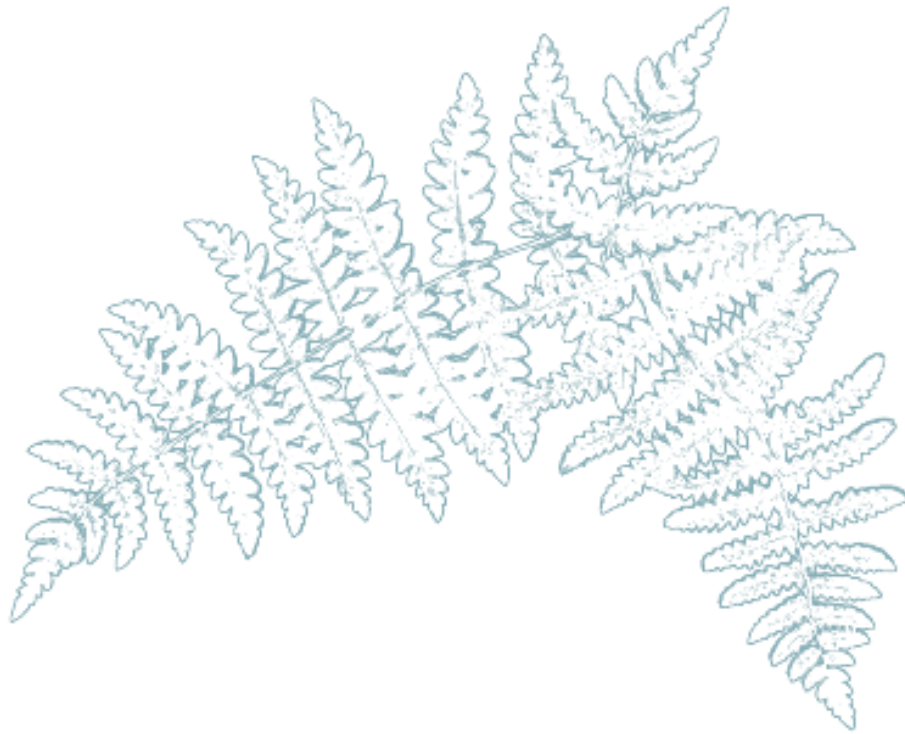


# LIVING THE FAITH:

A Lutheran Perspective on Ethics



EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

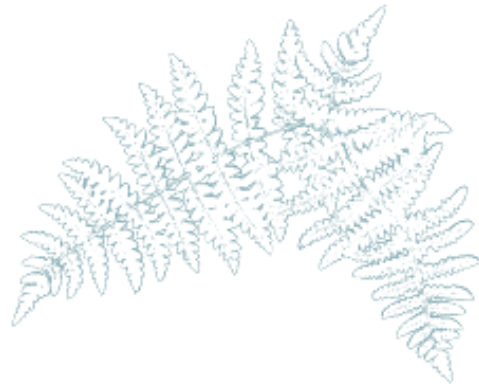
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DIVISION FOR CHURCH IN SOCIETY AND THE  
DIVISION FOR CONGREGATIONAL MINISTRIES



# LIVING THE FAITH:

A Lutheran Perspective on Ethics



**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
Division for Church in Society and the  
Division for Congregational Ministries



## **LIVING THE FAITH: A LUTHERAN PERSPECTIVE ON ETHICS**

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ISBN 6-0001-1160-6.

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 Printed on recycled paper with soy-based inks.

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Design and artwork by David Scott.

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## PREFACE

This congregational study invites you to think and talk about how your faith in Jesus Christ shapes the way you live your daily life. “Living the Faith” introduces you to the basics of Christian ethics as viewed from a Lutheran perspective. By drawing upon the Lutheran tradition in the midst of contemporary confusion and debate about ethics, this study offers congregations an insightful and accessible guide for talking together about the Christian life.

This study is meant for small groups of adults or youth who are interested in thinking through how Lutherans approach ethics. The questions in the text and the two sections “Guides for Leaders” and “Small Group Session Questions and Activities” are intended to facilitate discussion of the study. “Living the Faith” follows upon the publication of *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics* (edited by Karen L. Bloomquist and John R. Stumme, Fortress Press, 1998). This study refers to the essays in that book and helps introduce readers to it. Reading *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics* and having a copy at hand for reference will enhance your study.

The author of this study is the Rev. Dr. Paul Jersild. Dr. Jersild is Professor Emeritus of Theology and Ethics at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, where he also served as Academic Dean. Before going to Southern, he was Dean and Professor of Ethics at Wartburg Theological Seminary. He is now Visiting Research Professor at the Bioethics Center, University of South Carolina.

This study is a joint publication of the Division for Congregational Ministries (DCM) and the Division for Church in Society (DCS) of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The Rev. Paul Lutz (DCM) and the Rev. Dr. John R. Stumme (DCS) are the study’s editors. They have been assisted by the Rev. Ted Schroeder (DCM). DCM and DCS are responsible for the study. You may direct any comments you have on it to:

*Living the Faith*  
Division for Church in Society  
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America  
8765 West Higgins Road  
Chicago, Illinois 60631-4190



## SESSION ONE: MATTERS OF MORALITY

### The Moral Challenge

The wide variety of responses to ethics and morality in our world today indicate that we are living in a time of moral confusion. Even in the church, we sometimes seem to be confused about what it means to “live the Christian life” or “make Christian choices.” Our confusion can go so deep that we are unsure not only about our stand on particular issues, but also on our understanding of morality itself. There seems to be constant disagreement between those who believe that every choice is either right or wrong and those who believe that many shades of rightness and wrongness complicate every issue. One question Christians face is how do we apply our historical or traditional understanding of ethics and morality to the complex questions and issues of our day. It is often frustrating, but even on that question there is disagreement.

We live in a pluralist society. We live and interact with people from a variety of backgrounds, experiences, customs, religions and cultures. We may personally know atheists, Christian fundamentalists, New Age advocates, Muslims, Buddhists and many others. These people not only have differing beliefs, but they may hold to widely different moral convictions as well. Living in a world with that kind of diversity can certainly test our patience, but it can also provide the ingredients for a vital, engaging and interesting time to live.

### Morality and Community

Because individuals make moral choices, ethics or morality may seem like an individual matter. Indeed, people seem to set their own standards of morality. But even before morality becomes individual, it has its basis in community.

We are born into communities. Our communities have their own standards and expectations that shape our individual understanding of right and wrong. Learning morality starts with our parents. They, in turn, are part of other communities that shape their identity and moral choices. That’s what morality is all about: learning to hold to common convictions and standards that provide order for our communities and for society as a whole. Morality is the glue that holds society together in a state of reasonable harmony.

Unfortunately, society’s morality often fails to maintain order in a way that is good or fair for all. In those cases, commonly accepted morality may have to be challenged and changed. The church as a moral community is clearly concerned about the quality of moral life in society. For example, an accepted moral standard might say: “You should look out for yourself, whatever the cost to others.” As a community of faith, the church would challenge that standard. “We are called to lives of servanthood,” we would say.

Some Christians today think that churches have lost their integrity by selling out to the culture. If they would be genuine followers of Christ, they say, Christians should make it clear that they belong to *counter-cultural communities*. Churches must stand in opposition to a culture that appears to be moving further away from biblical values and morals. While we Christians cannot simply remove ourselves from society, we can march to a different drummer. In a secular, consumer-centered society, we will never be entirely at ease with the prevailing values of society.

We live in a culture that is struggling with its moral and religious roots. Many things work against a stable morality in our society: unstable families, increased mobility, the erosion of religious beliefs, consumerism, individualism that tends to isolate us from one another, and many more. In this setting, we Christians need to be equipped for living the faith. That equipping should take place in

#### Questions for Discussion

Session One Small Group Questions and Activities are printed on page 24

*How do you experience moral diversity as you live with and work with others?*

*When does this diversity become moral confusion?*

*In what ways is your congregation a “counter-cultural community?”*

How does your congregation equip you to live as a disciple in the world?

How does it nurture growth and direction in living the faith?

our congregations. There we learn and live what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ in our times. Through faithful worship, education and fellowship, we develop a religious and moral identity that enables us to live confidently and faithfully with a clear sense of who we are as people who bear the name of Christ. That will make us critical of our culture where its life is self-centered and destructive. But we also will want to affirm society when it displays a morality that is just and supportive of genuine community.

### Thinking about the Moral Life

Let us look at some basic ideas about morality before moving on to what it means to live a moral life as a Christian. The terms “ethics” and “morality” are often used interchangeably. They both refer to moral behavior. But ethics can also refer to the study of moral behavior. A class on ethics might include a study of the language, assumptions and beliefs that make up the moral life. It would also include reflecting on how we make moral decisions and the development of moral character and the virtuous life.

As human beings, we know what it is to be moral. We all have the capacity to be moral—to recognize right and wrong and to suffer from a guilty conscience when we realize we have done something wrong. Most of us want to be good most of the time. We see failure to be good as weakness, and we admire those who live according to noble ideals and show strong character.

We all judge the immoral person and react in disbelief when we encounter the *amoral* person—the one who seems to have no sense of right and wrong. Such a person appears to be less than human.

While Christians will differ from others because they live out of their faith in the triune God, they share a sense of morality with all people. We believe this capacity to be moral comes from our being created in the image of God. As children of God, the kind of moral person we are is far more important to our personal identity than whether we are rich or poor, black or white, educated or uneducated, famous or unknown. Whether or not we are persons of character has significant implications both for ourselves and our communities.

Do you agree that all people have a sense of right and wrong?

How does your view make a difference in the way you relate to others?

### A Christian Vision of Ethics

Christians bring a powerful vision to understanding humanity. Because we are all children of God, we affirm that all people have value that no one has the right to deny because we are all children of God. The particular content of Christian ethics comes from our confession of faith in the triune God. When we talk about ethics from a Christian perspective, we try to spell out the meaning of that confession for the moral life.

One of the ways that Christian ethics has been described is in the language of *self-giving love* (in Greek: *agape*). Jesus uses the language of love when he sums up the law: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind . . . and you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39). The apostles Paul and John use the same language to spell out the meaning of the Gospel: God’s gift in Christ is an expression of divine love, which moves us to love one another (2 Corinthians 5:14-22, Ephesians 5:2, Philippians 2:1-11, Colossians 3:12-17, 1 John 3:16 and 4:7-12).

Would you prefer another word or phrase in place of *agape love* to get at the heart of Christian ethics?

We believe that human beings who are created in the image of God are also in a state of rebellion against God. That rebellion is called sin, and it includes everybody. It shows itself in our self-centeredness and puts us in conflict with others and with God. Sin is a condition that influences every part of our lives. It stands in the way of our ability to reach wholeness or a complete trust in God.



## A Lutheran Perspective on Ethics

The Christian understanding of sin stands against popular views that see human beings as innately good. As the Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant remarked, “I ought implies I can.” Christians, on the other hand, hold to a more realistic view of our ability to live the moral life. We are not able to do what we should, namely, love God and neighbor. We do not find wholeness in ourselves or our moral achievements, but in the forgiveness and reconciliation of God in Christ. Because of what God has done for us, we cannot see the moral life apart from our relationship to God who gives new life and inspires and directs our service to others.

We have noted that personal morality is at the very heart of who we are. Ethics involves the character of our lives, our convictions about the meaning of life and the commitments we make. Another word Christians use in talking about ethics is *discipleship*—our calling to live in relationship with Jesus as Lord. For Lutheran Christians in particular, the life of faith is marked by repentance and forgiveness and trust in a merciful God. If we start with these fundamentals, where do they lead us in our moral life—in our decision making? What kind of life does the Christian faith produce? What insights does the Lutheran tradition bring to the subject of moral living? These are the questions we will look at in coming sessions.

*How does sin figure into your understanding of the moral life?*

*How does God's forgiveness shape the Christian moral life?*



## SESSION TWO: LUTHERANS AND THE MORAL LIFE

### Questions for Discussion

Session Two Small Group Questions and Activities are printed on page 25

### Practices that Nurture Discipleship

Martha Stortz, a Lutheran who teaches ethics, observes that in the past, Lutherans have drawn their ethics from doctrine or the teachings of the faith. While that foundation is appropriate, she believes it might also be helpful to look at “practices” in the life of the church as ways that shape individual moral life.<sup>1</sup> These practices are ways that we are formed into the Christian life and are taught to trust the promises of God as followers of Christ.

But what practices might these be? Martin Luther noted three activities or practices as particularly important for shaping the Christian life: worship, instruction in the catechism and individual prayer. Let’s look at each of these, beginning with prayer.

**Prayer:** In recalling how Luther taught prayer, Stortz finds the shape of a distinctively Lutheran discipleship that can be described with the following terms:

- *Responsiveness:* In prayer, we listen as well as speak. We believe that God constantly addresses us in Word and Sacrament and in the events of life, and we are called to respond.
- *Gratitude:* Whatever we face in life, thanksgiving and praise fill the life of faith.
- *Modesty:* We recognize our sinfulness and the constant need to come to God for forgiveness.
- *Joy:* We affirm that God gives what God commands. We rejoice because the final verdict on our lives is not based on our own performance, but on the grace of God.

**Worship:** Certainly worship, lying at the heart of the Lutheran community, is one of the ways that we are shaped as disciples. Many elements come together in worship to teach, guide, instruct, and shape us: prayer, confession and absolution, singing hymns, reading the Word and listening to the sermon. The Sacraments—Baptism and the Lord’s Supper—bestow God’s gifts of forgiveness and new life in and through common means (water, bread, wine), a living reminder that we in turn are called to share with those in need.

**Instruction:** In worship, in formal classes and in informal settings, Lutherans teach the faith. Luther considered instruction to be an important part of the worship service. There we hear again and again the stories from the Old and New Testaments and what they mean for our own lives. The sermon applies the Word to our lives, and the Creeds enrich and deepen the faith of the believer. The struggle to connect the traditions of the faith and the Word with today’s world may happen in the variety of learning experiences in the congregation. Questions about what it means to live the Christian life in a changing and complex world are an important part of our gatherings to read and study the Word.

When we talk about discipleship and living the faith, our basic concern should be with who we are as persons of faith. We focus on who we are as disciples and what it means to grow in faith, not only on learning to do the right thing at the right time. Jesus said that a good tree brings forth good fruit (Luke 6:43-45). Luther liked this image as a picture of the Christian life: the person of faith is faithful, producing good works like a tree produces fruit. For Lutherans, the basic question of ethics is, “Who am I in light of what God has done for me in Jesus Christ?” From the answer to that question, we move on to address what we should do as we live out our relationship to God in Christ.

Lutherans generally recognize that our Christian identity does not mean that we will all agree on the proper answer to every ethical question. We tend to reject any attempt to make a “rule book” that covers every moral situation we may face. Some find the Lutheran reluctance to set a code of behavior frustrating, but we believe that the answer to the question, “What is right in this situation?” is firmly grounded in the answer to the “Who am I?” question. Particularly for situations that are morally complicated, the fact that we share the Christian faith does not

*Many people do not associate prayer, worship and instruction with the moral life.*

*How would you prefer to make the connections?*

## A Lutheran Perspective on Ethics

guarantee that we will all make the same decision. We need to listen carefully to other Christians and to the moral tradition of our church, but the answer to what we ought to do must genuinely be our own as persons of faith and conscience.

### The Lutheran Ethos

*Ethos* refers to the values, beliefs, and customs shared by members of a community. All churches are part of the body of Christ, and therefore share a common ethos as Christian communities of worship and prayer. Yet every church (or denomination, as we say in the United States) has a distinctive ethos in light of its own particular history. What sets the ethos of a Lutheran community apart from others? Certainly the Lutheran emphasis on grace that makes us suspicious of any kind of legalism is a prominent part of a Lutheran ethos. Lutherans also have a healthy sense of realism concerning human nature—we are sinners who can do nothing but depend on God’s grace as the only answer to our predicament. Other features we might mention:

**Freedom:** For Lutherans, freedom differs from what our culture tends to claim it is. The freedom given by God is not the individualism that encourages people selfishly to “do their own thing.” Freedom is a gift rooted in the forgiveness of sins. That freedom releases us from the bond and burdens of our sinful past and gives promise to our future. It is the freedom we experience in new and fresh beginnings, repeated again and again throughout our lives in repentance and forgiveness. The gratitude and thanksgiving that emerges from the forgiven and renewed life impels us to recognize our neighbor as a fellow sinner whom we can love and serve in the name of Christ.

**Order:** Lutherans also believe that order and boundaries are necessary for people to live together. Luther identified three social orders in his own day: economic, political and religious. Living in each of these God-given contexts means taking up responsibilities that order and preserve society. Luther said it is easy to change society, but difficult to improve it. This realistic understanding continues to affect the way Lutherans look at the world. Lutherans tend to regard calls for quick and radical social change suspiciously. They might advocate revolution as a way of gaining justice, but only when all peaceful means have failed.

**Word-Centered Spirituality:** There is a growing interest in the Christian community in nurturing faith through cultivation of the inner life. What we refer to these days as spirituality used to be called “devotional life” by Lutherans, with emphasis on prayer and reading the Bible, as well as other devotional works. Rather than advocating the “contemplative life,” with lengthy withdrawals for prayer and meditation, Lutherans find renewal in hearing and responding to God’s Word in the means of grace. The Word, we believe, also addresses us in the events of everyday life and particularly in the lives of others. While a vital prayer life is clearly important, Lutheran spirituality turns one toward daily, ethical living and tending to the needs of others.

Lutherans emphasize an outward-directed spirituality partly because of the dangers of an emphasis on the inner life. An internal spirituality can quickly lead to a kind of spiritual pulse-taking and monitoring progress as a disciple of Christ. When spiritual exercises are treated as requirements for the Christian life, they become their own kind of works righteousness.

Lutherans also maintain an outward directed spirituality because of their understanding of vocation. Luther’s emphasis on our calling or vocation turns our attention from self to others. Luther insisted that the spiritual activities of monks secluded in cloisters or of priests were not holier or “higher” in the sight of God than the daily callings of other Christians. Indeed, he said the cleaning woman in her vocation serves God as much as any number of monks or priests.

*What do you think about the Lutheran concern to focus on who we are before asking what we should do?*

*When do you think a person is free?  
What does forgiveness have to do with freedom?*

*Do you think it is a good thing that the Lutheran ethos generally has a strong sense of order and boundaries?  
What possible weaknesses might there be in this position?*

*How would you describe your own spirituality?*

*Are you “at home” with the description of Lutheran spirituality here? Why or why not?*

*Do you think your congregation is a genuine “community of moral deliberation?”*

*What can be done to make it more effective in that role?*

Luther fundamentally changed the understanding of good works in the Christian life. Rather than seeing the good things one does as an offering to God to aid one’s salvation, Luther believed that good works are a response to God’s grace, an expression of God’s love for us. This understanding turns us from attempts to “please God” to ways to become instruments in God’s hands as we seek to be a blessing to our neighbor. The cultivation of the inner life for Lutherans is of little value if it is not the servant of good works.

### **Talking about Moral Issues in the Church**

One of the ways a congregation can nurture discipleship is to become a place where Christians can discuss the hard issues of personal and social life. In fact, Lutheran congregations have been urged to become “communities of moral deliberation.”<sup>2</sup> The congregation should be a safe place for Christians to speak freely about the moral challenges we face. This kind of discussion is both helpful and necessary since it allows us to learn from others and support each other in our efforts to live the Christian life.

Of course, being a community of moral deliberation is not easy. We may want our congregations to be like happy families with as little discord as possible. Because we feel deeply about political and economic issues and can find ourselves in serious disagreement over them, we just might be tempted not to bring them up. A better answer is to create an environment in which we can listen to and respect each other—even as we tackle difficult issues. As we discuss, we can recognize that any disagreements we have are nothing compared to our unity in Christ. In the Lutheran church, no one dictates the positions we should take as we relate faith to social issues. The church does, however, offer statements and study documents that can help us work through controversial issues.<sup>3</sup> Congregations can use these materials profitably in classes and study groups.



## SESSION THREE: THE LAW THAT JUDGES THE SINNER

### The Law in Many Forms

In Scripture and in Lutheran tradition, the Law has many meanings. Let's look at some of them.

**The Ten Commandments:** The Decalogue (Exodus 20) expresses God's sovereign rule and follows upon God's deliverance of the people of Israel from bondage in Egypt. The first three Commandments focus on our relationship to God. The others—the "second table of the Law"—have to do with our relationship to others. Most Commandments use negative language: "You shall not"—murder, steal, commit adultery, and so forth. They set boundaries in human relations and keep us responsible in those relations. The Commandments also can be seen positively. Jesus understands the Law as calling us to a loving relationship with God and others (Matthew 22:35-40). Luther gives a positive interpretation of the Commandments in the *Small Catechism*, where he explains God's Law as a call to do good as well as to avoid evil. The Commandments both prohibit what is wrong and encourage healthy relationships for the sake of others and the welfare of the community.

**The Law of Creation:** In the Lutheran understanding of creation, God, in bringing things into being, establishes demands that hold humankind responsible for creation. We come up against these demands in what we have called the "orders" of life. These orders are the web of relationships in which each of us stands as a member of society. One who is married or is a parent, for example, lives in relationship to certain people and carries obligations that come from those relationships. Our roles in life, as ethicist Robert Benne notes, are "places of responsibility" because they put certain demands on us.<sup>4</sup> Lutherans believe that these demands are rooted in the will of God and both encourage and require the responsible life. Luther saw the Ten Commandments as a helpful expression of what the law of creation expects of us.

Luther understood the orders of creation (see session 2) in a threefold division of society: family, state, and church. Recent ethicists have expanded this description to include marriage and family life, work, public life (citizenship and voluntary associations), and church.<sup>5</sup> We all live within these orders and experience the moral demands that each lays upon us. While love and a sense of responsibility relate to all of our relationships, certain virtues are particularly important for each of the orders in which we live. For example, marriage and family demand faithfulness, our work place demands honesty, citizenship requires a sense of responsibility for the common good, and the church calls us to a life of faith, hope, and love.

**Civil Law/Spiritual Law:** Lutherans also speak of God's different "uses" of the Law. One is the civil or governing use of the Law. This use is expressed in the laws of society that keep order and enable society to work effectively. To that end, the law demands obedience and administers penalties to law breakers. God also uses the Law in a spiritual or theological way to address the very heart of human existence. This happens when God's Law confronts the individual with judgment and condemnation. As condemned sinners, we are brought to our knees before God. Used in this way, the Law is like a mirror that shows us our sinfulness and our need for forgiveness—the necessary prelude to hearing the good news of Jesus Christ.

### Justice in a Changing Society

From the above, we see that Lutherans understand the Law to be more than a set of rules or commandments. The Law also refers to the demands that God through life itself places upon us. As a society, our task is to mirror accurately God's law of creation in the laws that we enact. Laws, then, should be just and fair. Just as we stand before God as

Questions for Discussion  
Session Three  
Small Group  
Questions and  
Activities are  
printed on page 26

*How do the Ten Commandments function in your life?*

*Give an example of what they mean for your daily life.*

*Think about your own roles and the obligations or responsibilities you have because of those roles.*

*Do you see God working through your roles? If so, how?*

*In your community, or in the larger society, what current laws or applications of laws do you consider unjust or unfair?*

*How can you work to change those laws?*



What current issues seem to you to be the most pressing for Christians to deal with? Why?

How do you think Christians should respond to these issues?

individuals, so the laws of a society stand under God's judgment. When they are not just or are not administered fairly, we have an obligation to change them or even resist them. This is so because we are all equal under the law as children of God.<sup>6</sup>

Lutherans have been accused of having too fixed or static a notion of society, mainly because some Lutherans have identified certain social arrangements too closely with God's orders of creation. Society, of course, does not stay fixed. History is a story of change that affects the social order for good or bad. Industrialization and the development of technology, for example, have profoundly affected the social order and raised many new ethical issues. Many societal problems today have been created by dramatic changes: for example, in the areas of family life, the status of women, the nature of work, weapons of warfare, conditions surrounding terminal illness, and the understanding of human rights. The orders of creation are constantly evolving, which means that Christians must continue to ask, "What is God up to in the developments of our time?" This question requires great wisdom and discernment as we seek responsible answers to the issues we face.

### Contrasting Law and Gospel in the Christian Life

Lutherans tend to stress the negative function of the Law. In the words of Luther's co-worker, Philip Melancthon, "The Law always accuses." As such, the Law stands as the very opposite of the Gospel—the good news of God's acceptance of the sinner apart from the Law. The Law may also become a means by which we attempt to justify ourselves before God and others. We use it in this way when we keep the Law as a ladder to climb up to heaven. Each rung is a good work bringing us closer to God. Any positive use of the Law in the Christian life—a subject we will look at more closely in the next session—tends to make Lutherans suspicious because such practices can easily lead to a misuse of God's Law.

Our understanding of the Law comes from the Apostle Paul, who fills his writings with the stark contrast between Law and Gospel. For example, in his letter to the Galatians, he draws a sharp distinction between Gospel and Law, grace and works, freedom and bondage, and between life in the Spirit and life dominated by the flesh. Paul makes clear that the life marked by trust in the God of the Gospel is radically different from the life lived under the Law. When the Gospel enters our life, we no longer need to be good in order to justify ourselves. God comes to us in Christ and makes us whole. The moral life for Paul is not the story of our obedience to the Law but the story of living out our repentance, forgiveness and trust—the new life given "in Christ." Life in Christ demonstrates the "fruit of the spirit" as we respond to God's grace with a life marked by love and other important virtues (Galatians 5:22-23).

How would you describe life "in Christ?"

How is that different from life under the Law?

Luther picks up Paul's description of the Christian life. For both Paul and Luther, the Christian life centers on our relationship to Jesus Christ. God's gift in Christ is the event that makes Christian discipleship and Christian ethics possible at all. The Law is still necessary because we remain caught in sin and subject to the judgment of the Law. But to get at the unique character of Christian ethics, we speak of Gospel rather than Law. That Gospel gives us the positive moral vision that identifies the Christian life.

What does this mean for the Christian life as Lutherans understand it? In the last session, we looked at Luther's concept of "calling." Our calling is our response to God within our places of responsibility—our stations or roles in life. Gospel ethics means that in response to God's grace, we seek to bring a spirit of neighbor-love to all that we do. In session one, we noted the character of this love is defined in the Greek word *agape*: the self-giving or unselfish love that intends to do what best serves the welfare of others. This spirit of love is a powerful force for change in human relationships, reconciling the alienated, and opening people to one another with attitudes and actions that seek the welfare of their neighbor.

## A Lutheran Perspective on Ethics

Another way of expressing the unique character of Christian ethics is to speak of the “theology of the cross.”<sup>7</sup> This expression comes from Luther and is one way of thinking about the truth of the biblical message and its implications for the Christian life. The cross of Christ defines the message of the Gospel and the lives of those who believe in the Gospel. The cross becomes the model for Christian discipleship—a discipleship rooted in the power of love and committed to reconciliation in human relationships. The “cruciform” life follows the example of Jesus Christ. It is a way of life that recognizes the ultimate power of suffering love rather than seeking power over others. The life of the cross also reminds us that we are at the same time sinner and saint, and we continue that struggle throughout our lives. That realization keeps us properly humble. To live the life of the cross is to trust in the God who loves us and who inspires our faithfulness, no matter how vulnerable we may become as we follow Christ’s path.



*What do you think the Gospel means for Christian ethics?*

*How would you describe the meaning of love?*

## SESSION FOUR: THE LAW THAT GUIDES THE BELIEVER

### Questions for Discussion

Session Four Small Group Questions and Activities are printed on page 27

*What is your understanding of the use of the Law in the life of the believer?*

### The Law as Helper

In the last session, you read about two “uses” of the Law in Lutheran teaching—its use in civil government to control evil and keep order, and its theological use in judging the sinful heart. We also noted the emphasis of the Lutheran tradition on this second “accusing” nature of the Law. Is there another more positive use of the Law that has been missing in Lutheran ethics? What about the role of God’s Law in the life of believers after they have heard and received the Good News?

This very question gave rise to a debate during the time of the Reformation. It was a debate over a possible “third use” of the Law in which it functions as a guide and helper for the believer. Here the Law is seen as a gracious gift for the benefit of believers, serving a useful purpose in assisting the believer to remain faithful.

John Calvin (the reformer whose teachings gave rise to many Protestant churches) thought that this third use of the Law was the most important. He taught, and many agreed, that within the life of the believer, the Law did not just condemn or judge, but became a teacher or guide that helped the believer live in a way that was righteous and pleasing to God.

Let’s compare the traditional teachings of the Reformed (Calvinist) and the Lutheran churches on the use of the Law. That comparison will help us better understand the Law’s implications for our lives.

The Reformed tradition tends to emphasize the moral difference (righteousness) of the person who becomes a believer. The Spirit of God is active in the believer’s life, using the Law as teacher and a source of encouragement rather than only a reminder of sin. In this view, Christians live under grace and no longer view the Law principally as accusing them of their sin.

Luther, on the other hand, was convinced that even though we have faith and receive the indwelling of the Spirit, we also remain in the sinful world and must deal with the sinner within us. We are sinner and saint, sinful and justified at the same time. Even though we are forgiven sinners who claim the benefits of Christ’s death on the cross, we do not necessarily exhibit a notable change in the moral quality of our lives.

In other words, Calvin looks for evidence of faith in the transformed behavior of the believer. Moral living demonstrates the grace and forgiveness of God in a Christian’s life. For Luther, the transformation is above all in the reality of being forgiven, not in one’s behavior. For this reason, the dynamic of the Christian life is the daily return to Baptism where we claim God’s promises and receive the forgiveness that means new life within us. Of course, Christians will seek to live according to the will of God, and that is now possible because we are forgiven sinners.

These two views have a differing impact on the Christian life. The Reformed tradition emphasizes more the moral consequences of the Christian life. Lutherans, on the other hand, emphasize the religious qualities of dependence and trust in God. John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* and John Wesley’s teachings that shaped Methodism reflect this Reformed emphasis on moral or righteous living. Lutherans are wary of talk of “progress” and “perfection” in the Christian life. They prefer to speak of “growth in grace” as a way to recognize that we are incapable of creating our own progress, either toward salvation or toward making ourselves “good.”

*Shouldn’t we want to see “progress” in our Christian journey?*

*What are the dangers to which Lutherans are sensitive in avoiding this kind of language?*



### Calvin and Luther on Social Morality

The difference between Calvin and Luther on living the faith is also seen in the way they related to their communities. In Geneva, Switzerland, Calvin thought that the power of the government should be used to create a Christian community and to enforce discipline; gambling, drinking, singing, and dancing were prohibited, and those who refused to obey were banned from the community. In Wittenberg, Germany, Luther thought government should restrain evil and be just, but he did not call on government to create a genuine Christian community. In the United States, the churches in Calvin's Reformed tradition have often been leaders in attempts to change laws and public policies in order to improve social morality. Lutheran churches have usually been more restrained, both in their efforts at public reform and in what they expect from such efforts.

Each of these two approaches has its dangers. One is *legalism*. Legalism is a law-centered way of looking at the moral life. Legalists try to make rules that cover every choice a person might have to make. Their ideal is to do everything right by the letter of the law. Legalism is dangerous because it makes following the law more important than serving the neighbor and because it encourages a judgmental spirit. It also may lead Christians to believe that the life of faith is simply following the rules and keeping the laws in order to please God.

The other danger is *antinomianism* (Latin: anti=against, nomos=law). Antinomianism is so afraid of the dangers of legalism that it fails to see the necessary role of the Law in the Christian life. Antinomians see the Law as the enemy of freedom and so exclude it from the Christian life. Lutherans can fall into the antinomian trap because of their suspicion of any attempt to define the Christian life according to a pattern or set of rules. The result can sound like Lutherans saying: "Don't bother me with laws—I am free under the gospel."

Lutherans come by their appreciation of Christian freedom directly from Luther, who fought a great spiritual struggle to be free from a faith that was defined by obedience to rules rather than reliance on the grace of God. In one of his most significant writings on the Christian life, Luther describes that life in terms of an engaging paradox: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."<sup>8</sup> In this statement, Luther understands that Christians make their moral decisions in the context of the freedom given them in the Gospel. In that freedom, they are able to live obediently and in service to all. This emphasis on freedom—along with an emphasis on the accusing function of the law—means that Lutherans have less to say about how the Law is active in the Christian life. This brings us to a controversial issue in today's Lutheran ethics.

### Reassessing the Lutheran Position on the Law

Some today believe that the Lutheran ethical tradition is in deep trouble. They say that antinomianism is not just a danger; it is alive and destructively active in Lutheran ethics.<sup>9</sup> They argue that the emphasis on the Law as accuser has created too negative an attitude toward the Law. Because of an over concern with legalism and works righteousness, and a failure to see the necessary use of the Law in the Christian life, Lutheran ethics has lost its moral substance. For all practical purposes, they say, all we have left is a vague commandment to love others that can be filled with whatever content we want. The end result, says Lutheran theologian Reinhard Hütter, is a "Protestant-lite" version of ethics that fails the Christian community with its lack of moral direction.<sup>10</sup>

This criticism is also aimed at the understanding of freedom in the church. It argues that freedom is not the opposite of Law, but actually needs the Law in order to be realized in the life of the believer. Freedom is formed and directed by God's Commandments, and results in a

*Do you think Christians are more likely to be legalists or antinomians? For what reasons?*

*Which of the two dangers do you think is the most serious for Lutherans today?*

particular way of life that accepts and follows those Commandments. We Lutherans are so intent on contrasting freedom with the Law that we find ourselves unable to unite freedom with Law. As a result, the argument goes, we are easily seduced by the over-emphasis on individualism in our society that sees freedom as a “freedom from” the Law.

Whether or not we agree with this criticism, the issues raised are important and certainly warrant discussion in the church. Relating Law and Gospel is not simple. The Law as accuser is certainly essential to the sinner seeking forgiveness, but that use of the Law does not exhaust its meaning and function. Saint Paul himself, who tends to contrast the Law as a source of bondage to the freedom of the Gospel, still is able to recognize the Law as teacher in the life of faith (Galatians 3:24). In the Old Testament, the Law (Torah—the Old Testament term for law or instruction) is a source of delight for the Psalmist (Psalms 1:1-2, 19:7-11, 119). The problem is not the Law, but our misuse of the Law, resulting in legalism or moralism that destroys the spirit of grace so essential to life “in Christ.”<sup>11</sup> It is important to stand against the dangers of legalism, but it is also important that we not minimize the function of the Law in the life of the believer. Lutherans are certainly right in placing the Gospel at the core of the Christian life, but they also should recognize that the Law is both necessary and helpful in keeping us responsible, both in our individual and corporate lives.

Another important topic related to Law and Gospel should be mentioned here. It is the distinction we have noted between obedience to the Law and dependence on God’s grace. This distinction, so important to Lutheran ethics, creates tension between our acceptance by God on the basis of grace and forgiveness, and the fact that we are morally accountable for all that we do. Saint Paul recognizes the problem in his letter to the Christians in Rome, where his message of grace seems to have inspired moral irresponsibility: “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” (Romans 6:1-2). For Paul, baptized Christians cannot claim forgiveness without recognizing that their relation to Christ rules out any careless or indifferent attitude toward sin.

Often we hear people today say that we cannot judge a person’s immoral acts because God forgives. But this is to turn a costly act of forgiveness into “cheap grace.” The message of the cross does not remove human responsibility; it is not “a way out” that cancels the significance of what one has done. On the contrary, the cross of Christ should help us to see the seriousness of sin at the same time as it points us to the precious possibilities of repentance and forgiveness.

The problems of contemporary ethics that can arise from soft-pedaling the Law are dramatically illustrated in what has been called “situation ethics.” Joseph Fletcher, author of *Situation Ethics* (1966), was driven by a passion to get rid of legalism in church and society. He taught a radical love ethics in which love (*agape*) is the only absolute. In this understanding, the force of laws as imperatives that set indispensable boundaries to our actions was lost. Laws became “principles” or guidelines that we can use as we see appropriate. The tension between love and law was lost.

Situation ethics may sound appealing, but it fails to appreciate the role of Law in serving the common good. It attempts to reduce the rich tapestry of moral responsibility and accountability, of justice and obligation, to one concept of love. The result is a flattened version of ethics that does not do justice to the importance of Law in establishing moral and legal structures that serve the community’s welfare

*Basing all moral and ethical decisions on love is inadequate.*

*Do you agree?  
Disagree? Why?*

*What do you think about situation ethics?*

## Sanctification

The term *sanctification* is familiar in Lutheran teaching. It literally means “being made holy.” Christian ethics is not the story of our ethical achievements, but the story of our faith in God who makes us “whole.” When we speak of holiness, we refer to what God has made possible through the power of grace and forgiveness in our lives. While Lutherans have talked far more

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about justification than sanctification, it is very important to recognize that the two terms cannot be separated: to be forgiven (justified) is to be made whole (sanctified), which means to live the life made possible by the life-saving act of forgiveness.

Holiness, then, is a relationship with God that results from the practice of faith in the life of the believer. For Lutherans, saintliness is not a goal to be sought after. Instead, faith shapes us into instruments that are put at God's disposal to be used to the glory of God and the service of our fellow human beings. When that purpose is lived out in our lives, we are truly living the Gospel and experiencing a foretaste of the kingdom that is to come.



## SESSION FIVE: MAKING MORAL DECISIONS

### From Convictions to Decision Making

Moral decisions do not happen in a vacuum. People bring their background and experience to every decision. Who we are is the critical factor in what we decide to do in any given situation. Our sense of identity and deeply held moral convictions contribute to our understanding of the situation we face and what we see as possible moral choices. As we consider those choices, we are engaged in a process of *discernment*. This process includes:

- Our reading of the circumstances (What are the facts of the case?);
- Our sense of obligation (Is there an overriding demand to which we must respond?); and
- Our assessment of the best way to carry out the values and principles that seem to apply (How is love of my neighbor best expressed in this case?).

Let's take an example. You are a supervisor in charge of 14 employees. You have the ability to hire and fire. The performance of one employee has gotten so bad that he simply cannot continue on the job. You also have learned that the employee is struggling with real problems at home and those difficulties have been a part of his poor performance. In addition, the worker's financial situation has also suffered and he is deeply in debt. It is your duty to call this worker in and inform him that he is fired. As a Christian, can you be satisfied with simply doing your duty in this case?

Some of the actions you might take are:

- Spend time with the employee, talking through the problems and suggesting ways he might still save his job.
- Make use of any company policy that might be used to help salvage troubled workers.
- Refer the employee to an agency that might be able to help him work through his problems.

Whatever you would decide to do, loving the neighbor calls on us to be imaginative in thinking of ways that the person in need can be served.

In this and almost any other situation, there is seldom a clear rule that covers what should be done. Many of the decisions we have to make can be very challenging personally because they test our ability to live out our faith in love for others. Do we have enough sensitivity to recognize the need of our neighbor? Do we have the strength of will to act on what we discern is needed, especially when it is costly to ourselves?

Other times of discernment involve situations when we are tempted to do the wrong thing. In those cases, both our sense of who we are and our fundamental convictions are important as we seek to fight off the temptation. Successfully resisting temptation always contributes further to our strength of character. The Ten Commandments and other moral principles serve as "ground rules" to keep us on course. But most important is to know ourselves as children of God whose purpose in life would challenge any behavior that is immoral and destructive.

Though laws and rules certainly are important in setting the boundaries for responsible action, the Gospel gives Christians the vision of what positive action might be taken in a given situation. The Gospel also gives us the incentive to do the right thing. Recently, some Christians have expressed a Gospel-centered approach to decision making with the question: "What would Jesus do?" Or as some put it: WWJD? The question is worth thinking about and can be helpful when we face a difficult decision. But this kind of "sloganeering" can also make the process of making moral decisions appear superficial and overly simple. It can encourage the idea that anyone who "knows" Jesus will know what to do in every circumstance. It might also foster the idea that there is one simple answer to every moral dilemma we encounter.

#### Questions for Discussion

Session Five Small Group Questions and Activities are printed on page 27

*What other actions might you take?*

*What do you think a supervisor should do?*

*How do you deal with temptation?*

*What do God's commands and God's love for you have to do with the struggle you face?*

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Actually, the moral choices we face are often complex, and a clear and obvious solution may escape us. Sometimes the best decision is choosing the lesser of two evils. Because we live in a sinful world, we face situations where the best we can do will compromise our moral convictions. Luther's oft-quoted advice for these situations is to "sin boldly!"—which means to do the best we can with the confidence that God forgives.

Some have suggested a better reading of WWJD is "Walking with Jesus daily." Living the Christian life does not consist of finding simple answers, but of remembering "who and whose we are." St. Paul emphasizes this point (2 Corinthians 5:17-21, Ephesians 1:3-8) and brings out a twofold truth: first, our righteousness before God is not what we achieve through living the moral life, but it is what we who are sinners claim through God's forgiveness in Christ. Second, our life is lived in relationship to Jesus and is marked by trust and a desire to be faithful. We do not aim to be morally perfect, but to be as trustworthy disciples as possible.

### The Role of the Bible

How does the Bible help us in moral decision-making? Christians give different answers to this question. Some think of the Bible as a kind of moral code book, a complete source of instructions about living. These people often see the Bible as "inerrant"—perfect in every detail because it is God's book. They give little or no attention to the human side of Scripture and how it is rooted in ancient history. These Christians read the Bible without asking about what lies behind the text or the historical situation in which the text originated. Lutherans disagree with this approach to Scripture because it remains on the surface level. We draw upon a long tradition of biblical scholarship that takes seriously the original setting and meaning of the text.

The Lutheran understanding of the Bible as the written form of God's Word appreciates its historical character. The Bible has not been dropped from heaven apart from an historical setting. Therefore, to read the Bible responsibly, we need to interpret its contents for our own time. This does not mean that only scholars can understand or apply the Word, nor does it mean we must insist on finding the one and only perfect interpretation for each biblical passage. But it does mean that the Bible deserves serious study. We must first understand what the words of Paul or Jesus meant to the people of their day before we can appreciate what they are saying to us.

Another reason why the Bible does not function well as a moral handbook is because it contains such a variety of ethical material. This variety includes moral codes for the people of Israel, stories from Israel's history that often contain a moral truth, moral wisdom adopted from other cultures (most notably the Proverbs), and the teachings of Jesus and Saint Paul. With this diversity, there is no easy formula for applying the moral commands one finds in Scripture. For example, some Christians claim they know what the Bible says about the death penalty. They cite verses like Exodus 21:22-25 (the law of retribution) and Romans 13:1-4 (the right of the government to "bear the sword" in punishment). But other Christians appeal to different verses, including John 8:3-11 (where Jesus refuses to condemn the woman subject to execution for adultery), and come to the exact opposite conclusion. Throughout history, Christians have taken opposing positions on many issues, all of them claiming support from Scripture.

What does all this mean for the use of the Bible as a help in making moral choices? Because we Lutherans believe the Bible is the Word of God, we approach it expectantly and with reverence. We want to *listen* to what God says to us in Scripture, but what we hear will always involve our interpretation of the text. This means that we can and do come up with differing conclusions on what the Bible is saying to us. Rather than to see the Bible as a book of answers to difficult moral questions, Lutherans—along with many other Christians—tend to

*What is your impression of WWJD?  
Is it helpful?  
Why or why not?*

*How do you respond to Luther's advice about sinning boldly?*

*Do you look to the Bible for guidance in making moral decisions? If so, how?*

*What role should the Bible play for Christians in moral decisions?*

*What other examples of opposing conclusions from Scripture do you know?*

*What lies at the heart of such differences?*



*Are there certain passages from the Bible that have had a particular impact on your life of discipleship? What are they and how have they affected you?*

see the Bible as a book through which the Spirit brings nurture and growth in the life of faith.<sup>12</sup> As the church seeks to equip its members for Christian living, it uses the Bible as an important teaching tool. It gives us the Ten Commandments, stories of moral heroism (Joseph and Potiphar's wife), of moral accountability (the prophet Nathan and King David), of loyalty under pressure (Ruth and Naomi), and parables that judge self-righteousness (the Pharisee and the tax collector) and exalt love and reconciliation (the prodigal son). We hear and learn these stories from childhood. They all are part of the church's message that inspires and directs our life toward Gospel-motivated works of love and a sense of responsibility toward the neighbor.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Conscience as Moral Guide**

Talk of the moral life often brings us to the question of conscience. What role does our conscience play in Christian ethics? Though there is no official Lutheran position on the conscience, most Lutheran ethicists would recognize its importance and relate it to our being created in the image of God. The word "conscience" expresses our human experience that we are moral beings who are able to recognize right and wrong. In the New Testament, it is used in both a negative and positive way. Our conscience judges us when we do wrong, but it also affirms us when we have done what is right (Acts 23:1, Romans 2:14-16, 1 Corinthians 8:7). But Paul's reference to "weak" Christians in Corinth, whose conscience will not allow them to eat food that has been offered to idols, indicates that the conscience is formed by one's particular experience and is not necessarily a reliable guide for everyone else.

*Do you think your conscience is a reliable guide for action? Why or why not?*

Sometimes conscience has been seen as the "voice from God" telling us what to do, or more often, what not to do in a given situation. This is not helpful because it means our conscience is an absolutely reliable guide for making moral decisions. In fact, our conscience is never free from being manipulated by less than pure motives. It is better to see our conscience as formed by the values of the community in which we live. If this is the case, then it is all the more important for the church to help shape the conscience and character of its people by lifting up the biblical ideals of love and justice. As Christians, our conscience should reflect who we are as members of the church and followers of Jesus Christ.<sup>14</sup>



## SESSION SIX: THE LUTHERAN CHURCH IN SOCIETY

### The Two Kingdoms

A major theme in Paul's letters is that Christians, as sinful and redeemed people, live under the rule of both Adam and Christ (Romans 5). While we all share in Adam's fall, the "new Adam"—Jesus Christ—has begun his reign, and we look forward to the end times when the rule of Christ will be complete. In his treatise, *Secular Authority: To What Extent It Ought to be Obeyed* (1523), Martin Luther relates the concept of the two ages (the present age and the age of Christ's rule now and in the future) to what he calls "the kingdom of the world" and the "kingdom of God." It was Luther's way of understanding how Christians relate to the two realms of life—the one under the rule of God's Law and the other under the Gospel. This teaching of Luther has become known as the "two-kingdom teaching," or better expressed for today, the "two-realm" or "twofold rule" of God.

The two realms are not identical to the state and the church. The one realm includes the whole of the secular (which means "this age") world: politics, commerce, culture and so forth. The other is the realm of faith where the Gospel is proclaimed and the Spirit carries out God's redemptive work. In the realm of the world, the force of law is necessary to establish peace and order. In the realm of faith, the Gospel rules by gentle persuasion and the faithful pursue the godly life. This twofold understanding emphasizes distinctions and contrasts between the realms. Yet, there is no absolute dividing line between them, since both are part of the one God's rule. The church as an institution is subject to law, and in that respect is a part of the secular realm. Christians live daily under God's rule in both realms.

Remembering the world in which Luther lived helps us understand the two-realms teaching. At Luther's time, the church exercised a great deal of political power. In fact, Luther reacted against the attempts of the church to go beyond its mission and to wield political influence. His own conflict with the church included the church's attempts to dictate to the princes who were protecting Luther. Luther insisted that the government was not subject to the church. He believed that the government needed to be independent of the church in order to carry out its God-given responsibilities. He called the government the "left hand" rule of God, in contrast to God's "right hand" rule in the realm of redemption.

While Luther thought that government should be independent of the church, he also placed limits on government. The government has no business entering into the realm of the Gospel and attempting to tell the church what it should preach or teach or what the faithful should believe. Of course, Luther lived in a time that was politically and religiously far different from our own. Not everything he believed about the relation of church and government applies today. Our convictions reflect the modern development of democratic institutions in a society that is far more tolerant of differences in attitudes, cultures and beliefs. Still, the distinctions between the two realms connect with the Constitution of the United States with its guarantee of religious freedom and its prohibition of a state-sponsored religion. Both sources distinguish between church and state, and limit each in order to preserve the integrity of each institution.

### Past and Current Views

Unfortunately, Lutherans sometimes have taught the two realms in ways that have had negative effects. Particularly in the nineteenth century, many Lutherans thought the church should turn its back on the public world and tend only to the spiritual life and matters of salvation. In contrast to Luther, they often saw God as absent from the world of politics and commerce. Because government was ordained by God, they tended to see their vocation in the world as nothing other than being dutiful and obedient citizens. This stance, along with other social and

#### Questions for Discussion

Session Six Small Group Questions and Activities are printed on page 28

*Do you think the two-realm teaching makes a valid point?*

*What possible weaknesses do you see in it?*

*Do you see evidence of this Lutheran heritage in present-day attitudes in our church?*

*What should be the attitude of the church and Christians toward public life?*

*Give some examples of interaction between church and state.*

*Is that interaction beneficial to both? Why or why not?*

cultural factors, contributed to fateful consequences in Nazi Germany. Despite exceptions like Dietrich Bonhoeffer,<sup>15</sup> Lutherans generally failed to take an active role in resisting the Nazis. Partly in reaction to this history, Lutherans in the latter twentieth century have interpreted the two-realm teaching in a way that encourages critical participation of the church and the Christian citizen in public life.

Lutheran ethicists today continue to debate the truth and value of the two-realm teaching. Some believe it has little useful purpose. They believe it encourages a kind of compartmentalized thinking that identifies God with religious concerns and excludes God from the realm of public life. Others emphasize its connection with the “two age” teaching of Saint Paul. Paul often contrasts “this age” and “the age to come.” This view understands the distinction between the two realms in terms of time, and does not attempt to define society according to realms of Law and Gospel.<sup>16</sup> Others see the teaching’s value as a way of drawing boundaries that can help preserve the integrity of religious life in a secular society. In this view, concepts like the “kingdom of God” can bring out the broader, positive vision that Christians bring to history, while two-realm thinking provides a strategy for Christians to be responsibly engaged with society.

As Lutherans deal with the relationship of church and state today, some speak of “institutional separation and functional interaction.” This language recognizes that there is no simple, hard dividing line between church and state. Rather, the two should work together in areas of mutual concern. This approach differs from those who see a “wall of separation” between the two, which can isolate the church from the public world. The image of a wall may help protect the church from interference by the government, but it can also function as a barrier to fruitful interaction between them.

### **The Church in Public Life**

We live in a pluralist society. Christian churches no longer are the exclusive religious presence. For example, there are more Muslims in the United States than the two million Episcopalians. And it may not be long before there will be more Muslims than the five million ELCA Lutherans. Living in a democratic society requires that we be tolerant of other religious communities. Indeed, we must not only tolerate them, we must also be willing to respect them and work with them in matters of mutual concern. While church and state relationships in the past were never easy, they are even more complex today.<sup>17</sup>

In the United States, religious organizations are “free churches” or denominations. That is, they are not established by law. All enjoy equal standing under the law; none are given preferred status by the government. Moreover, the state is to protect the freedom of churches and religious groups to carry out their religious activities. While these basic truths form a framework for church-state relations, there are still many areas of conflict where each will encounter opposition from the other. For example, the government may find it difficult to accommodate the religious practices of different religious bodies—the practice of polygamy among Mormons and the use of the peyote plant among some American Indians come to mind. Another controversial area concerns religious practices in public places and at public events, such as prayers in the classroom, manger scenes on public grounds, the posting of the Ten Commandments in school buildings, and the like. Churches themselves disagree on the appropriateness of many of these practices.

What stand should Lutherans take on these matters? The Lutheran heritage leads us to avoid an extreme position from either side of the issue. On the one hand, we resist efforts to deny or ignore the significance of the Christian heritage in this nation’s history, or to deny the importance of religion to the general welfare of society. On the other hand, our heritage resists attempts to “Christianize” society through laws intended to further the message and mission of the church. We expect



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that our voice be heard in a fair and open society, but we oppose efforts by Christian groups to control political parties or local school boards for religious purposes.

### **Justice and the Kingdom of God**

Lutherans are not interested in using the heavy hand of politics to achieve religious purposes. What, then, should be the goal of the church's involvement in public life? Lutherans respond with the word *justice*. We have noted that the word *agape* (the love that seeks the welfare of others) is at the core of Christian ethics. The realm of public life, however, is a corporate world organized around the self-interests of competing groups, and they have to be balanced in a way that works for the common good. In a world that emphasizes power and the ability to gain both wealth and control, justice becomes a primary goal. That goal also fits with Lutheranism's two-realm teaching with its concern for the role of law in the world of institutions. This does not mean that love has no place in a world of law, for it often creates concern for justice and brings mercy and compassion into a competitive world. Love tempers justice with mercy, and is always a humanizing influence, even in the world of politics and commerce. Nonetheless, law and justice remain the common coin of public life.

Christian faith brings a unique vision to human life. We believe that all of history—past, present and future—has its final destiny in what Jesus called the “kingdom of God.” That phrase turns us not only to Jesus as Redeemer and Lord, but directs us to the future and the ultimate end and goal of human history. That goal will not be met by human effort. We will not establish the kingdom by placing all government under the rule of the church. Instead the coming kingdom points to transcendent hope, rooted in God. It gives us a vision that inspires every effort, both individually and as the church, in working for greater justice in society and the realization of a more peaceful community. We trust that whatever happens, we will not be forsaken because we are confident that God governs both now and in the future, and we are confident that God will bring all things to completion in God's good time. Our faith provides a tremendous “staying power” that should enable us to persist in the struggle for justice, even in situations that appear to be hopeless. So we may approach the future in hope—a hope that inspires confidence to meet every challenge of life, moral or otherwise, with the conviction that “in everything God works for good with those who love God” (Romans 8:28).

*Are there controversial issues in your community on the relation of religion and government?*

*How might they be resolved?*



## GUIDES FOR LEADERS

As leader, you play an important role in this study. You will be responsible to plan the sessions, make sure resources are available to participants, guide the discussion in order to cover the material, encourage participation by all, help summarize learning, and help to carry through on any possible actions that may arise from your study. You do not need to be a pastor or church professional to lead this study—but some previous study of ethical issues would be helpful.

### Audience

The study is meant to help people in congregations to gain more understanding and insight into the moral life, and to see what this means for deciding moral or ethical questions. In order to accomplish that task, groups of individuals in congregations need to come together to study the subject and to think through its implications for their own lives and that of the congregation. Any group of youth and/or adults in the congregation would benefit from this study. It may prove particularly stimulating for leadership groups in the congregation—church councils, elected committees and task forces, and others.

### Preparation

- Be sure you have a copy of this guide for each participant. Making these available before your first session and encouraging all to read through the guide ahead of time can enrich your discussion.
- You might assign one person to lead opening and closing prayers or worship.
- You might assign a session to individual participants (or participants working in pairs). Encourage participants to become as familiar as possible with the material they have been assigned. They might do additional research on the ideas in the session—especially using *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics* as background. They might write or summarize their discoveries in their own words, interview people in the congregation about the ethical issues raised in the session, write discussion questions relating to the session, or bring someone to class who is an “expert” in the area that the session covers.
- Invite the pastor, congregational leaders, or others who could enrich your discussion, especially during specific sessions.
- Be sure to include some who have a long history in the Lutheran church or in your congregation. Their memories can enrich your discussion.

### Purpose of Your Study

The goal of your study should be three-fold:

1. To help those who study understand how Lutherans approach living the Christian faith;
2. To help those who study think through their own understanding of, appreciation of, and use of Lutheran theology and ethics; and
3. To help those who study be able to apply a Lutheran perspective on ethics to personal and community discussions and decisions on important moral and ethical issues.

### SESSION PLANS

The study is divided into six sessions or sections. You will first want to read over the whole study guide and mark those important insights and issues. Your choices will help you plan how to go about your study.

You might give copies of the study to those who will attend your sessions. Ask them to read through the entire session’s material before your first session. Suggest that as they read they mark those insights and ideas that they find most important. At your first session, list all of the issues that have caught the interest or concern of participants. Make it a point then to read through and discuss all of these during your sessions together. You may well need more than one time period to discuss a session, so plan how long you will be meeting to study this booklet.

### Doing a Session

You might follow this pattern for each of your study sessions:

#### **Begin with Prayer**

##### **Read**

Read through sections of the session one at a time. You might read them aloud or ask those who may have read them ahead of time to summarize the material and supply whatever background they have been able to discover. Note questions or comments that come from participants as you read.

##### **Reflect**

The questions for each session under “Getting Started” in “Small Group Session Questions and Activities” (page 24) as well as the ones in the margins are meant to stimulate discussion. You will find some more helpful than others; use them as you see fit, and be sure to let participants raise questions as you discuss and think through each of the sections. Ask participants to share what comes to mind from their own experience that fits with the insights of the section. Encourage them to tell personal stories of how they were involved in the issues raised. The purpose of this activity is to help participants reflect on the insights from the study in terms of their own faith life and practice. Take time to deal with questions or concerns that may remain for some participants.

##### **Applying the Learning**

This material is not intended to take the place of questions and discussion prompted by the text. Use it as you have time and as it proves helpful to participants in understanding and applying what they have learned.

##### **To Do this Week**

Encourage them to do some of the suggested activities in “Small Group Session Questions and Activities” during the week. Begin your next session by encouraging participants to share their learning and discoveries as they did the activities.

##### **Evaluate**

After your discussion, toward the end of your session, be sure to think through the implications of what you have learned for the life of your congregation. For example, you might talk about what how you make important decisions in your congregation. Or you might think through how important or controversial issues might be dealt with more effectively.

##### **Vision**

You might end each session with a time for participants to project into the future what some of your learning might mean for the life of the congregation or their own lives. Encourage them to be as specific as possible.

##### **Close with Prayer or Worship**

## SMALL GROUP SESSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

“Getting Started” is for use at the beginning of a session, and the rest of the material is for use after having studied the text. In most cases, the ideas for discussion under “Applying the Learning” could be “role played.” There should be no attempt to do all of the discussions. These should be used to bring together the participants’ learning from the session.

### Session One: Matters of Morality

#### Getting Started

If you mention the words *ethics* and *morality*, you are likely to get mixed responses:

“Ethics? Isn’t that just the way some people justify what they are doing?”

“I’m confused about moral standards; from what I’ve learned, what’s right in one culture may be wrong in another.”

“The Ten Commandments are all the guidance I need. My ethics are God’s ethics.”

“Ethics and morality are vital. We need more emphasis on them in home and school.”

What do you think of when you hear the word *ethics* or *morality*?

#### Applying the Learning

Discuss one or more of the following:

1. A small, suburban congregation seeks to grow. Two “plans” or approaches to growth emerge in the discussion:
  - In this world of consumers, we must “market” the church, just like you market any business. We have to tell people the benefits of belonging, offer the kinds of activities that they seek and give them what they want. And that will make us grow.
  - The purpose of the church is to call people away from the world to discipleship. We invite people into a new kind of life—a life of sacrifice and service. We are not in the business of pleasing people, but bringing people into a relationship with God. Which is the best approach? Why? Is some combination possible? Why or why not?
2. The local government wants to introduce gambling to raise funds for the schools. The leaders of the community want the congregations to support the measure. How should your congregation respond?
3. Some of the local citizens want to organize a group to rid the streets of the gangs of young people that have started to congregate and threaten others. So far no one has been hurt, but there has been much talk of violence. One group talks of demonstrations by citizens and police to intimidate the youth and stricter laws to keep them off the streets. Others want to contact the youth and work with them to put their time and energy into more constructive activities. Which do you support? Why? What does your choice have to do with your understanding of human nature? What does your choice have to do with Christian faith?

#### To Do This Week

1. Assess your own morality and ethics. Where does your sense of right and wrong come from? What does that sense have to do with your parents? Your community? Your church? Your relationship to your God? How does your sense of right and wrong differ from others you know? From the world around you? Bring the results of your reflection to your next session for discussion.
2. Do some research on the terms “ethics” and “morality” at the library or on the Internet. Bring the results of your study to your next session to share.
3. Keep a diary or journal. Every day, write down some of the ethical choices you had to

make. Describe the way you made the choice. What did the choice have to do with your sense of who you are? With your sense of right and wrong? With your relationship to God? Share your journal with another person, if you wish to do so.

### Session Two: Lutherans and the Moral Life

#### Getting Started

Talk about these issues as you begin your session: Because of our emphasis on “right teachings” (the catechism and confessions) and “faith not works,” Lutherans have been accused of not giving enough attention to living the moral life. Do agree? Disagree? Why? If we want to get better at nurturing discipleship (living the faith, living morally), how should we do that? What can congregations do to put a clearer emphasis on moral formation?

#### Applying the Learning

Discuss one or more of the following:

1. You are forming a committee to help shape (or reshape) your congregational emphasis. You want to encourage active discipleship in all members. What congregational activities would be important? How would you involve others in those activities? What would be distinctively Lutheran about your emphases? How would your congregation or the members of your congregation change?
2. The local school has made it a rule that all student athletes must participate in the games that are scheduled on Sunday mornings. From a perspective of the Lutheran understanding of freedom and order, how would you counsel your young people to respond? Should they break the rule? Should they work for change? If so, how?
3. Two directions seem to develop in a congregation’s attempt to encourage discipleship: The “devotional” group: This group seeks to bring people into a more active prayer life, gather for prayers for the community, and develop the practice of personal Bible reading and study. “The place to begin discipleship is in the heart,” they say. The “social action” group: This group affirms the importance of prayer, but seeks to live out their discipleship in the community by meeting the needs of others and acting on behalf of those who are oppressed. “Personal discipleship that does not act for others is useless,” they say. Which group is headed the right direction? Why? How can the two emphases be blended?

#### To Do This Week

1. Interview some members of your congregation. How do prayer, worship and instruction play a part in their life of faith? What seems to be working? What seems to be lacking? Bring the results of your interviews to the next session for discussion.
2. What steps would you take to grow in your faith? What activities would you want to include? How would you find time for them? How would you motivate yourself to keep up the activities? Share your plan with someone else. Make an agreement between the two of you to walk the new discipleship path together.
3. Continue your journal. This week, pay particular attention to your sense of freedom and order as you make choices. Which seems to influence you more? How do you experience freedom? How do you live within God’s order?

## Session Three: The Law the Judges the Sinner

### Getting Started

As you begin, discuss the following:

- A current popular view sees humankind as innately good. What evidence gives support to that view? What evidence challenges it?
- Read the story of the Fall in Genesis 3. What is the nature of the brokenness in human kind? What do we mean when we call it sin?
- What is the benefit of the laws and rules established by God and by human government? What do they have to do with sin?

### Applying the Learning

Discuss one or more of the following:

1. Because of significant problems in the community, a congregation wants to become more involved. Two approaches emerge:
  - Our community is overrun with sinners. We should proclaim God's Law—the limits that God has set in order to encourage people to treat each other justly and to get rid of crime on the streets.
  - Our community is overrun with sinners. We need to proclaim the Gospel to them. It is only the Good News of God's love that will change their hearts.
 Which approach seems best? Why? How might the two be combined?
2. The congregation is dying. Fewer and fewer people attend church or participate. The council talks about the problem and possible solutions:
  - We need to get to these people and explain again to them their responsibilities. We need to “lay down the law.” If they don't want to live as God expects them to live, then we should declare them separate from the church.
  - We need more clearly to proclaim the Gospel to these inactive members. Only the Good News will change their hearts. If they come to believe more fully, they will carry out their responsibilities. Which approach seems best? Why? How might the two be combined?
3. The congregation seeks to grow. Two approaches emerge:
  - We need to tell people the benefits of being a Christian—how God will bless them if they are a part of the church community. We need to let people know that we can supply their needs here and give them the spiritual services they seek in order to have a successful and happy life.
  - We need to call people to a life of service—even suffering. The life of faith is sometimes difficult, sometimes conflicted and often out of step with others. The life of faith finds success only in imitating Jesus Christ. Which approach seems best? Why? What difference does your answer have for the individual disciple? For the congregation?

### To Do this Week

1. Interview several other members of your congregation. Why are they members? What benefit do they receive from the congregation? What does their membership have to do with daily living? How do they live their discipleship?
2. Continue your journal. Be aware of how God's Law affects your daily life this week. What choices do you make out of a sense of responsibility? Which out of a sense of being loved by God? Share your journal with someone else, if you choose to do so.



### Session Four: The Law that Guides the Believer

#### Getting Started

As you begin your session, discuss the following:

- The Ten Commandments are constantly in the mind of the Christians, guiding their choices and helping them overcome temptation. Do you agree? Disagree? Why?
- “Laying down the law” just makes people feel guilty. What we need is to be clearer about the Gospel. Do you agree? Disagree? Why?
- The Gospel does not remove God’s Law, but makes us new creatures so that we may fulfill it. Do you agree? Disagree? Why?

#### Applying the Learning

Look at the following statements. Do you agree? Disagree? Why? What does your answer have to do with your life as a congregation? With your life as a disciple?

1. “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”
2. With the right emphasis on the Law of God, we could shape our community into a place of peace and harmony.
3. Simply telling people what they should and should not do leads to despair and rebellion.
4. The Law is both necessary and helpful in keeping us responsible.
5. It should be possible to tell who is a Christian by their holiness of living.
6. Better to soft-peddle the Law and keep the sinner close enough to hear the Gospel than to offend them by preaching the law too harshly.

#### To Do This Week

1. Write down some guidelines that you see as important for your own sanctification.
2. Interview several others. Ask them to describe their “holiness” in daily life. How do they have a sense of becoming what God wants them to be? How do they make choices that help them on the way? What do their lives in the congregation have to do with their choices? Share your discoveries at your next session.
3. Continue your journal. This week pay attention to your own sense of how the Law of God is guiding you in your daily walk with God. How does the Law lead you toward “holiness.” What does forgiveness have to do with that walk. Share your journal with someone else, if you choose to do so.

### Session Five: Making Moral Decisions

#### Getting Started

As you begin your session, discuss the following:

- How do God’s Law and Gospel affect your daily choices?
- In Romans 12:2, Saint Paul says: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” This verse captures an important part of what it means to be a Christian. What do you understand by the words, “be transformed by the renewal of your minds?”

### Applying the Learning

Talk about how decisions should be made in the following cases. What do God's Word, God's Law, personal responsibility, conscience, and Christian love have to do with the choices?

1. A student's work is clearly failing. Failure has been the student's way of life. He is near becoming a drop-out. What should you as his teacher do?
  2. A man has left his wife and now lives with another woman. He seems troubled and depressed in spite of the change. Clearly seeking, he comes to worship and communion. What should you as pastor and church council do?
  3. A short-cut to a profitable deal involves using "inside information" to make an investment. Everyone is doing it. What should you do?
  4. A former convict and drug user wants the custodian's job at the church. He will be around children and staff. Should you offer the job?
  5. An employee of a large company offers you a special deal on an air conditioner installation. All you have to do is "share" some of the savings with him. What do you do?
  6. The city wants to put a "half-way house" in your neighborhood. What is your reaction?
- Add and discuss other situations of your own.

### To Do This Week

1. Take time to study a portion of the Bible every day. Think about what that text is telling you about God's activity in your life, about God's promises, about God's expectations. How does the study of Scripture affect your daily decisions? Share your discoveries at the next session.
2. Read the daily paper and find stories that illustrate the kinds of choices that Christians have to make in daily life. Bring some of those to your next session and discuss them.
3. Continue your journal. This week pay attention to the difficult ethical or moral choices you have to make. What does God's Word and the Gospel have to do with your choices? Share your journal with someone else, if you choose to do so.

## Session Six: The Lutheran Church in Society

### Getting Started

As you begin your session, discuss the following: Because the church is the community of believers, it is important for the church to take leadership in dealing with the difficult moral questions of the day. Do you agree? Disagree? Why? It is better for the church to teach and equip its members to be agents for change in the world than for its leaders to attempt to influence society? Do you agree? Disagree? Why? The job of the church is to preach the Gospel. Dealing with moral or social issues is not the church's business. Do you agree? Disagree? Why?

### Applying the Learning

1. Discuss one or more of the following:
  - a. Some members of the congregation want to form a "Christian Political Action" group to be active in the local community. This group seeks to fight for the Christian heritage of the community by seeking to establish prayer at public functions and the community celebration of Christian holidays. What is your reaction? What good might come of their action? What harm?
  - b. A number of people in the community still live in poverty. Many of these seem to have had a chance for productive lives but failed to take it. Many don't believe that



there is anything that can be done for them. Certainly the church does not need to be involved, they say. Others want to organize to seek both justice and opportunity for these poor. What is your response?

- c. Some see the future as something to be feared. Certainly there are many things that threaten the future of humankind: overpopulation, global warming, continuing wars and conflicts and much more. Others affirm that even the future really belongs to God and we can look forward in hope. Which do you agree with? Why? How does your view affect your daily choices?
2. Read over this study again and recall your discussions and insights. Revisit your definition of “morality” and “ethics.” How have they changed? Talk about what your study and discussion means for your life and for the life of your congregation.



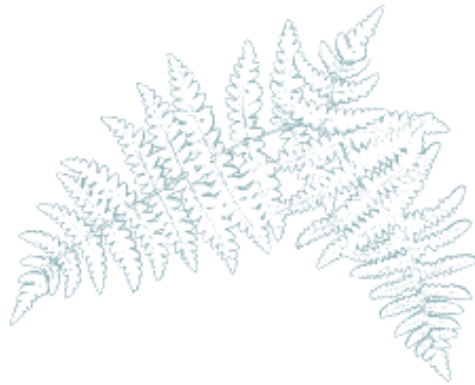
## ENDNOTES

1. *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics* ed. by Karen L. Bloomquist and John R. Stumme (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1998), chapter 4. Stortz also acknowledges that practice and doctrine cannot be separated from each other; practices embody doctrines and doctrines direct practices.
2. See the ELCA social statement, *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective* (1991). New Testament theologian David Fredrickson interprets Saint Paul's understanding of the congregation as a "speaking place" along the lines of the Greek assembly. Its future is dependent on "unhindered conversation" that reaches consensus through persuasion. See *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*, p. 117. See also *Talking Together as Christians about Tough Social Issues* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1999).
3. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has seven social statements: *Abortion* (1991), *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice* (1993), *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective* (1991), *The Death Penalty* (1991), *For Peace in God's World* (1995), *Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture* (1993), and *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All* (1999). It also has nine messages: *AIDS and the Church's Ministry of Caring* (1989), *A Changing Europe: Peace and the Churches* (1990), *Community Violence* (1994), *End-of-Life Decisions* (1992), *Homelessness: A Renewal of Commitment* (1990), *Immigration* (1998), *The Israeli/Palestinian Conflict* (1989), *Sexuality: Some Common Convictions* (1996), and *Suicide Prevention* (1999). These social statements and messages may be ordered through the ELCA Distribution Service at 800-328-4648; single copies are available at no cost by phoning 800-638-3522 ext. 2718. All the social statements and messages, as well as many other resources, are available online at [www.elca.org/dcs/studies.html](http://www.elca.org/dcs/studies.html).
4. See *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*, p. 13.
5. *Ibid*, p. 15.
6. Obvious instances of this in our own society are the laws passed by the white majority that intentionally discriminated against minorities, such as poll taxes that were designed to keep African Americans from exercising their right to vote. In his historic letter to white clergy, written while sitting in a jail in Birmingham, Alabama, Martin Luther King Jr. contrasted such laws with the Law of God that expresses the ideal of justice and fairness.
7. See *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*, p. 17.
8. "The Freedom of a Christian" (1520), quoted in *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*, pp. 40-41.
9. This concern runs throughout chapter 3 by Reinhard Hütter in *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*.
10. *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*, pp. 10, 36.
11. See *Ibid*, p. 149, where authors Rasmussen and Moe-Lobeda note the importance of understanding the third use of the Law not in purely individual terms, but in corporate terms as well, relating moral exhortation and formation to our corporate responsibility for such urgent challenges as creating a sustainable world.
12. See *Ibid*, p. 109, where James M. Childs speaks of "the vital role of the Bible in shaping Christian character individually and as a community."
13. It is important to recognize that when we turn to the Bible, we bring our particular traditions, culture and historical context with us, and that contributes to what we find in the Bible. Lutherans, for example, interpret Scripture from a different heritage than that of the Mennonites, and this influences the way each of these traditions understands Scripture in regard to issues of war and peace. In *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*, chapter 5, Richard J. Perry, Jr. notes that the experience of African Americans leads them understandably to find particular significance in the Old Testament story of the exodus and other stories that lift up "God's liberating acts of freedom."
14. Luther contrasts the conscience of faith with the anxious conscience of people in general, identifying the good conscience with life lived under the cross and resurrection. See *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*, p. 49.
15. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and theologian who became involved in a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. The attempt failed, Bonhoeffer was imprisoned, and shortly before Germany was defeated in 1945, he was executed. His powerful writings and the noble example of his life make him one of the more notable Christian martyrs of the twentieth century.
16. See *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*, pp. 104 ff.
17. See *On Being a Christian and a Citizen: New Lutheran Perspectives on Church and State*, eds. John R. Stumme and Robert W. Tuttle (Minneapolis: Fortress, forthcoming in 2000). This collection of essays was produced by the ELCA's Division for Church in Society.
18. See the social statement, *The Church in Society: A Lutheran Perspective* (1991) and *Policies and Procedures of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America for Addressing Social Concerns* (1998).



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\$1.25

**69-6330**  
ISBN 6-0001-1160-6