

Luther's Ethics in the Realms of Church, Household, and Politics

Seminarleader: Risto Saarinen

Reporter: Jonathan Mumme

How can a seminar on »Luther's ethics in the realms of church, household, and politics«, function as a subsection of a congress on »Luther's ethics in the realms of church, household, and politics«? *Risto Saarinen*, having set the theme for his seminar before the congress had set its own, decided not to answer that question. Instead, wishing to further pursue his own findings on divine ordinance and the three orders, he offered one seminar group the opportunity to engage the theme of the congress directly.

Michael Beyer opened the forum by way of a guided tour through the seventeenth to nineteenth sections of Luther's »Ein Sermon von dem heiligen hochwürdigen Sakrament der Taufe« (1519) – WA 2, 734, 14 – 737, 13 –. Beyer's analysis explained baptism as the justified identity of the Christian in a fallen world and the three orders or hierarchies as the places in which Christians variously live out this one baptism. Living out baptism within these orders means nothing other than work and labor, suffering and dying. Baptism's work is to kill sin and the flesh, and it adopts these orders as its theater to that destructive end. Within the three orders baptism continually labors to break any tranquil satisfaction with earthly life, preparing the Christian in his or her given »Stand« for death.

Written as edifying literature for the pious reader, this early sermon stood in sharp contrast to the piety of its day. The reader is

not encouraged to reach above and beyond his or her »Stand« in order to merit a given standing with God. Rather, as baptized and justified the reader is to find his or her given work in the given »Stand«. The mathematical gradations of a late medieval merit-based system fall apart before baptism's common quantity – »gemein Maß« –. These gradations having falling by the wayside, the baptized Christian finds a unique life in his or her given »Stand«, in which action amounts to the praise of God and the service of neighbor.

The fact that this sermon deals with these orders under the headings of »Estate of Marriage« – »ehelicher Stand« –, »Spiritual Estate« – »geistlicher Stand«, here pertaining to monasticism – and »Governing Estate« – »regierender Stand«, here pertaining to bishops and parsons –, which estates are themselves arranged into a graduated hierarchy, led to a lively discussion of Luther's understanding of the three orders – »Dreiständelehre« – over against his understanding of the two fields of ruling or operating – »Zwei Regimente« – and his and/or Augustine's (354-430) understanding of the two kingdoms – »Zwei Reiche« –.

Continuing his presentation under the heading »Luthers Drei-Stände-Welt als Ort christlicher Existenz: das Miteinander der befreiten Knechte« Beyer sought to present Luther's understanding of the three orders as an essential element of early-modern life.

In this regard the churchliness of all three orders was stressed as well as their tendency to overlap and intertwine.

«The three orders or life-forms and the three motifs», the paper presented by *Bernhard Erling*, wrestled with difficulties and ambiguities associated first with reconciling and then with applying Luther's understanding of the two kingdoms and of the three orders in the modern context.

Erling approached the topic on the basis Anders Nygren's (1890-1978) work in «Agape and eros» (Phil 1953). Here Nygren identifies three motifs, that is, three factors or virtues that give particular thought systems and outlooks their character. These motifs he calls «agape», «eros», and «nomos». These motifs underlie the answers given by various systems of thought and world-outlooks to fundamental questions of belief and behavior, of faith and ethics. After articulating Nygren's thesis that «agape» – essentially Christian and «eros» – essentially Greek – were synthesized by Origen (circa 185/86 - circa 253/54) and especially by Augustine into «charitas», a synthesis subsequently shattered by Luther, Erling went on to show how these three motifs harmonize with Luther's tri-fold distinction of ecclesia, oeconomia, and politia. Adding in the parallel distinctions of Lehrstand, Nährstand, and Wehrstand, the categories for the rest of the paper and the group's discussion were ordered as follows: ecclesia / agape / Lehrstand, oeconomia / eros / Nährstand, politia / nomos / Wehrstand.

Posing numerous concrete, contemporary questions, Erling kept his eye to fundamental differences between the modern and Reformation contexts. In Luther's articulation of the three orders at least two things may be observed. First, there is an overlap,

a sort of giving and receiving, between the three orders. Second, Luther assumed and foresaw a system in which the ecclesia had an intentional and definitive teaching function in the oeconomia and the politia; see Luther's 1530 «A sermon on keeping children in school»; WA 30 II, 517-588 $\approx$ LW 46, 207-258. This teaching function – Lehrstand – was embodied in the person of «the teaching pastor». Clearly, one is presented with a different situation today. Whether viewed from the perspective of the American context, where one finds a strict division of church and state, or from the Finnish or German contexts where the politia regulates religious and moral education, the ecclesia as Lehrstand does not hold the place it did in Luther's day. Yet the «separation of church and state» alleged in the United States – or in the Americas, as *Daniel Beros* affirmed of Argentina –, dare not obstruct the permanent fact, that religious and moral education is inherent in all educational systems – a fact at least recognized in the lands of Erling's European interlocutors –.

Erling's paper provided much grist for the milling conversation, touching not only on education, but also on political and socio-economic systems. His central thesis is that Luther's understanding of the three orders can best be approached and applied in the modern context from the standpoint of the three motifs. Identifying Luther and his understanding of Christian love, and thereby his ethic, with the agape motif, Erling suggests that a society could approach moral and religious education under the categories of agape, eros, and nomos. The given educational system would present and teach about all faiths active in the given land, but under this threefold heading. One would expect that the agape motif, characterized by self-

giving love and thankful response to this love, would come to predominate the other two motifs, making room for the voice of the ecclesia in its Lehrstand function, to educate not only the family – one half of the *oeconomia* – but also the socio-economic workings – the other half of the *oeconomia* – and the government – *politia* – of the given society.

Risto Saarinen's paper, presented mid-week as a short presentation, could well have served as an introduction to the whole of this seminar's discussions. Herein *Saarinen* deals with his own particular interest in this seminar's theme, namely a consideration of the three orders as divine ordinances.

Considering Luther in relation to the ethical systems of his day, *Saarinen* deals especially with Aristotelian (384-322) ethics as received in the medieval tradition. With Luther he finds both an appropriation and adaptation of Aristotelian ethics in the latter middle ages. Here Luther's tri-fold ordering of ecclesia, *politia*, and *oeconomia* reflects the divisions of Aristotle's ethics as received in the middle ages: *ethica monastica* – from Nichomachean Ethics –, *ethica politica* – from Politics – and *ethica oeconomica* – from Oeconomics –. »Luther replaced *ethica monastica* with the ecclesial order«, argues *Saarinen*. It is this »ecclesial order«, somewhat resembling though not identical to Aristotle's understanding of prudence – *phronesis* –, which his paper then labors to define.

Through following the research of other Luther scholars *Saarinen* identifies a deficiency in the failure to observe the medieval notion of *ordinatio Dei* as an essential element of Luther's articulation of the three orders. The language of divine ordinance was most common in late medieval discus-

sions of grace and justification under the term »*potentia ordinata*«, and, in addition, it played a role in this period's consideration of covenant, testament and donation/gift. The late medieval consideration of divine ordinance was enriched by analysis from the perspective of Aristotle's four causes, to which late medieval theology added the category of instrumental cause, divided into the subcategories of primary and secondary instrumental causes. *Saarinen* sees Luther appropriating these distinctions as he articulates a positive place for Christian action in »the earthly kingdom«, in the *oeconomia* and *politia*, understanding Christians as secondary instrumental causes. Luther's ethics in regard to the ecclesia, however, remain more nuanced. He claims a reticence by Luther to speak of human beings as instrumental causes in the ecclesia, »the spiritual kingdom«, since this would amount to Pelagianism.

Illustrating his observations in part by way of Luther's exposition of Psalm 127 – 1532; WA 40 III, 268, 1 - 269, 4 –, *Saarinen* arrives at a »twofold view of human agency«; in the *oeconomia* and *politia* human action may be understood as a secondary instrumental cause, but in the ecclesia human action may only be considered »ecclesial« if it proceeds from faith and love. Late-medieval considerations of covenant and testament suffice to articulate a sort of two-party action in »the earthly kingdom«, but fall short of being able to define a theological causality of faith and love. Thus the three orders come to »represent a graduated moral hierarchy«.

Saarinen cautions against extracting any discussion of ethics from the whole of Luther's theology, the danger in this case being that one may slip into Pelagianism. He concludes that theological »doing« and philo-

sophical/ethical »doing« are fundamentally different. In the latter the doing flows from reason and a rightly disposed will, in the former the doing flows solely from faith.

Saarinen continued his contribution to the forum with his paper on »Renaissance ethics and the European Reformation«. In his section on the Lutheran Reformation Saarinen identifies a young Luther well acquainted with Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*. Although Luther theologically rejected Aristotle's understanding of virtue along with medieval understandings of merit that sprung from the same, Melancthon skillfully adapted Aristotle's ethics in 1546 for his »*Philosophiae moralis epitomes libri duo emendati & aucti*«, and preserves its place in the Protestant university.

Melancthon's attention to Luther's distinction of Law and Gospel and his understanding of the two regiments allows for the articulation of ethics and the law within the state, falling entirely into the »worldly kingdom«, and in the household, which »remains between worldly and ecclesiastical orders«.

Opening this seminar's first session, Saarinen remarked that his interest in Luther's understanding of the three orders had been sparked by previous seminars of the Luther Congress led by Oswald Bayer. The 2007 seminar may well not be the last that the Luther Congress is to see on this topic. Especially in regard to the ecclesia, this group's discussions evidenced that there is still work to be done before clarity is reached.

Luther on Work and Vocation

Seminar leader: Roger Jensen
Berichterstatter: Roger Jensen

This seminar titled »Work an Vocation« explored Luther's notion of the ethical person, with special reference to the reformer's understanding of everyday work and vocation. We focused our attention on both Luther's writings and the tradition of scholarly interpretation. Although we missed the contributions of several seminar members who, at the last minute had to cancel, our work led to a consensus that the theology of Luther – particularly his understanding of vocation – represents a vital resource for modern ethical reflection.

Initially *Roger Jensen* gave a short presentation of how the term »calling« has been interpreted differently in the history of Luther research. Jensen argued that older – i. e., pre-Holl – investigators emphasized Luther's supposed division between church and society into separate spheres. Therefore, argued Jensen, the work of early Luther researchers such as Christian Ernst Luthardt (1823-1902), Karl Eger (1864-1945), and Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) – as well as that of P. H. Schiffer-deckers (* 1902), Wilhelm Stapel (1882-1954) and Arno Deutelmöser (1907-1983) – could