

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

The Early Dark Ages of the Church –
Some Reflections

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The Ministry of Absolution

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Homiletics

Book Review

Vol. XLI

February 1970

No. 2

“Different Ministries, Different Means, One God!”

A Theological Opinion on the Racial Issue

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Consideration of the racial issue in the context of social reform has often been marked by a profound confusion of the Law and the Gospel. As a result, rather ill-defined issues have been confounded by a darkening of the light itself. The Law has not been used lawfully, and the Gospel has not been employed evangelically. The church in relation to culture has been seen as a “Statue of Liberty” that bears the torch of social reform, holding it high in the air as she leads mankind to a better society. She has been viewed as the “conscience of society,” speaking her word to the issues of racial prejudice and inequality so that the Gospel becomes not only the dynamic of social reform but also its pattern, means, and goal.

Such notions of the church and her relation to social reform reflect a confusion of the Law and the Gospel. Neither is spoken clearly. This, in turn, means that issues have been theologically ill defined, resources have been negated (insofar as their use is concerned), and action has been misdirected. Issues that were not originally racial have been belabored without prospect of solution, affording no comfort to those involved, or else have remained hidden, only to torment and frustrate those involved in them.

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This present opinion on the racial issue is set within the theological framework of the Law and the Gospel as the two expressions of God’s different ways of managing the affairs of men in relation to Himself and to one another. This article is not an abstract dissertation on “the proper distinction between Law and Gospel,” nor is it a defense of the “two-kingdom doctrine.” It is an exercise in both. Its primary concern is to preserve the Gospel of salvation as Gospel and to conserve the life of the church as her members live in society and have their part in the formation and reformation of that society. The present writer asserts that we are guilty of a functional failure in our distinction between the Law and the Gospel, especially as this is pertinent to the current social and racial revolution.

I

CREATOR AND CREATION

Theologically considered, human beings within the solidarity of humanity and within the interlocking categories of space and time or social and cultural institutions are an expression of the free, joyful, sovereign will of the Creator. The Creator is Source and End of human life, the dynamic of spontaneous goodness that continues and sustains human life in its cosmic ecology day by day. Such assertions are confessions of faith, not deductions from evolutionary

hypotheses nor principles derived from investigating the phenomena of a process.

Theologically described, the individual human exists by the hidden presence and power of the Creator, whose creating will is expressed through the divine Logos. Personhood is the result of the Fountainhead Person's addressing a "you" from the bounty of His uncreated "I" in such lordly fashion that every creaturely predicate is in fact predicated by the Logos of God. The hidden presence of this Good Creator is the dynamic of all creation.

At the same time the fury of God's wrath operates as a reality in man's life. The Creator wills that evil shall not continue forever in His creation. His execution of death on the creature, man, is an action limiting the evil. Thus, man feels the presence of the Creator also as threat, as unnamed and faceless fate, as destiny in which both environment and individuals rob him of freedom as well as sustain him in life. Here, too, the security of life becomes the threat to life, just as the Creator Himself is Judge and Executor.

The wrath of God, which threatens with mortality all man's artifacts as well as his life, works as an inescapable master, holding man to choices he cannot avoid making and judging and punishing him by as well as for those choices. This is as true of societies, governments, and institutions as it is true of individuals. Each can become a scourge for the others. Blacks, long tormented by whites in American history, now arise as threats to the whites. Both blacks and whites, as Americans, find their choices continually confirmed and their joint life continually harassed by each other, as well as by the threat of other nations, ideologies, or economic dreams.

Man responds to God's wrath, which threatens his life and freedom, with wrath. Man's expression of hatred and contempt for others or for himself is a manifestation of the wrath of God. Man's responses of mistrust and resentment toward others likewise manifest the presence of God's wrath as hatred. Hostility, confusion, and toadyism are signs of the presence of the wrath of God and man's fear of death.

II

LAW AND LOVE

The tool for revealing the root of this wrath and its appearances in human life is God's Law. "God's Law" is used here to designate the manner in which God retributively arranges the affairs of men with Himself and with one another. It is also the oral and written expression of that retributive order. In this sense God's Law refers to the dynamic of life that the Creator and Judge initiates to effect, sustain, change, and finally terminate cultures and cultural forms. God's Law is God's operational presence hidden in the culture, its politics and institutions, preserving its good and just assets, making human existence possible, but also judging, punishing, changing, and finally destroying them. God Himself, not love, is the ground of continuity and the dynamic of change in society and human life.

This understanding of Law indicates that human reason is a bright and precious light by which the human race perceives and understands something of the appearances of the hidden God. Within the realms of life in society, reason is to be exalted, cherished, and cultivated. Man should train his powers of memory and utilize the benefits of human experience

and systems of value judgments in trial-and-error cases. He should discuss the rational use of power, persuasion, and coercion. He should explore the dynamics of behavior modification and seek to balance them in justice, tempered by mercy.

If the church uses the Law lawfully, she can indeed illumine a situation of turmoil and violence. The Law shows the link between the fury of God and the anger of man. The inexorable demand of the Creator links life and love as much as death and wrath. The church adds to the confusion when she substitutes a sentimental love ethic for the inexorable demand of God on man and the deadly judgment of God against man. By teaching a love ethic for society apart from God's inexorable demand and unremitting judgment, the church teaches men to look contemptuously on the message of God's free love in Jesus Christ. When the church fails to use God's Law lawfully in articulating the demand for justice and substitutes a message of love that sounds like the Gospel to diagnose and change situations, then the church simply compounds guilt, wrath, and hatred by using love-talk to expose it. She frustrates action by using love-talk as a whip to move man. She fails to use the right means for the necessary ministry.

The Law of God does in fact say to every human, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." He dies who does not love his neighbor as himself. Death is not man's choice; it is his fate. His choice not to love is countered by God's verdict that he shall not live. The very articulation of the demand reveals not the presence but the absence of love. For this absence of love man not only dies, he is executed by God the Creator and Judge. Thus both the

environment and individuals stand as instruments of God's fury and, therefore, as objects of man's hostility.

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself" is a demand, whose consequences for failure are deadly. So great is the threat of failure that the fear of the Lawgiver is able to liberate men from all other fears, not by removing their fears but by overriding them. Preaching this Law, using the resources of law-enforcement agencies of society, rationally persuading men to conform to it, and using the vocation one has in society as a citizen to achieve this end are explicitly the task of Christians and the church.

The absolute demand of the Law, "Love your neighbor as yourself," has built into it the standard for civil and political action. That portable norm is the love of the self, a demand that has received scant attention in the racial situation. Very little has been said on the basis of a theologically illuminated use of the Law to reveal to blacks and whites that the blacks' resentment against blackness and the inordinate self-negation of the blacks expresses a fundamental hostility against God for creating them black. Even less was said to call the blacks to their full vocation as blacks, to abandon this self-negation. Instead, whites added to the contempt for the Creator by using such expressions as the "burden of being black." That understandable but ill-informed sentiment is unfitting to the church, as much as it would be for her to confound the woman's understanding of herself by talking about the "burden of femaleness." One discerns at work among the whites a pathetic mixture of confusion, fear, and consequently a shame about themselves that manifests itself in stupe-

fied silence, self-flagellation, or aggressive segregation. Whites, trying to work outside the demand for creaturely self-love, being ashamed of whiteness, fail to address their black countrymen with an authentic call to bear the fearful accountability of loving the neighbor as oneself. The wrath of God, in the forms of hostility and suspicion among men, violently works confusion but not insight.

The Law demands love but does not furnish purity of heart. The Law drives with fear and never relaxes its demand for self-love. The church must be persuasive and shrewd in her analysis of human dynamics and political coercion in relation to this demand of the Law. But the church has no right to be confused and sentimental about the nature of this love.

First, this love is not a motive for action; it is the goal of action. Rarely are all motives known; they are never all pure. Neither does the Law instill motives. The necessity of command, in fact, reveals love's absence. But the Law does address itself to the goal or the purpose of human behavior.

Second, this love does not live in a world of make-believe where it is assumed that all are equal. The Law does not say, "Love all men equally." Equality itself is a term that must be modified by other terms; for example, "equality before law" or "equality of opportunity." This love is exercised through the web of human relationships in space and time as well as in biological and political ties, where inequalities are obvious. There is a put-ness, a "thereness" of our life together, that is grounded in the free choice of the Creator. Interlocked into the creation, a man and his neighbor both participate in a place

and a life that is normed and determined by the Creator. To love one's neighbor as he loves himself is to be put "there" with that person to will the life of that person as he is as a creature and to be available, within creature limitations, to serve that existence.

In this realm of Law, where God manages retributively the affairs of men with Himself and with one another, God has many ministers. Through them He effects His right, giving to every man his due as He wills. Those who lend themselves to reason and learning in order to utilize the powers of persuasion and control by law, economic sanctions, or political pressures are God's ministers. The church — as church — does not exercise this ministry. A careful investigation of Article XVI of the Augsburg Confession reveals guidelines for recovering a doctrine of vocation and ministry that affirms both the Gospel as Gospel and the created world, including civilized society, as God's work, without turning the Gospel into a new law and without confusing the righteousness of the city with the righteousness of God reckoned to faith.

There are two foci of concern in Article XVI's treatment of political systems and secular power. (1) Authority, power, and law are created and established by God. They are "good works of God." Efforts should be made to maintain, not undo, them. (2) Christians are not sinning when they take part in these works of God; in fact, Christians are to serve in these social functions by using "imperial laws" or other laws to render decisions, punish evil-doers, serve as soldiers, buy and sell, and so forth. Christians are strenuously urged to seek "Christian perfection" in the fear of God

by affirming the holiness of the orders. In this way the functions are "hallowed from within."

Obviously this article is addressed to the believing congregation, not to the government. The church is not the conscience of society to call for obedience of the government to her pronouncements or for the government's enforcement of the First Table of the Law. The church proclaims the word that God works in the political system and secular authority to establish and maintain life and order and to reward and punish retributively.

God is related to these functions as their Creator and Judge in the same way that He is related to man, whose Creator and Judge He is. God exercises lordship and does right as He concretely arranges the affairs of men among men. Even though fallen man can pervert those functions, he cannot stop exercising them, for God gives him no vacation. Article XVI affirms the creaturely reality of political systems, for God rules and works through them. Even those spheres of life that lie under the authority of man's reason cannot subsist without "divine governance." There is an authentic secularity about the political system; it is asserted in such a way that at the same time the interdependence of men in the created world is clarified. In fact, the "function of civil government" is defined "by referring to the Christian in and under this government, not by referring to this government as such." *

Christians by their vocations work within the affairs of men, using rational

and political tools, economic powers, and legal sanctions. But they have no call from God to make the Gospel the dynamic or the blueprint or the goal of social reform.

Even more explicit than Article XVI is Article XXVIII of the Augsburg Confession. In former times, says the article, the power of the church has been improperly confused with the power of the sword:

Accordingly our teachers have been compelled, for the sake of instructing consciences, to show the difference between the power of the church and the power of the sword, and they have taught that on account of God's command both are to be held in reverence and honor as the chief gifts of God on earth. (Par. 4)

The power of keys is a command of God to preach the Gospel, to remit and retain sins, and to administer the sacraments. This power is exercised only by teaching or preaching the Gospel (pars. 5, 8). The civil government, on the other hand, is concerned with things other than the Gospel. "The state protects not souls but bodies and goods from manifest harm, and contains men with the sword and physical penalties, while the Gospel protects souls from heresies, the devil, and eternal death." (Par. 11)

Ecclesiastical and civil power are therefore not to be confused (par. 12). The church should not invade the other's function by abrogating the laws of civil rulers, abolishing lawful obedience, interfering with judgments about proper civil ordinances or contracts, or prescribing to civil rulers laws about forms of government (par. 13). In those cases in which bishops exercised both ecclesiastical and civil functions, the *means* as well as the *goals* of

* Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, tr. Paul F. Koehneke and Herbert J. A. Bouman (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), p. 226.

their two ministries were to be kept distinct.

The concern for distinction of ministries and means is not a concern for the divorce of either one from God or from the other. Quite the contrary. Real unity is in God, and real unity can be confessed when it is left in God and not assumed to be a realized possibility in time or to be equated with a construct of the human mind. Proper distinction makes room for the functional fidelity of people as they participate in God's ministries in their various vocations. Proper distinction makes it possible for the things of the *saeculum* to be secular instead of being overridden with pseudoreligious utopian ideologies or mythologies. Improper distinction, on the other hand, leads to functional failure of the means for their properly differing ministries. Legal power, justly executed, can be mitigated and sentimentalized by a moralism that has the form and sound of love or Christianity but is in fact disguised ecclesiastical or religious imperialism. Salvific power, the gracious proclamation of rescue from the wrath of God, can be twisted into a scourge to make "love talk" the instrumentation for guilt, shame, or behavior modification.

If the church keeps clear these distinctions, she is free to preach God's judgment on those situations among us where there is no practice of justice under law toward a segment of our citizenry. Her words can be a clear proclamation of the wrathful judgment of God on every practice of injustice among men, for God loves and does justice. Her words fit Christian and non-Christian, religious and nonreligious. Dick Gregory is right: We do not need new laws; give us the constitution!

If pastors, theologians, and members of the church continue to instruct one another, then the church, renewed in the righteousness of God by one ministry, can enter into political, social, and economic life. There churchmen can use rationality, persuasion, and lawful coercion to join God in seeking the righteousness of the city, which is the task of the other ministry. But in this quest for the good of the city, one Christian may not in the name of the Gospel demand from all others an identical point of view. Neither may anyone unchurch those with opposing views. It is still possible for Christians to hold varying political views.

The freedom of the church to speak the Law of God courageously is derived from her enslavement to the Gospel. Failure to distinguish properly between the Law and the Gospel leads also to the functional failure of the Gospel and to a breakdown of discipline in congregations. It is a sign of our tragic confusion that where segregation within congregations has happened, where schism, heresy, and exclusion of baptized Christians on the basis of color have occurred, we can resort only to scolding or self-justification. Moralizing the Gospel into a blueprint for social reform cuts away the freedom of the Gospel and renders us incapable of the ministry of the office of keys. (AC XXVIII)

The Gospel liberates people from a legalistic threshing of consciences by pious scolding and frees them for spontaneous and surprising ministries within their worldly vocations. God uses both reason and the Gospel. But the church should be able to tell the difference between them and should know when and where to use them appropriately. Certainly, it is time

for voters assemblies, discussion groups, and other sectors in the Christian congregations to be engaged with the Word of God in exploration of ways to train the Christians to hallow their vocations. The failure in this respect has been the frivolity of our teaching and study. And this fate has fallen on us because we either have ignored the Scriptures or have perverted them into propaganda instruments for our own political or social judgments. We have hardly noticed them as the light that sets men free to function in the world without the dead works of self-justification and self-made meaning. But how dismal it is in the face of a number of possibilities in freedom of political or social solutions to take one political position, one social remedy, and identify it with the will of God!

III

REDEEMER AND REDEEMED

The threat of death is overcome with the mercy of God in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen from the dead. This good news of God about His Son is the Gospel promised through the prophets in the Holy Scriptures, the Gospel of that great descendant of David, designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by His resurrection from the dead. The Gospel is the story of God's rescue of creatures who were under His curse. The Gospel has faith as its correlative, the new birth as children of God's favor. Those who are called by the Gospel are precisely that, the "called-out ones" (*ecclesia*) — called out of death into life. Grace as the new basis of their relationship to God is received by faith. Everything that is not in Christ is under curse; everything that

is not of faith is sin; everyone who is not a newborn child of grace is by nature a child of wrath. Those whose linkage with God is by faith through Christ in the Spirit are those whose life is managed with God in a new way, no longer retributively but in mercy.

A new relationship is established among those connected with God in Christ by the Spirit: "A *new* commandment I give you, that you love one another even as I have loved you." This new commandment is spoken to disciples. It stands in contrast to the old, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." It is a dominical distinction between the fellowship of Christians and those unattached to Christ. From this distinction it follows that those passages that speak of love to the brother, of showing hospitality, and of ordering life in the cruciform of Jesus Christ are not descriptions of the church's relation to the world nor blueprints for the church's exercise of cultural or political management over society. They are, rather, intramural words.

The church as church has a different existence and mission from the body politic as body politic, just as she has a different life. Here Christ is not Logos as *ratio*, but He is the incarnate Logos of grace and truth, standing in merciful contrast to the Law revealed through Moses. Living on the mystery of His death and resurrection, the church is sunk into the web of creaturely life. Her members, like all men, die. Unlike other men, however, her members die the gracious death in Christ. They die with Jesus Christ, and therefore with Him all of them are called to life in the new humanity, life in the resurrection from the dead.

In contrast to the world where men hate

the just will of God in their death (either adoring death or mistrusting God in it) and hate every action whereby God takes a piece of their lives, the church trusts the will of God. She receives death with Christ while she expects the resurrection from the dead. She seeks the will of God, asking that it be done on earth! But the church does not go out to die on behalf of some ideology. Her view of man is determined by Jesus' death and resurrection, not by an ideological deduction from a set of premises. The church's mission, therefore, is to preach and teach, to baptize and feed on Christ's body and blood, and to exercise the power of keys. She is to love, for God Himself lives in her, driving her with His life, His Spirit. She wills men to live as God's creatures. She wills men to live forever with God in Christ. Hence, there is an authenticity about her will that men live as creatures and about her work of feeding, clothing, and healing them. But God has more than one ministry. In the work of feeding and clothing, God has many excellent ministers who are not church; and the church does not imagine this work is her ultimate ministry.

The church is plunged into the world to live in secret union with God, doing His will. She too hears the Law and repents. She shares in the unequal positions of place, time, and human endowments in the created world. There are still husbands and wives, parents and children, pastors and flocks, teachers and pupils, rulers and ruled, judges and judged. The church does not imagine that she has left the created world. Neither is she overenthusiastic about rejecting present conditions in favor of some idealized society among men in the future. The mystery of her life is justi-

fication with Christ. Hence, in the created world her members live to give each his due. The secret of her freedom to live in this new righteousness is her union with Christ by faith.

That union in faith is not splintered by the distinctions between male and female, bond and free, white and black. The richness of Christ in that union leads the church to reject the rejection of that union as a threat to her life, to the Gospel, and to the new humanity. But the union is one of faith and hope. The church waits in hope, the expectation of its full reality. Therefore, she will not barter away her life in the Gospel for the promise of making this reality of faith an empirical reality in time by using it as the grounds for reordering society. She is not a descendant of Esau. She will not lord it over the world of men in a kind of imperialistic program of cultural management. In fact, quite to the contrary, she is the one who can liberate the secular to be the ministry of God in time. For ancient pagans the secular was enchanted, but the Gospel broke the spell. The secular was released so that the ministries of God in space and time could be His. Likewise at the Reformation the Gospel liberated the secular. The creatures of God's ministry in culture and politics were returned to a holiness that depended on God doing with them what He wanted; they no longer had to derive their authenticity from ecclesiastical management.

But when the secular life wills to be the source of its own freedom, it becomes shackled to its own dreams and its half-gods. It labors under the unhallowed burden of self-sanctification. Real secularity is possible only where the Gospel truly liberates that which belongs to this age.

The church can desecralize our culture and at the same time continue to nourish her own life as church only by properly distinguishing the Law from the Gospel and using each as the Word of one God addressed to the hearers. What a pity when she no longer wants to be the church or else wants to exercise religious imperialism by using the Gospel as a pattern for social reform.

If one wants to speak about the racial issue and social reform in terms of the Gospel, he must address himself to Christians, to those who practice the mutual love of brothers, to ecclesiastical discipline, and to the office of keys; or else, he must speak to the task of evangelization. Within the church there are special agencies and "ministries" to guide and instruct. There are also intercongregational agencies and intracongregational resources whereby Christians can talk to one another.

There ought to be far more energy, prayer, and ingenuity devoted to living the hallowed life and hallowing life in the community. Much too little has been done either to articulate or to augment the kind of "pastoral care" that equips Christian citizens to demonstrate care for the world in their daily vocations. Much more needs to be said about using in holiness forms of political action, opinion formation, and economic sanctions. Wherever the church is present, with pastors, teachers, and theologians expressing their proper crafts, the disclosure of the dynamics of wrath and law must not be ignored. Similarly, the church should not neglect to train Christians in skills of seeking the righteousness of the city.

Wherever the Gospel is spoken, one must also talk about moderation and suffering with joy. Such moderation calls for fasting, not with regard to eating and drinking, but in relation to other men, an abstinence of antagonism and violence and retribution. Moderation is not so much a "friendly" or "nice" attitude of mind as it is, rather, a joyous composure that can bear suffering and injustice with an equanimity that comes from joy of the Lord. This moderation imitates the humility of Jesus on earth, for it is a moderation in joy, a living on the goodness of the Lord. It restrains the passion for vindictiveness and wills by patient practice to live in good towards both enemy and friend. Such moderation will not on the basis of legal rights push itself to moral wrongs.

Such moderation is born only of that life that is hidden in the gracious will of God in faith. If, in the hostility and threats of men, a man sees nothing but God's wrath with no hope, then most surely he will respond with wrath, hostility, and threats. Christians who are anxious about their life, especially in the face of such threats, are invited by the apostle Paul to combat such cares with "prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, making [their] requests known to God" (Phil. 4). Such fasting, such abstinence from wrathful responses, such control of passions that perpetrate evil, and such joyful suffering help reveal Christian moderation to all men. Instead of man's being the sentinel over his own rights, the peace of God will stand guard over him to keep him in peace.

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