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Ministry, Word, and Sacraments: An Enchiridion

Martin Chemnitz

Translated by Luther Poellot

St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia (1981).

173 pages, cloth, \$19.25.

Martin Chemnitz (1522-86) was the Lutheran divine who wrote the definitive rebuttal to the Council of Trent. He also collaborated with several other Lutheran theologians to write the *Formula of Concord*.

So why review a Lutheran doctrinal treatise from 1569 in a Reformed journal? Should we continue to pick at the scabs of that horrible meeting between Luther and Zwingli in 1529? By no means! Indeed, I suspect—perhaps through rosy lenses—that had Calvin and Chemnitz spent much time in conversation and correspondence, we would not have separate mudslinging Lutheran and Reformed communions, but rather, one Reformation church. Reformed people with a wholesome yearning for a true ecumenical bridge to Lutheranism often appeal to the affectionate relationship between Calvin and Melanchthon. This will not, however, win the true confessional Lutherans. It is true that Melanchthon wrote major portions of the Lutheran confessional documents. But he was gentle and winsome to a fault, a man of wavering convictions and timidity in an age which called for strong stomachs.

Chemnitz, on the other hand, had Luther's firmness of conviction together with Melanchthon's patience and gentleness of speech. He commands the respect of Lutherans down to this day and is spoken of as "the second Martin."¹ Indeed, the Tridentine papists believed they would have eradicated Lutheranism had it not been for Chemnitz.

I think there is strong reason in our time for Reformed

people to poke around the fringes of Lutheran orthodoxy because the Lutherans actually have a higher view of the sovereignty of God in Sanctification, though I hasten to add that Lutherans squirm in discomfort over “sovereignty” as a topic for open discussion.

This high view of God’s sovereignty in Sanctification works out profoundly, of course, in the way Lutherans approach gathered worship forms, and it is precisely at this point that Reformed people may benefit some from Lutheranism. A small number of Reformed people are able to maintain the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries within the four walls of their local church buildings. The rest of us are beset by the virulent worldliness of the broad visible church, all those technique-oriented semi-Pelagian ways of approaching God and viewing ourselves.

To be sure, the Lutherans are bedeviled by the same societal undercurrents. Still, their worship forms are so tightly married to their theology that deviations are obvious and traumatic. The Lutheran “Divine Service” (*Gottesdienst*) is a matter of God ministering to his people through Word and sacrament. It’s that simple, the very root of every thought, word and action in gathered worship. There is little room for passing fads. One Lutheran pastor recently complained against the tendency to treat gathered worship as a matter of style: “The assumption is that worship is made by human hands, therefore it may freely be changed by human hands.”²

Chemnitz’ *Enchiridion* is written like a catechism, is immanently accessible, and can be digested in small gulps. Its antique odor will cause an occasional smile.

In Article 176, regarding Predestination, Chemnitz asks, “Is this doctrine to be set before the hearers, or necessary to be known?” Then his answer:

Since most holy Scripture touches the doctrine of this article, namely that God before the beginning of time and the

creation of the world predestined the elect in Christ unto salvation and life eternal, etc., not only once, and that lightly or in passing, but teaches, emphasizes, and explains it thoroughly and often in many places, it is truly by no means to be passed by in silence and indifference, etc. (p. 85).

In Article 177, Chemnitz asserts that the doctrine of Predestination should not be avoided merely because it is frequently abused. He then catalogs the dangers and rebuts them.

In Article 178, he painstakingly leads the reader beyond accusing God of being the author of evil on the basis of the doctrine of Predestination.

Article 179 begins with the question,

How, then, can the doctrine of eternal predestination or the election of the children of God to salvation be grasped in a sure way, according to the analogy of Scripture, and set before the uninstructed, that they be not offended or disturbed thereby, but rather draw comfort and be improved?

The nature of the question already tells somewhat how the teacher will answer.

It is striking how similar this presentation is to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, III.8:

The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, that men, attending the will of God revealed in His Word, yielding obedience thereunto, may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election. So shall this doctrine afford a matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God; and of humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the gospel.

Yes, the way Reformed and Lutheran theologians work this through will be different, but there can be no doubt, the spirit and intent are one and the same.

There is much in Chemnitz' *Enchiridion* which will touch off ancient hot buttons for many Reformed readers. Such readers should be encouraged to step back from the particular issue and view the larger system of thought. On one occasion, Chemnitz carries on a long argument against the papist practice of administering the sacrament in only one kind (giving parishioners the bread but not the cup). The papists justified their argument of communion in one kind by extending the phrase, "not discerning the body of the Lord." They were quick to point out that the text did not say "the body *and blood* of the Lord." To this, Chemnitz responded,

We should not, on the basis of the judgment of our smart-aleck reason, which Scripture declares is not only blind, but blindness itself, in divine things, take the testament of the Son of God to ourselves to reform and change it, as though, in the night in which He was betrayed and instituted His Supper, He was not rational enough to know that a living body does not exist without blood; but we should rather take our foolish reason captive to the obedience of His infinite wisdom, and in simple obedient faith we should believe His word and obey His command (p. 123).

The differences between Lutheranism and the Reformed faith are not so much in celebrated particulars. The single difference is, rather, epistemological, and though this latter sample is a rebuttal against papists, it displays well basic Lutheran epistemology. Yes, on April 18, 1521, Luther stood before Charles V and said, "Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason . . .," but it was a frightened, obscure monk from a new university appearing before the

mightiest and most ambitious potentate the Holy Roman Empire had seen for a long time. The phrase, "and plain reason," is a bit of backpedaling. By 1529, when Luther met with Zwingli, the formula would read, "Unless I am convicted by Scripture," while Zwingli held to a Scripture-and-plain-reason position.

Reformed people have often felt themselves the victims of this obdurate Lutheran unwillingness to reason beyond a certain point. But for all of the famous sixteenth-century German vituperation, history testifies that faithful Lutherans applied this standard with some uniformity as the above example aimed at Rome shows. Beyond that, the Lutherans were not above examining themselves by the same measurement. For in the middle of the sixteenth century the Lutherans experienced a proliferation of speculative theology which could compete well with the absurdities some of the medieval schoolmen advanced. Philip Schaff reports that two Lutheran theologians, Wigand and Heshusius, disputed "whether the flesh of Christ were almighty and adorable only *in concreto*, or also *in abstracto (extra personam)*. Chemnitz declared this to be a mere logomachy and advised the combatants to stop it, but in vain."³ Here again Chemnitz is placing boundaries around our "smart-aleck reasoning." It is a bare-knuckled *sola Scriptura* posture.

The Reformed and Lutheran epistemologies have not changed substantially in the last four centuries, and so, I suppose we might remain stuck at that ugly impasse of Marburg, 1529. There is Luther bellowing, "*Hoc est corpus meam*," while Zwingli is busily erecting a logical explanation of the mystery. Must we really remain at that impasse? I think not. For in 1529, the vehicle of history was pointed straight into the ascendancy of modern science and the Enlightenment, those modes of thought whereby we tried to be like the Most High. Here at the close of the twentieth

century we sit among the rubble of those systems of thought. We gave up on the Enlightenment sometime back, but our abandonment of modern science has only recently begun. Yes, the postmodern time is one of great apostasy and hypertrophic paganism, but is also a time of God's mercy. For postmodernism may give us the healthy distance to see the amount of intermarriage between modern science and theological systems of the past few centuries. Some in Toronto have despaired, and have resorted to laughing and barking. The rest of us would do well to have our consciences captive to the Word of God, and the writings of Martin Chemnitz may prove useful in that pursuit.

Leonard Payton
Austin, Texas

Endnotes

- 1 This label was first given by the papists.
- 2 Martin R. Noland, "The Christian Philosophy and the Christian Religion," *Logia*, vol. 4 (Eastertide/April 95) no.2, 44.
- 3 *The Creeds of Christendom*, Vol. 1. (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 1996), 293.

Christian Ethics in Secular Society

Philip Edgcumbe Hughes
Grand Rapids: Baker Book House (1983).
212 pages, paper, o. p.

Christian ethics is about more than solving moral puzzles. It is about life having a moral compass that pulsates with the reality of the will and goodness of God as unfolded within the categories of a biblical worldview. This is the approach of Philip Edgcumbe Hughes in his most

readable introductory book on Christian ethics.

Though over a decade old, his text remains a relevant and important work, not only for presenting biblical norms on basic moral issues, but for the way it perspectively explains the moral significance of biblical passages as they highlight principles, motives or concrete situations. Refreshingly, Hughes' theory and practice do not stand in isolation from doctrinal commitment, but are profoundly shaped by a theological vision that rests squarely in the Reformed tradition.

In his first and foundational chapter, "Knowing and Doing," Hughes stresses that God's Word is not just revealed information, but a command. It follows then that ethics has primarily a prescriptive emphasis. It examines how people *ought* to live. In the strictest sense "ethics" is "Behavior that ought to be customary in society" (p. 11). But when placed within the framework of Creation, Fall, Judgment and Redemption, its true context, ethics is "essentially theocentric," meaning, "its primary concern is the will of God and the advancement of His kingdom" (p.12).

Christian ethics has as its first concern "the relationship to his Creator." It is summed up in love to God, then love to man. These two directives make up "One structure of ethics." Yet, its distinctive character resides in Christ and the Gospel of new life. Christian ethics "is not just on what one *does*, but first of all on what one *is*" (p.13). These features are progressively fulfilled when we aim to imitate Christ, our ethical model and goal.

In developing his ethics in chapters two and three, Hughes offers what many evangelists leave out, a significant discussion on the roles of conscience, and a clear conception of the relationship between law and love. Conscience "witnesses to the status of man's relationship with his Maker" (p.29), and functions to inform him that there is a difference between right and wrong, that this difference relates

to the doing or not doing of God's will, and that our obligation is to do the right and reject the wrong.

The "essence of the law is set forth in the Decalogue," of which the "inner motive is love" (p. 48). In all Christian conduct, then, love is the "dynamic principle" (p. 49). Yet, law and love are not antithetical. By looking at key passages on law and the new life in John's gospel and Paul's epistles, the author concludes,

The change that takes place is not in the law but in the Christian and in the "location" of the law. What was previously an external ordinance standing over against the sinner and condemning him became an internal principle, engraved as it were on the living tablets of the believing heart (II Cor. 3:3), so in contrast to his unregenerate days he now loves the law of God and delights to fulfill its commandments (p.52).

He concludes by pressing home the demand to view our moral life in the light of Christ's second coming, yet warns against moralistic extremes as practiced in some destructive forms of casuistry.

In chapters four to eight, Hughes adequately critiques pseudo-Christian ethical theories, trends, and programs emerging within society as a result of self-absorbed philosophies. The secularizing effects of the "new morality," psychoanalysis and humanistic ethics generally, are assessed. Such reviews, albeit dated, still remain essential reading for the beginning students of Christian ethics in understanding the rise, reign and reasoning of moral and cultural relativism so pervasive today.

Hughes' final two chapters on applied issues address "Sexual Ethics" and "The Christian and the State." Some will be disappointed that no serious attention is given to medical concerns. What is noteworthy is that he approached

human sexuality by way of the *imago Dei* and the structures of marriage, family and church, not first as itemized and unconnected acts of moral deviation by individuals. Hughes is concerned to reconcile form and content, particulars and universals, and to give a positive assessment to both Creation and Redemption as necessary spheres to measure moral accountability.

The book is an excellent introduction to a God-centered ethic! Though it lacks detail and discussion on many current concerns, its abiding value lies deeper. It orients the student of ethics to the greater priority of integrating morality with biblical and theological truth. Is this not the greater need?

Evan Hock
Westmont, Illinois

Biblical Christian Ethics

David Clyde Jones
Grand Rapids: Baker Book House (1994).
205 pages, paper, \$14.99.

Hark! Is the recent ethics text by David C. Jones, of Covenant Theological Seminary, the awaited successor to John Murray's *Principles of Conduct*? Perhaps not by design, but its credentials are unmistakably reflective of the same Reformed heritage: "Now I would say that I follow the Reformed tradition in ethics, especially Augustine on the goal of the Christian life, Calvin on his norms, and Jonathan Edwards on its motive" (p.7).

Overall, Jones' work resembles the richer, riper and wiser approach customary of most Reformed thinking on ethics. In one paragraph he declares succinctly his word-directed and God-centered orientation:

The title *Biblical Christian Ethics* is intended to underscore the unity of theology and ethics. Given the evangelical assumption that the holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the only infallible rule of God's revelation as well as Christian doctrine. On this view ethics and dogmatics are not properly separate disciplines but integral parts of the whole study of God's revelation of himself and his will for mankind. Christian ethics is properly a subdivision of systematic theology; it could be called the doctrine of Christian life (p. 7).

Judging by his emphasis on foundational matters (seven out of nine chapters), Jones' first desire is for Christians to think theologically about ethics. Indeed, how we approach ethics, and upon what grounds, has everything to do with how we conduct moral reasoning on an issue, and what conclusions we reach.

Though Jones' ethics is well-rooted, he does not just restate the past. Rather he builds and expands upon the past by explaining and applying biblical truth and logic in the light of current questions and challenges. What results is a plenitude of topics and a steady stream of creative insight, intelligent debate and spiritually helpful material that complement an otherwise cogent presentation of the discipline. Admirable, too, is the way his definition and summary of ethics below outline the main features and shape the contours of the work like a plumb line in each subsequent chapter.

Christian ethics is the study of the way of life that conforms to the will of God as revealed in Christ and the holy Scriptures and illuminated by the Holy Spirit. It seeks to answer the practical question, what is God calling us, his redeemed people, to be and do?

Jones accomplishes the task by structuring ethics along the lines of its key components: goal, motive and norm. This move, a trend in Reformed ethics, clarifies the fundamental criteria and language used in ethical discourse without having to abstract ethics from its Christian distinctives. Thus, chapters one through seven read accordingly: "The Question of Ethics," "The Goal of the Christian Life," "The Motive of the Christian Life," "The Direction of the Christian Life," "The Primary Forms of Love," "The Universal Norms of Love" and "The Resolution of Moral Conflicts."

By beginning with "goal," Jones seeks to reflect the priority of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*. Though multiple themes overlap, like the image of God and eternal life, a theological emphasis emerges that centers on God's kingdom as the dominant motif, of which God's glory is the chief end. This priority is important, for it focuses attention on the lawgiver, not the law, and "maintains the distinctively personal orientation of the Christian ethic" (p.36).

This personal orientation introduces his next chapter on motives. But moving from goal to motive presents a dilemma for natural man. "The real problem of ethics is not finding the rule to direct us how to glorify and to enjoy God but in having the will to make this our aim in the first place" (p.37).

This concisely worded issue leads into discussions on the human heart, Christian freedom (adiaphora) and the pivotal concept of love. He probes, "What does it mean to love God?" He concludes that loving God and neighbor is truly a "dispositional complex" involving both volition and affection (pp. 44-45). Contrary to some, Jones argues that the "self-love" is not necessarily pejorative to Christian ethics; it is "a moral obligation" before God. How so?

We belong to God and are responsible to him for the preservation of our own life, chastity, property, and a good name,

as well as of others. It is a theo-centric self-regard that is assigned paradigmatic value in the commandment to love our neighbor as ourself (p.56).

Love as the primary motive becomes “obedient love” when expressed as a disposition of walking with God in gratitude and faith. Here, the use of Scripture for guidance, Christ’s example, the Holy Spirit and the role of conscience are all presented in digestible portions. The personalistic dimension of love includes its “forms,” or love embodied in various practices and virtues. Of interest is his positive regard and recommendation for the continued viability of the “cardinal virtues” first espoused systematically by Aquinas.

From goals and motives, the author turns to universal norms, or the moral law as summarized in the Ten Commandments. Not only does the Decalogue denote God’s will for all mankind, but building on its continuity, he underscores how Jesus, who emphasized the heart, “does not set up an antithesis between an ethics of disposition and ethics of external command.” With impressive New Testament support, he shows how the commandments “continue to structure the covenant way of life” (pp. 105-108). Though Jones does not soft-pedal the law’s importance, he is sensitive to the subtle perils of legalism within Sanctification. The law is for Christians but not as the means to maturity, nor is it to bind the conscience where God has left it free. Rather, “The law informs, the Spirit enables” (p. 124).

In reviewing cases of moral conflict, the author wrestles with a thorny question: Is there a “tragic moral choice”? In his various critiques, he rejects the “lesser of two evils” and “the abandonment of one universal in favor of another.” Case work is inevitable but “the choice is not between casuistry and no-casuistry but between good casuistry and

bad” p.139). Moral reasoning is more an art than a formula. Applying norms requires wisdom, experience and good judgment. His “applied ethics” in the final two chapters outlines principles, and engages moral problems in the covenant of marriage and family. Here, the Heth-Wenham thesis is assessed.

One weakness overall is that the book, for many, will be seen as long on theory and short on “applied” issues. A second volume is needed. For a Reformed ethic, particularly in the Westminster tradition, more is required as to the role of the covenant in moral experience. Also oddly lacking is any substantive discussion on the church as a moral community. Finally, given that the content at times is technically precise and thickly woven, it is not a book for the casual ethicist. It must be read with commitment.

In conclusion, Jones has twenty years of moral reflection invested in this work; it is forged and tested in life as well as in the classroom. The content is well-researched and interesting. Consistently, it is adequately, even superbly, supported and explained by Scripture. Furthermore, he succeeds more than not to get the reader to the heart of the matter. More so, the words are never reckless, and it exhibits the fruit of the Spirit. In short, the book is a gem, and is worth all the time a thinking evangelical can give to it.

Evan Hock
Westmont, Illinois

War and Christian Ethics: Classic Readings on the Morality of War

Arthur F. Holmes, editor
 Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House (1975, reprint 1991).
 356 pages, paper, \$14.95.

In this text, Dr. Holmes has compiled selections from key persons throughout history on the ethics and morality of war. This book rises above the trendy literature often published during times of military conflicts, and should serve well as a reference tool to church historians, ethicists, military or veterans chaplains, and to Christian philosophers.

The book is well organized into seven main chapters, each having various sections that emphasize the thoughts of a particular writer. It is always rewarding to read the works of such men as Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and many others. While not all the writers selected by the editor were orthodox Christians, each writer presents an ethical position that helps understand the dilemma of the Christian and war.

The author does not embrace any particular theory concerning the ethics of war, but rather provides the theoretical arguments side by side, so individuals may draw their own conclusions. I found this to be both a strength and weakness in this book. It was a strength because individuals may evaluate and contrast original sources to develop their own position. It was a weakness because the reader does not have a definitive statement or position to evaluate and either embrace or reject.

Some may be disappointed in the book's introduction. In only nine pages, the author mentions such concepts as just war theory, pacifism, ethical conduct during combat, and a brief (one page) summary of what the Bible says about war.

The person who is looking for concise statements on these concepts will have to labor through hundreds of pages to get results. Yet, as a historical anthology of war and Christian ethics, the book succeeds, and fills a void in the literature on this subject.

Kenneth Lawson
 Beverly, Massachusetts

In obedience man adheres to the decalogue, and in freedom man creates new decalogues.

Martin Luther

I used to think that being nice to people and feeling nice was loving people. But it isn't. Love is the most immense unselfishness, and it is so big I've never touched it.

Florence Allshorn

If the Spirit of grace is absent, the law is present only to accuse and kill us.

St. Augustine

Let us therefore learn to maintain inviolable this sacred tie between the law and the Gospel, which many improperly attempt to break.

John Calvin

For love is the only meaning of the law; therefore *obedience* to the law can only be an *echo or response to God's love*.

G. C. Berkouwer

God's Word can indeed say many things to us. It not only can comfort us, heal us, vivify us, it not only can instruct and enlighten us, it can also judge us, punish us, kill us, and it actually does all of these.

Karl Barth