Doctrine

The Third Use for Doves and Serpents

Eric W. Gritsch

A Neglected Legacy

Recruitment, rather than "evangelism" or a "membership drive," should attract people to the church as the body of Christ, trained for disciplined discipleship. Such an approach will draw attention to the reality of life as seen by the writers of the Lutheran Confessions—namely, that believers need the discipline of the law to survive the interim between the first and second coming of Christ. That is why the final part of the Lutheran Confessions, the *Formula of Concord* (FC), speaks of a careful distinction between divine mandates (law) and promises (gospel). The crucial work of the law involves its several uses.

> The law of God is used (1) to maintain external discipline and respectability against dissolute, disobedient people and (2) to bring such people to recognition of their sins. (3) It is also used when those who have been born anew through God's Spirit, converted to the Lord… but in this world are not perfectly renewed… For this reason, too, believers require the teaching of the law, *so that they do not fall back on their own holiness and piety and under the appearance of God's Spirit establish their own service to God on the basis of their own choice, without God's Word or command*.[1]

The harsh reality of sin is confronted with the power of the redeeming Christ (AC II and III).[2] The third use of the law is a wedge against the continual temptation to play God (Genesis 3:5)—backsliding, as revival preachers used to put it. The authors of the Formula were aware of religious hypocrisy: the sly egotistic attempt to fool God by claiming to be worth saving, indeed pretending to have the gift of the Holy Spirit ("under the appearance of God's Spirit"). Human reason always tries to move upward, "to wrest heaven from God."[3]

Article VI of the Formula asserts a hard-nosed Christian realism: temporal life is conditioned by evil, sin, and death. Accordingly, the church must be organized for the battle with evil, must be militant before it becomes triumphant at the end of time. It is a pilgrim people, journeying between their birth by the Holy Spirit (Pentecost) and their death (the end times) as "strangers and foreigners on earth" who, like Abraham and his descendants, live by the promise of a new homeland, "the city of God" (Hebrews 11:13–16). Before being baptized, each Christian must pledge to do battle with the forces of evil. The first question asked in the liturgy of baptism ("Do you renounce all the forces of evil?") is traditionally known as exorcism.[4] In the interim between Christ's first and second advent, in the (mean!) meantime, there must be spiritual discipline in catechetical education for the struggle with evil, combined with worship as the celebration of the new life that is already here in part but will be complete at the end of time ("Now I know only in part; then I will know fully," I Corinthians 13:12). That is why the Lord's Supper offers "a foretaste of the feast to come."[5]

Dove- and Serpenthood in the Bible

Vigilance in the face of evil was already a key mandate for mission by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, and it was accompanied by a description of terrorizing persecution. The mandate to be vigilant in the face of terror accounts for the FC's warning about people who "establish their own service of God," because they embody the full power of original sin—they deify themselves by dominating others.

> I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; *so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves*… Brother will betray brother, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. (Matthew 10:16, 21–22)

The four animals in the Matthean passage above describe the experience of the mission entrusted to the disciples. If they are like sheep—naive, dumb, and afraid—they will be devoured by wolves—greedy, violent, and fearless in a gang. They need to be like serpents: clever, cold-blooded, and aware of deadly poison; and like doves: innocent, joyful, and happy.

The image of the serpent develops in three stages in

the Bible. First, the serpent is the instrument of temptation in paradise, promising Adam and Eve that they will be like God if they eat the forbidden fruit (Genesis 3:5). Then the serpent becomes a symbol of healing, a bronze serpent erected by Moses to save anyone bitten by poisonous snakes (Numbers 21:9). Finally, the serpent signifies the means to eternal life. "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:14). The serpent also symbolizes medicine in the ancient and modern world. The Greek god of healing, Asclepios, whose cult flourished around 420 BC, is portrayed with a serpent curled around a staff—the modern symbol of medicine—its head touching his left hand.

The dove symbolizes the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus after his baptism by John (Matthew 3:16). Doves appear to be innocent when they coo during the mating season on the rooftops, unconcerned about their environment. They represent a childlike faith, often manifested in the church by such gifts of the Spirit (*charismata* in Greek) as speaking in tongues. But in a hostile environment doves quickly die because they are easy targets for raptors or for hunters who know that most fowl can be shot at close range while mating. Jesus called for disciples who combine the innocent joy of a childlike faith with the cold-blooded wisdom of rational discernment. Mindful of the terminology of the FC, one could say that the power of reason should be employed to detect and exorcise evil rather than to speculate about God. The joy of faith in this world must be protected by a sharp and critical reality check on evil.

Healing and salvation do not happen without a precise, correct, and cold-blooded diagnosis of an illness. For example, a teacher once was unable to teach because of fear. He consulted a psychiatrist who after a lengthy analysis offered the diagnosis, "You have an inferiority complex that paralyzes you in the classroom. Find another occupation." The teacher was advised by a good friend to get another expert opinion. So he went to another psychiatrist who, after a lengthy analysis, offered the diagnosis, "You do not have an inferiority complex. You *are* inferior." Now the teacher could teach again, not as well as many others, perhaps, but well enough to make a living.

Catechetical Implementation

The serpent-like use of the law needs to shape everyday Christian life. The formational use, the third use of the law, is most needed, given the mandate to witness to the gospel in a world dominated by evil. The church has not done well in diagnosing evil and being joyful in the faith rooted in Christ. Serpentine wisdom and dove-like joy were replaced by fear without eschatological hope. Law and gospel became separated, resulting in confusion. Lutheranism became a religion of the mind in seventeenth-century Orthodoxy, with its emphasis on pure doctrine and biblical literalism; a religion of the heart in eighteenth-century Pietism, with its born-again conversion-ideology; a nineteenth-century cultural Protestantism (*Kulturprotestantismus*), marked by a naive relationship between church and state; and a part of twentieth-century religious pluralism that encourages denominational division rather than disciplined ecumenical cooperation.

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The Lutheran Reformation cherished church discipline by converting canon law into a process of catechetical and jurisdictional education, linked to well-rehearsed congregational worship—a law-gospel discipleship for survival in the world.[6] Its legacy is the enduring challenge of unmasking evil through the reality check of scrutinizing diagnosis, and of protecting the joy of childlike faith among the people of God in a sinful world. After all, Lutheranism was born in the conflict with evil in the church. Late medieval everyday life was a mixture of fear and idolatry. Luther made a correct diagnosis of abuses through serpentine wisdom and theological skills without losing the joy of childlike faith; he maintained an effective balance between education and worship.

Luther's Small and Large Catechisms were based on a careful rational examination of contemporary life in Saxony. He arranged for visitations of parishes in Electoral Saxony in 1528 to determine what was needed for catechetical instruction. A team of four visitors, representing the Saxon court and the theological faculty of the University of Wittenberg, inspected religious and sociopolitical conditions, guided by seventeen topics ranging from aspects of the Christian faith to foreign policy. A main concern was the competence of parish pastors.[7]

The diagnosis was devastating: ordinary folk knew "absolutely nothing about the Christian faith," and pastors were "unskilled and incompetent teachers… As a result, they live like simple cattle or irrational pigs and, despite the fact that the gospel has returned, have mastered the fine art of misusing all their freedom."[8] Luther encountered the classic problem of spiritual discipline—namely, that comfort and security always seem to be more popular in the church than struggle and freedom. That is why worship and catechesis need continual

reform. Moreover, violence, prejudice, ignorance, and apathy seem to have become the contemporary four horsemen of the apocalypse (Revelation 6:1–7). The violence of terrorism in the twenty-first century, be it secular or religious, is like the terror of which Jesus warned his disciples. Prejudice and ignorance propel fundamentalists of all stripes; and apathy dominates the rest of contemporary humankind. Thus there is a dire need for a catechism for disciplined discipleship. Erasmus of Rotterdam (1469–1536), Luther's contemporary, called his catechism *Handbook of a Christian Soldier* (from the Greek *enchiridion*, "something put into the hand," understood as "dagger")—symbolizing the work of serpentine wisdom in the church militant.[9]

In its best and brightest moments, Lutheranism has focused on the biblical image of the church as a pilgrim people during the interim between the ascension and the return of Christ on the last day. Consequently, everyday life is marked by a peculiar freedom and joy in the face of a future promised by the gospel. Too often Lutheran theology has made bad distinctions between law and gospel, justification and sanctification, losing sight of the natural interaction between faith and life. Naive charismatic antinomians assume that justification by faith automatically issues in love of neighbor; and embittered apathetic relativists say that the article of justification is no longer needed since Lutherans do not perform any good works anyway. But FC VI keeps confronting Lutherans with the confessional alert for disciplined discipleship. Faithful Lutherans know that justification by faith through word and sacrament calls for a militant stance *against* evil and *for* joyous celebration.[10] The proper function of the third use of the law facilitates a healthy dialectic of spiritual formation[11] and doxological worship. This dialectic is sorely needed in our time. To use the paradigm for recruitment during World War II, "God Wants You!" for disciplined discipleship. LF

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Notes

1. FC 6:1–2, 18, 20, in *The Book of Concord*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 587, 590 [hereafter cited as BC]. Italics added.

2. Note the sequence of the first three articles in the Augsburg Confession (AC): God, original sin, the Son of God. BC, 36–39.

3. Large Catechism 1:22. BC, 388.

4. *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978), 123. Hereafter cited as LBW.

5. Offertory in the liturgy of the Lord's Supper. LBW, 66.

6. See the work of John Witte Jr., *Law and Protestantism: The Legal Teachings of the Lutheran Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

7. See Eric W. Gritsch, "Luther's Catechisms of 1529: Whetstones of the Church," in Gritsch, *The Boy from the Burgenland: From Hitler Youth to Seminary Professor* (West Conshohocken: Infinity, 2006), 330–44.

8. "Preface," Small Catechism, 2–3. BC 347–48.

9. See Roland H. Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom* (New York: Scribner, 1969), 66. See also Eric W. Gritsch, *A Handbook for Christian Life in the Twenty-First Century* (Delhi: ALPB, 2005).

10. It is sometimes overlooked that the article of justification combines doctrinal assertion and liturgical celebration since it is to be communicated as "gospel" in word and sacrament. AC 7:1-3. BC 42, 43.

11. Usually a Roman Catholic designation. But Christian formation through catechesis, as Luther viewed it, is to create a lifestyle, an attitude, a disciplined discipleship, with baptism "as the daily garment" throughout life. See "Baptism" in the Large Catechism, 4:84–6. BC, 466.

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