

**Augustana College  
Chapel of Reconciliation**

**The 'Unethical' Theological Agenda of Luther: His Early Years in Wittenberg**

**Chris Croghan  
11 Feb 2008**

***Romans 3:***

**19** Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. **20** For "no human being will be justified in his sight" by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin. **21** But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, **22** the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, **23** since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; **24** they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, **25** whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; **26** it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. **27** Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. **28** For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

For those of you who know me, or perhaps simply know of me, it may not come as a surprise that the scripture text I have chosen for today is the same text regularly read on Reformation Sunday. What else might you expect from a church historian who has a partiality towards Martin Luther? Even so, I didn't pick the text because I like Luther. Rather, I picked this text because it serves my twofold task for today. My first task is to proclaim from the pulpit God's Word. My second task, as evident in the title printed in the bulletin, is to address how this Word, and more specifically, how Luther's understanding of this Word, shaped the history and the subsequent legacy of a small and remote university in Wittenberg, Germany and more specifically, how this Word shaped Wittenberg's views on ethics in a Liberal Arts curriculum.<sup>1</sup>

To begin with, any talk of Luther's perspective on ethics is tantamount to looking at two sides of a coin. We begin with the first side of the coin, namely the role of ethics in the

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<sup>1</sup> It is helpful to briefly outline the context of Luther's early work. The people of Germany likely considered the University of Wittenberg as remote and insignificant. Nevertheless, it was established by Elector John Fredrick in an attempt to develop a renowned university for his territory. Subsequently, through a series of events and a particular perspective on God's activity in the world, the University of Wittenberg proceeded to imprint and at times shake the foundations, structures and outcomes of the Liberal Arts educational system within Germany and throughout vast parts of Europe. In fact, one can still witness the fingerprints, bold and clear in some instances while more slight in others, on the current shape and content of liberal arts institutions throughout the world, and more specifically, on today's Lutheran Liberal Arts colleges.

arena of theology. And to do that, I need to read again a portion of today's scripture lesson in order to expand on how it relates to the title of this talk.

**21** But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, **22** the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, **23** since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; **24** they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

In order to make the connection between Paul's words to the Romans and the title of this talk, it is important to understand what Luther believed to be Jesus' agenda. Simply stated, according to Luther, through the eyes of the Apostle Paul, Jesus' agenda was the salvation of sinners.<sup>2</sup> This perspective is not necessarily unique to Luther or Paul. It is a common Christian assertion. But the stipulations for salvation, namely what makes sinners righteous before God is where the Apostle Paul, and subsequently Luther, advance a distinct perspective. As stated by Paul in the passage just read, sinners are righteous before God by faith in Jesus Christ and only faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul's assertion, that one's righteousness is determined by faith and not by works, is an entry point for analyzing Luther's unethical theological agenda in Wittenberg. While I hoped today's title would be provocative and create some curiosity, believe it or not, calling Luther's theological agenda "unethical" is not committing blasphemy amongst Lutherans. As my teacher once stated, "Put audaciously, perhaps even irresponsible, one might announce that the problem is that Luther does not have any ethics!"<sup>3</sup> To be sure, such a statement requires a number of qualifications, most importantly, recognizing Luther's own working assumptions about ethics.

Luther's unethical theological agenda was aimed at the influence Aristotle's writings held on theological discourse and conclusions. Luther identified Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* as a primary culprit.<sup>4</sup> A month before the publishing of the *95 Theses*, Luther

<sup>2</sup> Over the centuries scholars have debated whether or not Luther understood Paul accurately. Accusations that Luther misunderstood Paul are found in the early days of the Reformation period. As of late, the debate is regularly found in the discipline of Biblical Studies. The contemporary form of the debate is illustrated in a recent volume of *Dialog*, 46:2 (2007). Contemporary critics of Luther follow in the footsteps of E.P. Sanders, Krister Stendahl, James Dunn and N.T. Wright; whereas, defenders of Luther follow the scholarly opinions of Rudolf Bultmann, Günter Bornkamm and Ernst Käsemann. The work of Wilfried Härle demonstrates some of the misunderstandings of Luther critics. Härle takes seriously the work and proposals of E.P. Sanders and demonstrates some fundamental flaws. "Rethinking Paul and Luther." *Lutheran Quarterly*, 20:3 (2006): 303-317. Because of the arguments presented by Härle and a host of other scholars, I remain unconvinced by the critics of Luther. In fact, in addition to Härle's work, it would be interesting to explore if and how the critics of Luther hold a set of underlying assumptions and definitions based on an Aristotelian notion of justice that informs their reading of Paul's writing. If as much was proven to be the case, Luther's critics essentially fault Luther for failing to look at Paul's writing with the same set of philosophical assumptions. Such philosophical assumptions warrant at least inferred if not specific textual evidence in Paul's writings.

<sup>3</sup> Gerhard Forde, "Luther's 'Ethics,'" in *A More Radical Gospel* ed. Steven Paulson and Mark Mattes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 138.

<sup>4</sup> Luther was well acquainted with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Early in his teaching career he lectured on it no less than five times.

presented his *Disputation against Scholastic Theology*. Five of his theses illustrate the point.

41. Virtually the entire *Ethics* of Aristotle is the worst enemy of grace. This is in opposition to the Scholastics.
42. It is an error to maintain that Aristotle's statement concerning happiness does not contradict Catholic doctrine. This is in opposition to the doctrine on morals.
43. It is an error to say that no man can become a theologian without Aristotle. This is in opposition to common opinion.
44. Indeed, no one can become a theologian unless he becomes one without Aristotle.
50. Briefly, the whole of Aristotle is to theology as darkness is to light. This is in opposition to the Scholastics.<sup>5</sup>

This disputation was the early part of a campaign Luther and his colleagues waged against the use of Aristotle in the theological curriculum and discussions.<sup>6</sup> Less than three years later, as Luther realized he had a serious fight on his hands, he offered a solution to reform theological education:

In this regard my advice would be that Aristotle's *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, *Concerning the Soul*, and *Ethics* which hitherto have been thought to be his best books, should be completely discarded ...<sup>7</sup>

Why such an extreme stance against these writings of Aristotle? Why discard some of the basic readings that maintained and informed the majority of theological discourse and doctrines? In short, Luther wasn't rejecting Aristotle's *Ethics* as much as he was rejecting medieval scholasticism's tendency to blend Aristotelianism and Christian theology. Early in his career, Luther characterized this tendency as working *ad modum Aristotelis*, in the manner of Aristotle. At the heart of Luther's concern was scholasticism's tendency to use Aristotle's *Ethics* as the reference point for theological discourse and doctrines.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> "Disputation Against Scholastic Theology," in *Luther's Works* [American Edition] 55 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-86) 31:12. hereafter cited as *LW*.

<sup>6</sup> For further evidence of Luther's early opinions about the place of Aristotle in theological education see Timothy Dost, *Renaissance Humanism in Support of the Gospel in Luther's Early Correspondence*. p.p. 105-113. Also see Ernest Schwiebert *The Reformation* Minneapolis MN. Fortress. p 309, Ronald Frost "Aristotle's *Ethics*: The Real Reason for Luther's Reformation?" *Trinity Journal* 18 (Fall 1997): 223-241.

<sup>7</sup> To the Christian Nobility, *LW* 44:200

<sup>8</sup> In contemporary theological discussions, Luther's views on ethics regularly evokes the same protest which arose while Luther was alive. In short, contemporary thinkers regularly gage the merits of theological doctrines and discussions based on their perceived contributions to discussions and deliberations about ethics and morals, i.e. the ethical fruits. If a theological perspective or doctrine does not produce a more ethical person or society then the discussion or perspective is perceived as having no "real world" relevance.[0]

To gain a better understanding of the disagreement between Luther and his contemporaries, one can look at Aristotle's notion of distributive justice.<sup>9</sup> Distributive justice claims that justice is carried out when things are distributed equally based on a person's merit. One's merit is determined by the virtue of one's deliberate actions. Here, we find dissonance between the concepts of Aristotle and the words of the Apostle Paul. As evident in the previous passage quoted from the letter to the Romans, righteousness, that is one's justification before God, is not based on the virtue of one's actions, but simply on one's faith. In short, works, including your morals and ethics, do not save you. Therefore, in Luther's mind, those who made human deliberations about ethics the foundation of or normative for a discussion about God undermined Paul's assertion about the work and fruit of God's action in Jesus Christ.

Looking at the phenomenon of hope<sup>[0]</sup> further illustrates the disparity between Luther's perspective and a theology grounded in Aristotle's *Ethics*. Central to ethical deliberations is the human quest to categorize actions as either good or evil. Luther believed such a quest was tantamount to the temptation the serpent used to deceive humans in the Garden of Eden. When striving to possess such knowledge, humans *hope* that our ethics will shape or determine our destiny. In essence, ethics is the arbiter of hope.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, ethics as the arbiter of hope is clearly different than the Apostle Paul's assertion, namely that faith in Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected is the sole arbiter of hope. And with such information, it becomes clearer why Luther ranted and raged against Aristotle's influence, in particular his *Nicomachean Ethics*, as normative or even included in any theological curriculum. Luther believed that the hope of the people was at stake. And where hope is at stake, so too is the salvation of souls. Luther observed that bringing Aristotle into the conversation created an environment "where little is taught of the Holy Scriptures and Christian faith, and where only the blind, heathen teacher Aristotle rules far more than Christ."<sup>11</sup> That is to say, hope was grounded in the words of Aristotle rather than in the words of Christ.

As you might imagine, much more can be said about Luther's unethical theological agenda. But the limits of time require a shift in direction to ensure both sides of Luther's views are dealt with. Clarity and full understanding is essential here. To review, the first side of the coin described above is Luther's rationale for removing Aristotle's ethics as the backbone of conversations about God and God's work, which for Luther, were conversations of faith. However, the other side of the coin, his agenda for the rest of a Liberal Arts Education had a much different flavor. In short, Luther was very much in favor of incorporating significant portions of Aristotle into the rest of the university curriculum. In fact, ethical concerns were primary to the curriculums not pertaining to theology. Therefore, I suppose I could amend my title to read, "Luther's extremely ethical agenda in everything but theology."

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<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *Great Books of the Western World* (Chicago Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952) vol. 9, 5.0-5.4 [Berlin number 1129-1131 (25)]

<sup>10</sup> Forde, 141.

<sup>11</sup> To the Christian Nobility, *LW* 44:200

A prudent starting point to this aspect of Luther's perspective is his words regarding a Christian's life in the world. Luther wrote, "A good person does good work."<sup>12</sup> This phrase helps to reorient the discussion about ethics. Good works don't make a good person but a good person does good work. Ergo, ethical deeds do not make a person ethical, but an ethical person does ethical deeds.

For our purposes today, it is important to notice that those phrases are inherent to the concepts the Apostle Paul set forth in his letter to the Romans. In fact, the opening verses of today's reading reveal the parallels.

**19** Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.  
**20** For "no human being will be justified in his sight" by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

Founding his views on Paul's writings, Luther understood and asserted that only the saved will do truly good works. Such an assertion comes from a keen understanding of how the human conscience operates. If a person strives to enhance one's image, either in the world or before God, then the person's motivation for their good deeds is inherently selfish, therefore, not truly good.<sup>13</sup> But if one is saved, that is to say, living in a free conscience before God, then "one can leave the question of self-enhancement both before humans and God behind, enter freely into the world, and do the good that appears good to do."<sup>14</sup> Paul Althaus summarized Luther's perspective in this way:

.. good works can only be done by the person who already has a good conscience because God has freely forgiven the person's sin. A good conscience is not the product but the source of the Christian ethos.<sup>15</sup>

Luther's vantage point radically shifted the location and telos (goal) of ethical conversations in a Liberal Arts Education. Luther removed ethics as an anchor in the theological agenda and curriculum and redirected it toward the other academic disciplines. Such action also shifted the intended outcome of ethical discourse. Luther's words provide insight into his intention and convictions.

You have frequently heard that we need not do works for God's benefit but only for our neighbor's benefit. We cannot make God stronger or richer through our

<sup>12</sup> Freedom of a Christian, *LW* 31:361.

<sup>13</sup> Luther's *Treatise on Good Works* illustrate his views. "In all this they have had no faith in the grace of God and no certainty of his approval ..and they look for good only after the works have been performed. And so they build their confidence not on Gods' favor, but on the works they have done. That is the building on sand and water." *LW* 44:29.

<sup>14</sup> Forde, 146. Forde's views are backed by Luther's comments in *The Sacrament of Penance*, "Sins must be forgiven before good works can be done. For works do not drive out sin, but the driving out of sin leads to good works. For good works must be done with joyful heart and good conscience toward God, that is, out of the forgiveness of guilt." *LW* 35:10.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Althaus, *The Ethics of Martin Luther*. (Philadelphia PA: Fortress Press. 1972), 4-5. I altered the quote slightly to reflect the gender neutrality of Althaus' original language.

works—but these works can strengthen and enrich other people. People need them—God doesn't—and people ought to receive them.<sup>16</sup>

This perspective became the guidepost for the earliest proposals and forms of a Lutheran Liberal Arts Education. Grounded in the theological understanding that God calls us good and faith grasps such declarations, a Lutheran Liberal Arts Education is directed toward service to the world and for the neighbor. No doubt, such service meant and continues to mean long and hard deliberations about ethics. But, these deliberations are a fruit of our encounter with God's word and conversations of faith. Such conversations create space for humans to be the creatures God made us to be. Then and only then, flowing out of these conversations "is the possibility of living spontaneously in loving service to the neighbor ..for the well being of the earth and its communities."<sup>17</sup>

Finally, I suppose something needs to be said about how these words from Paul and ideas of Luther pertain to the educational program of Augustana College. In short, as a college claiming the tradition of Luther, we need to carefully consider the place and role of ethical deliberations in the department responsible for theological conversations.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, Richard Bowman's desire to invite folks from across the curriculum to speak about ethics in their field is clearly congruent with Luther's perspective. After all, each discipline is intended for the good of the community and the world. Therefore, long and difficult deliberations about the needs of the world are essential.

So, I suppose in light of Luther's insights and the words of the Apostle Paul, there is only one final thing to say. In the mercy of Almighty God, Jesus Christ was given to die for you, and for his sake, God forgives you all your sins. AMEN

Go in peace, serve the world.

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<sup>16</sup> WA 10: 222

<sup>17</sup> Mark Mattes, "The Thomistic turn in Evangelical Catholic ethics" *Lutheran Quarterly* Vol. 16:1 (2002) 77-78.

<sup>18</sup> In hopes of being equitable in this conversation, it must be noted that the views presented in this paper are not held universally amongst Lutherans let alone, those who read Luther. A recent article by Theo A. Boer represents a Lutheran theologian who has read Luther and arrived at a different set of conclusions. I would contend, as evident in his appeal to knowing a *summum bonum* that Boer appears to be working *ad modum Aristotelis* with his reading of Luther. Theo Boer, "Is Luther's Ethics Christian Ethics?" *Lutheran Quarterly* vol. 21:4. (2007), 404-421.

## MORNING WORSHIP

Monday, February 11, 2008

**Prelude** Variations on a hymn for Lent by Dale Wood

**Welcome**

**Invocation**

**Call to worship** [based on Psalm 1]P: Blessed are those whose delight is the word of God

**C: And on God's word they meditate day and night.**

P: They are like trees planted by streams of water

**C: Bearing fruit in due season.**

P: The wicked are not so

**C: They are like chaff the wind blows away.**

P: Blessed are those whose delight is the word of God

**C: And on God's word they meditate day and night.**

**Prayer**

God of promise, stir our faith in your word that rooted and grounded in your promise we be freed to bear good fruit for our neighbors, in Jesus' name. Amen.

**Hymn** "God's Word is Our Great Heritage" ELW #509

**Scripture** Romans 3: 19-28

**Message** Dr Chris Croghan  
*The 'Unethical' Theological Agenda of Luther: His Early Years in Wittenberg* Ethics in the Disciplines, Pt 1

**Dismissal**

P: Go in peace, serve the world

**C: Thanks be to God.**

**Postlude** "A Mighty Fortress" Wilbur Held

Thanks to Rich Bowman, Chair of Moral Values, for coordinating this series. Next Monday, Janet Blank-Libra, English, will present "Ethics in Journalism."

## CAMPUS MINISTRY ANNOUNCEMENTS

**CAMP FAIR** - Feb. 12-13, and 15th - COMMONS LOUNGE. Representatives from many camps across the country will be in Siverson Lounge to recruit summer staff. These are magnificent summer jobs--great learning and great fun! Augustana offers a scholarship for all students who work at ELCA camps. Contact financial aid for details.

**FAITH FEST** - Outreach is sponsoring an event for high schoolers on Sat. and Sun., Feb. 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>. Activities include break out sessions, a concert by Fuller Still, and a special speaker - Dan Scharnhorst.

**SEMINARY REPRESENTATIVES** - Tuesday, February 19<sup>th</sup> representatives from all eight ELCA seminaries will be at Augustana. At 10 AM you may hear the distinctive programs of study at each. Individual appointments for exploration and discernment are available throughout the day. Contact Carol, x5403, to make appointments.

**"Ethics in the Departments"** Rich Bowman, Chair of Moral Values, has arranged a series of services exploring ethics in the academic disciplines. Mondays in Chapel, Feb. 18-March 10, 10 AM.

**FAIR TRADE CHOCOLATE SALE** - Tuesday through Thursday (12<sup>th</sup> - 14<sup>th</sup>) - Commons Concourse - 10:30 am - 1:00 pm. Just in time for Valentine's Day!!

### CHAPEL SCHEDULE

Monday (11 <sup>th</sup> )	Worship, 10 am - Chris Croghan, Reli
Tuesday (12 <sup>th</sup> )	Roman Catholic Mass, 10 am 0 Fr. Thomas Fitzpatrick - CAMP FAIR - Commons Lounge - 1:30 am - 4:00 pm - <i>Fair Trade Chocolate Sales</i> , Tues., Wed., Thurs. (10:30am-1:00 pm, Commons Concourse)
Wednesday (13 <sup>th</sup> )	Holy Communion, 10 am - Pr.Paul
Friday (15 <sup>th</sup> )	Worship, 10 am - Adam Norenberg, Sr. Spkr.
Saturday-Sunday	FAITH FEST
Sunday (17 <sup>th</sup> )	Worship, 11 am - Pr. Paul

## The 'Unethical' Theological Agenda of Luther: His Early Years in Wittenberg

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In this regard my advice would be that Aristotle's *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, *Concerning the Soul*, and *Ethics* which hitherto have been thought to be his best books, should be completely discarded...

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