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## CASE FOR CHARACTER: Towards a Lutheran Virtue Ethics. By Joel D. Biermann

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**A CASE FOR CHARACTER: Towards a Lutheran Virtue Ethics.** By Joel D. Biermann. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014. 204 pages. Paper. \$29.00.

This volume culminates work that Joel Biermann has done in response to the antinomianism which he thinks is prevalent in Lutheranism today. Of course, it is hard to determine whether it is legalism or libertinism which has the upper hand in today's church: in various circles we encounter one or the other. Rightly distinguishing law and gospel helps us to avoid both legalism and libertinism. In response to legalism: we look no longer to the law but instead to Christ for our righteousness before God. In response to libertinism: since we have died to sin, we no longer seek to live in sin.

Biermann proposes that Christian leaders promote the virtues of courage, wisdom, moderation, and justice, in preaching and catechesis. He urges that preachers and teachers should not shy away from Christian ethical instruction (*paranesis*), as if avoiding *paranesis* is faithful to the law and gospel distinction; indeed, people are seeking wisdom for how to live. The fact that "Christ is the end of the law" (Rom 10:3-4) in no way rules out the law as guidance for Christian living; instead what it rules out is all self-righteousness before God. Our neighbors benefit from our righteousness in the world. Indeed, the pattern in Romans, as in other Pauline epistles, is that *paranesis* (Rom 12-15) invariably follows *after* the gospel (Rom 3:21-Rom 8). Biermann expands on the work of Robert Kolb who noted: "Believers strive, under the Spirit's guidance, to put to death the vices that spring from their need to secure

life on their own terms. They repent—are turned by the Holy Spirit—from vices to virtues as God uses them as his masks. They strive to practice those attitudes and actions that reflect the image of God's love, care, and concern into the lives of others. They do so in every situation of human life."<sup>1</sup>

Biermann looks to philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre who offer Aristotle-based "virtue ethics," as an alternative to "quandary ethics" (ethical problems which have no clear resolution) in which modern ethical theories, whether duty-based (deontology) or outcome-based (utilitarianism), are mired. In addition to MacIntyre, Biermann appeals to the Methodist theologian Stanley Hauerwas, and several contemporary Lutherans, to defend virtue ethics. He shows that this approach can be found in Luther, Melancthon, and the Lutheran Confessions. His own proposal reworks the traditional "three uses of the law," countering those who reduce the uses of the law to two (which Biermann finds inherently antinomian), by advocating three kinds of righteousness: 1) the law governs in the wider political community (righteousness applying to all regardless of one's status with God); 2) the gospel justifies sinners through an alien righteousness given to people of faith; and 3) the law guides believers to conform their lives to God's will (righteousness evident in godly living and good works). Each of these functions of the law corresponds to each of the articles of the Creed. Biermann's constructive work is persuasive, but there are some questions that should be raised.

First, in the Bible, all *paranesis* is done apart from Aristotle. The scriptures refer to virtue, but they lack an

Aristotelian grounding for it. Instead, Wisdom literature distinguishes between wise and foolish behavior, while the prophetic tradition calls for fidelity to the covenant. New Testament *parenesis* is indebted to both. So, one can do *parenesis* without Aristotle. But, if that is the case, should Aristotle be baptized? If he should, doesn't he need to undergo some catechesis first?

After all, there is no commensurability between the pride that Aristotle advocates for a well-lived life (*Nicomachean Ethics* 4:3) and the humility advocated by Paul (Philippians 2). Aristotelian virtue ethics are grounded in how human nature is furthered through excellence (doing the Golden Mean) as opposed to vices of excess or defect. In general, Biermann's case would be stronger if he would articulate the rapport between Aristotle's *eudaimonism*, that is, self-fulfillment through exercising character traits of excellence and biblical humility. How does this *eudaimonism* square with the fact that believers have been crucified with Christ and that they no longer live for themselves, but instead Christ lives in them (Gal 2:20)? Many who deny a "third use of the law" deny a "continuously existing self." Possibly Biermann could look to early Christians, such as Augustine, who did not jettison ancient virtue ethics as pagan but instead reworked them to focus on love and service.

Biermann notes of Aristotle's *eudaimonia*: "It is a deep, steady, settled happiness that endures. Aristotle was no hedonist. He understood this kind of happiness to be 'activity in accordance with virtue,' the best of which was the 'life according to reason,' or the contemplative life." He goes on to say: "Based not on

human reason, but on divine revelation, the creed provides a profoundly more fundamental, truthful, encompassing, and even practical *telos* than Aristotle's insightful yet reason-bound conclusions" (155). But, the tension cannot be smoothed over so quickly. Admittedly, Aristotle was not arguing that humans should do excellence for the sake of achieving happiness, but instead that happiness is a natural payoff when humans perform excellently. It may be that Biermann thinks that Christian virtue ethics are not so different from Frederick Buechner's view of vocation: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." But if that's the case, that should be explained.

Second, one reason that Aristotle lacked appreciation for the humility so central to Paul, Christ, and the entire scriptures, is that God's people were in fact repeatedly humbled by God as a consequence of their sins, or, because at times, God is hidden (*deus absconditus*). In the Old Testament, God's people experienced oppression beneath a parade of empires. Only rarely did God's people have the upper hand. Mary's words, "[God] has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree" (Lk 1:52), present the whole life of God's people. Aristotle cannot appreciate that. This is said not to denigrate the use of Aristotle in ethics but to urge Biermann to fill out the details of the compatibility between scripture and Aristotle which he thinks is possible. What must be said is that the "new obedience" is a cruciform life, one in which Christians are being conformed to the image of Christ precisely through the trials they undergo. That is, "the entire life

of believers” is “to be one of repentance” (LW 31:25).

Third, Biermann’s case could be strengthened if he would capitalize on MacIntyre’s notion of “narrative identity,” that human identity is story-shaped, as a way to see how God is working through the scriptures to shape character. Christian imaginations are guided by, and not merely motivated by, scripture. The ethical question is, as Bruno Bettelheim puts it, *who do I want to be like?* Saturated in the scriptures, believers acquire the courage of Elijah, the patience of Moses, the humility of Mary, and the wisdom of Christ. While Luther appeals to the “spontaneity” of good works, in fact this spontaneity is a result of the word’s power to shape believers by portraying the realities that very word gives as believers internalize Scripture’s history, wisdom, and prophecy. Thereby, Christ is not only “sacrament” but also “example.” The Scriptures guide believers in the virtues of Christ-likeness as they grow in knowledge of the Scriptures. True Christian virtue is not a project in self-enhancement. The self is ever and only grounded in Christ. Freed from securing and protecting the self, one can actually start doing significant good in the world—fulfilling the human *telos* to love God with all one’s heart and one’s neighbor as oneself, in which Luther notes that we do “make some progress” in this life.

Over all, Biermann’s contribution is significant, timely, and a remarkable achievement that will alter current discussions of ethics among Lutherans and other Christians. In light of his work, we can conclude that

Lutheran sinners indeed turn from virtue to grace and receive a passive life (*vita passiva*) as the early Luther outlined it; but, through *coram mundo* such a grace-filled life expresses itself in virtue exercised not for self-justification but for the sake of service.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Kolb, *The Christian Faith: A Lutheran Exposition* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 248.