fully material and fully spiritual together at once. Man is mud sculpted by God's hand and then filled with God's breath. Man does not live for himself. He does not live to actualize his own full potential. He does not live to be all that he chooses to be. He does not live to improve himself or perfect himself. Man is not on a lifelong, personal mission to achieve his own individual telos. Indeed, he does not exist for his own sake at all. Rather, he exists purely for the sake of that particular part of creation into which he has been placed by the Creator. His telos directs him into this outward-centered way of being human.

## Law and Gospel

The inevitable, struggle, failure, and final inability that every human creature will face as he strives to fulfill this task—in other words the hard reality of his sin-soaked human condition—will inevitably, and often quickly, chasten and defeat every human. And yet, this personal sin and failure is not the last or most important word about a person's identity or reality. All of a man's sin and all of his failure are already fully covered by the redemptive and restorative work of Christ. A person does not need to justify his existence or gain his standing with God. He is God's forgiven creature by virtue of God's grace. So, man does not live to justify himself—Jesus has already done that. He is a forgiven and restored creature with a secure identity and a secure future. He will arrive at his telos; Christ himself will see to that.

So now, freed from the need to save or justify himself, and gifted with a clear sense of his life's purpose and direction, a Christian can get busy not seeking God's favor, or trying to justify his existence, or secure his identity, but he can get busy with the work for which he was created. God sends his redeemed creature back into the world to do the work he had always been created to do. This is the crux of Luther's dynamic and powerful paradigm of the two kinds of righteousness. It fully accounts for both the sweet comfort and divine monergism of the gospel as well as the perpetually unfinished and endlessly challenging work of creaturely responsibility expressed in the demands and direction of the law.

## The Loss of Self

Both of these aspects of the Christian life, the vertical relationship with God the Creator, and the horizontal relationship with fellow creatures, drive the human to forget about his own needs and his own righteousness. Indeed, God's reality leads each Christian to self-forgetfulness and self-denial that drives him outward away from self-centeredness. Luther succinctly expresses this dynamic precisely and powerfully in the same treatise, "The Freedom of the Christian," where he writes:

> A Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian.... He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor.[3]

Obviously, this way of living in the world, this complete dismissal of the self, flies in the face of all the established foundations and all the standard assumptions at work in every self-improvement peptalk, virtually every Christian living book, and even most approaches to "Christian" counseling and personal thriving. The true Christian wisdom expressed so pointedly by Luther subverts all the therapeutic

underpinnings of the present age. Self-love is not the goal; it's not even the first step. Self-focus is fundamentally ruled out. Faith toward God and love toward neighbor—that's the Christian life expressed through the framework of two distinct kinds of righteousness: a passive one *coram Deo*, before God, and an active one *coram mundo*, before the world.

## Creational Law and Forgiving Gospel

Contrary to the old running joke about the patent incapacity for Lutheran theology to contribute anything of significance to the ethical task (you know, Lutherans can't do ethics because they are perpetually preoccupied with salvation by grace through faith alone apart from any human works), this foundation of two kinds of righteousness, so central to a rightly articulated Lutheran approach to the Christian life, provides an exceedingly sturdy foundation for robust ethical work. In fact, true Lutheran doctrine does not subvert, but actually enhances, the pursuit of Christian ethics. In other words, a Lutheranism that would have the gospel trump the law and cast it out of the ongoing reality of Christian living is emphatically not a faithful expression of right Lutheran teaching. As noted, the law plays a critical role for the Christian as a clear expression of God's will for the best way to live within the structure or the design of the creation. This idea is nicely captured in the Formula of Concord which asserts, "the word 'law' has one single meaning, namely, the unchanging will of God, according to which human beings are to conduct themselves in this life."[4] This understanding of the law certainly aligns with what is often labeled as natural law. But considering the baggage, entailments, and raft of liabilities dragging along behind that term, perhaps we can just refer to the comprehensive and encompassing design of God that has been hardwired into the very fabric and being of every part of creation itself, as the creational law.

Thinking of God's law this way expands it well beyond a mere list, even beyond the exalted list of the Decalog. Thinking about the law in this creational way also liberates us from casting the law as only a negative, crushing, enslaving, and killing word from God. Instead, it enables us to see the law as simply the structure or design that God has established for the right functioning of his creation. This means that when humans feel the weight or sting of the law, the problem is not the law, but their own sin. And when forgiven and justified Christians are living as the humans that God designed them to be, they are necessarily living in conformity with the creational law of God. It must also be said and stressed that the role of the gospel in all of this is to forgive and restore sinners. The gospel does one thing—and it is one vitally important thing—it puts broken sinners back into a right relationship with God and the world. The gospel brings them into God's grace and returns them to their place in God's story. The gospel makes Christian ethics possible (there is no

Christian ethics if there are no Christians, after all), but the gospel does not create, shape, direct, or even guide Christian ethics. One of the more tragic blunders of many Lutheran thinkers has been the effort to conceive or even practice a "gospel ethics." The consistent result of such ill-conceived endeavors is inevitably the mutilation of the gospel. When this game is played, the gospel is distorted into a law that demands and expects. There is no gospel-shaped ethics. There is no gospel-directed way of life. The gospel, in the strict and proper sense of gospel gift, does not direct, demand, or expect. All of those necessary, and exceedingly good and right tasks, are the apt province of the law alone.

Ethics, then, is the work of discerning, teaching, and living in accord with the creational law, the will of God, not, to be sure, in an effort to win favor with God, but merely to fulfill faithfully the purpose for which humans were created. We are redeemed and restored in our relationship before God in order to be sent back into the world to serve our neighbor there. We strive for the telos of being fully human not for the sake of ourselves, but to better serve the world according to God's plan through our faithful living. We cultivate the virtues not as ends in themselves, but as skills and habits that better shape us to live as the fully human creatures God intends us to be. We aren't particularly interested in establishing a specific list of definitive virtues, though we are quite willing to learn from Christian and non-Christian individuals, and from traditions in the church and in the world, about the virtues that best enable us to think, act, and live fully human lives—but, of course, any insight or direction must be held captive to what God has clearly revealed in his written Word and in the *regula fidei* of the church. Luther's *Small* and *Large Catechisms* are remarkably rich and enduringly relevant sources for concrete instruction in Christian lives of virtue.

## The Imitation of Christ

As we work to become those fully human people of God's design, we simultaneously and enthusiastically embrace the *imitatio Christi*. Eagerly and inquisitively, we look to Jesus as the one perfect and unsurpassable example of what it means to be human. We follow Jesus and imitate his example not according to his transcendent deity, which is by definition always beyond our grasp, but according to his perfect humanity. Jesus shows us what it looks like when a human creature is living as God intended. While none of us have the precise vocation of Jesus—indeed not one of us has the precise vocation of any other human being—nevertheless, Jesus witnesses the self-denial, others-centeredness, and submission to the will of God that should define the lives of every human creature.

Obviously, living this kind of Christian life is not easy. Luther frequently invoked the unholy trinity of forces ferociously fighting not only to blunt any growth in Christian virtue or deaden the pursuit of ethical ideals, but to annihilate Christians altogether. We fight against God's very real adversary, Satan, and all his demonic horde. And we struggle against the surrounding fallen world itself, as Jesus and all the apostles warn us. And perhaps most insidiously of all, we contend against our own selves. The old Adam or the old Eve that indwells every fallen creature lingers even in the reborn Christian and is intent on strangling the gospel's new creation. This side of the eschaton, a sizable gap always remains between who we truly are according to God's declared reality and the equally true empirical, lived reality we see at work in our thoughts, words, and actions. Luther knew this well from what he saw in himself and from what he saw in the people in his parish. So while he could exult in the certainty of the gospel and his status as genuine saint in Christ, he could also admit the continuing struggle that remained. Early in his career, he wrote, "So long as we are on this earth, believing in his word, we are a work that God has begun, but not yet completed; but after death we shall be perfect, a divine work without sin or fault."[5] We *shall* be perfect, even as in Christ we are now *already* perfect according to God's gracious declaration. Later in the same treatise Luther made the point even more strongly. His words sound, frankly, confoundingly un-Lutheran, yet when heard in light to the two kinds of righteousness they not only make perfect sense, but they also provide a fertile ground for a zealous pursuit of ethics and for the cultivation of true virtue:

> This life, therefore, is not godliness but the process of becoming godly, not health but getting well, not being but becoming, not rest but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. The process is not yet finished, but it is actively going on. This is not the goal but it is the right road. At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle, but everything is being cleansed.[6]

So Luther wrote, and so we strive to live.

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## Notes

1. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1-30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-76); vols. 31-55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress Press, 1957-86); vols. 56-82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009): 31:343 (hereafter LW).
2. Ibid., 344.
3. Ibid., 371.
4. Robert Kolb and Timothy J Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 589; FC VI SD, 15.
5. LW 32:24.
6. Ibid.

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