CENTER FOR STEWARDSHIP

Leading as God's Steward

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A STEWARDSHIP E-BOOK

A THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION FOR STEWARDSHIP

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The Christian life begins at the baptismal font. God calls and claims his own, Christ's gifts are given, and the Spirit indwells the newly redeemed. In another sense, it is right to say that the Christian life begins even before time when God makes his sovereign choice. Stretching into an infinite future within Christ's eschatological fulfillment, the Christian life is vast and comprehensive. Rightly conceived, the Christian life is simply the description of a child of God living all of life as a child of God. This Christian life has been variously named and understood; terms like discipleship, holy living, Christ-likeness, conformity to God's will, new obedience, and sanctification have been used to capture the reality of the Christian life. Another term that must be added to the list of descriptors of the Christian life is *stewardship*. Some may object that while stewardship may be a part of the Christian life, it hardly captures the whole of it, but such thinking about stewardship is too narrow and ultimately inadequate. Stewardship is a synonym for the life of a Christian who is living rightly within all of his relationships: before God as well as before his fellow creatures. Stewardship is the Christian life and the Christian life is stewardship.

"IN THE BEGINNING..."

Stewardship, more particularly, names the practice of rightly managing or caring for that which belongs to another. This means that a consideration of stewardship must take into account place, purpose, and responsibility in this world. Consequently, any successful attempt to come to a right understanding of stewardship must come to terms with the doctrine of creation. It seems wise then, to begin with the beginning; after all, a prerequisite for a solid understanding of stewardship is a solid understanding of creation. But establishing a basis in creation is not as easy as it may seem. Serious thinking about the doctrine of creation and its implications happens rarely. Too often, acrimonious debate over origins and the place of science in the theological task hijacks discussions about creation. While arguments about evolutionary claims, the correct understanding of *day*, and the age of the earth have their place, they are not particularly helpful when it comes to understanding our raison d'être; and when they curtail more careful and fruitful reflection on the significance of God's work of creation for Christian living, such preoccupations can be harmful.

The need for theological thinking that takes creation seriously was capably addressed in the twentieth century, and we can use this foundation to good advantage.[1] God's action of creating has countless implications for Christians. It means that the created realm is good. It is God's work. Further, the creation is the specific object of God's love and care, and the justification for the creation of humanity. Drawn from clay, and filled with God's animating spirit, we are of the earth, with the prescribed task of subduing and ruling over the earth. Quite appropriately, Genesis 1:28 has been dubbed *the first great commission*: "God blessed them; and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'" Recognizing the normative and formative role of the creation account, God's command is not merely a directive for Adam, but is the commission for all humanity. In light of the creation account, this is obviously not a mandate to dictatorship or abuse of the creation. It is a holy charge to provide care and direction to the creation. This is our task. It is our reason for existence. Notwithstanding the Christian traditions that relate our purpose to God's glorification,[2] Scripture actually supplies an answer to the question "why am I here?" that looks not up to heaven, but around at creation. We are here to look after the creation.

We are creation's stewards. Grounded in the concrete, creative work of God, our earthbound task is inherently holy.

Living in an industrialized society with an economy increasingly detached from the land and oriented toward "service," it may seem nostalgic or irrelevant to argue that humanity's purpose is grounded in the earth. Nevertheless, this is precisely the foundation that must be grasped for right thinking about our place in the creation, and our responsibility toward the creation. The beginning of God's revelation makes it clear that we exist for the sake of the creation. Rightly directed and God-pleasing human activity should serve the creation. Of course, creation certainly includes humanity, so service to fellow creatures includes service to other human creatures. Thus, most gainful employment finds a place within this understanding of humanity's purpose.[3] This understanding also provides new perspective on the sort of work that is often diminished or devalued as routine or mundane. What is done simply to fulfill the demands of the daily schedule may be deemed ordinary and unexceptional; but when undertaken for the sake of the creation, it is precisely the work that needs doing, and is important and precious as it fulfills its place within God's plan for his creation.

God created us for the sake of the creation. We are to use our unique human abilities to care for the creation around us. Thus, our purpose is tied to the creation, and we are complete or fulfilled not by escaping the created realm, but by embracing our role and work within the created realm. Unlike religions and philosophies that contend that we should strive for release from the material realm, Christianity actually drives us into the midst of the creation, and anchors us in the material relationships that we share with every other creature. Thus, the goal of living is not somehow to escape the creation, or the material world, or the mundane realities of ordinary life. Nor should one yearn for a higher or more spiritual mode of existence, or aim to become some greater order of being. Instead, we recognize that as creatures of God, we are responsible to fulfill this task within the creation to the best of our ability. God created us for this. The goal of human existence, then, is to become fully human.

Consistent with this way of thinking, sin is failure to do what God has us to do. Such failure makes us less than human, that is, in some sense, *in*-human. Sin is a departure from God's good plan, and a rebellion against God's design. The story of salvation, beginning with the proto-evangelion in the garden of Eden and culminating in the eschatological consummation of the

apocalypse, is the story of God's work to return us to the plan, and to restore us and all of creation to the Creator's design. This is what it means to begin with the first article of the creed, rather than the second. In fact, the second article with its focus on the Son's work of redemption only makes sense when seen in light of the Father's original action of creation. The Son's work is for the sake of the creation, and the Son seeks to restore all of creation.[4] The objective is the restoration of humanity to its right place within the creation—including, of course, humanity's right place before the Creator. This is precisely the Father's eternal plan fully accomplished in the Son's obedient mission in the power of the Holy Spirit.[5] Human beings, then, can only grasp their identity and purpose from the perspective of God's work of creation and redemption.

LEARNING WITH LUTHER

The themes outlined above find powerful affirmation and elaboration in the work of Martin Luther. In the introductory remarks to his commentary on Galatians, Luther distinguishes between the righteousness Christians receive by grace in their relationship before God, and the righteousness achieved by their humble and faithful service to those around them in the world.[6] With this distinction, Luther positions the believer's relationship to the rest of creation, as the object of God's work of redemption. In other words, and put somewhat bluntly, people are not saved so that they can "go to heaven someday," they are saved so that they can be fully human and accomplish what God put them on earth to do. This is precisely Luther's point as he finishes his introductory comments on Paul's epistle. Having celebrated God's justifying gift of passive righteousness, Luther concludes:

> *When I have this righteousness within me, I descend from heaven like the rain that makes the earth fertile. That is, I come forth into another kingdom, and I perform good works whenever the opportunity arises. If I am a minister of the Word, I preach, I comfort the saddened, I administer the sacraments. If I am a father, I rule my household and family, I train my children in piety and honesty. If I am a magistrate, I perform the office which I have received by divine command. If I am a servant, I faithfully tend to my master's affairs. In short, whoever knows for sure that Christ is his righteousness not only cheerfully and gladly works in his calling but also submits himself for the sake of love to magistrates, also to their wicked*

laws, and to everything else in this present life—even, if need be, to burden and danger. For he knows that God wants this and that this obedience pleases Him.[7]

The passage is remarkable on several counts, but most significant in the present discussion, is Luther's hearty endorsement of the varied responsibilities and tasks that attend life in this world. God gives us Christ's forgiveness, and then immediately compels us to return to the world and our responsibilities within the world. Our existence is grounded in the realities of creation and our purpose belongs to those realities. Redemption in Christ does not negate, but reaffirms the pursuit of mundane creaturely existence.

Luther's argument in the great Galatians commentary was not the first time the reformer had considered the importance of ordinary work in the world. This emphasis on our responsibility as creatures to be in relationship with the surrounding world was a foundational concept undergirding his theological work. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to consider this Luther's "other breakthrough." The anguished and weary monk's discovery of the liberating and comforting message of the gospel is familiar enough, and aptly referenced as Luther's breakthrough. But in the early part of the 1520s Luther was making another, related discovery every bit as revolutionary as his reclamation of the gospel: Luther discovered the idea of vocation. In spite of the prevailing assumptions and admonitions of his day, Luther came to understand that one does not serve God best by abandoning his role and responsibilities within the structures and obligations of routine worldly existence for the sake of life in the cloister. Luther came to see that his own decision to enter the monastery was wrong not only because it was a futile and dangerous pursuit of righteousness through works, but because it meant the renunciation of his role as son. "For my vow was not worth a fig, since by taking it I withdrew myself from the authority and guidance of the parent [to whom I was subject] by God's commandment; indeed it was a wicked vow. . ."[8] So, Luther came to delight in the work of everyday life—simply living in the relationships and responsibilities established by birth and by duty. This is the heart of Luther's understanding of vocation. Vocation is nothing more than doing what God has given one to do within the relationships of creation.

Gustaf Wingren wrote the book on Luther and vocation—literally.[9] The Swedish scholar's focused exploration of Luther's corpus makes clear how pervasive and compelling Luther's "other breakthrough" was for his theology. In an essay from early in his career, Wingren summarizes

Luther's position with sharp and poignant clarity:

> *In heaven Christ reigns with His Gospel, that is to say, with pure giving and grace. Man enters this heavenly Kingdom through faith, which receives and lays hold on the Gospel and thereby on Christ Himself. But the neighbor lives on earth, and one does not believe and trust in him. One does not receive salvation from him, but rather serves the neighbor in one's daily work. We may set forth the following proposition: If man seeks to take the works which God commands him to do and bring these works before God, man thereby abolishes God's order both in 'heaven' and on 'earth.' For in heaven the Gospel reigns alone. Here to seek to place works before God as a means of justification is an attempt to depose Christ from His throne. Man allows his works to compete with the King of heaven. But at the same time the neighbor is pushed aside in the earthly kingdom, for works are not done for the neighbor's sake, but in order that I might adorn myself with them before God. Christ is 'dethroned' in heaven and the neighbor is 'dethroned' on earth.*[10]

The force of this argument is startling, and challenges conventional assumptions about Christian piety. Following Luther, Wingren contends that one does not do good works for God's sake, but for the neighbor's sake. Christian service, then, is marked not by a driving obsession to "do something for Jesus," nor with a fundamental compulsion to express love and gratitude to God by doing good works. Rather, the Christian does good works in an effort to meet the needs of the neighbor, period.

Interestingly, this is the clear message of Jesus's parable of the sheep and the goats—a scriptural narrative often advanced in support of the idea that a Christian lives to serve God. In this parable depicting the final judgment, Jesus certainly does acknowledge union with "the least of these," thereby affirming both a remarkably lofty view of the church and God's participation in the lives of the saints. Yet, the parable places emphatic stress on the thoroughgoing ignorance attending the service of the sheep. The sheep on Christ's right hand must be told about the significance of their acts of compassion. It is obvious from their questions to Jesus that they had not spent their days seeking ways to serve God. An explicit point of the parable is that the good works of the sheep are done purely for the sake of those in need, without the intent of "doing something for Jesus."[11] This was exactly the lesson learned by Luther, and this idea shaped his understanding of the Christian life and the place of the Christian's work. A Christian's work is not aimed inward—a self-serving

effort at personal fulfillment is antithetical to the Christian faith. Nor is a Christian's work aimed upward—a pious desire to "give God my best" is not what animates a follower of Christ, and may devolve into works-righteousness that diminishes the importance and dignity of the neighbor. Rather, a Christian's life is spent aimed outward—attentive to the needs of the neighbor and then actively working to meet those needs. And so, as Luther would have it, the Christian lives by faith and by love: "He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor."[12]

For Luther, *vocation* names the responsibilities and even the obligations that are placed on us by virtue of our being creatures within the world. Children, parents, spouse, employer, and employee—all have tasks that need to be fulfilled for the sake of other creatures. These works of service for fellow creatures are grounded in the structure and purpose of this world—they are the individualized form taken as each person strives to "have dominion" and fulfill his particular purpose within creation. This understanding of vocation is precisely illustrated in the "table of duties" appended to Luther's Small Catechism.[13] In terms of another Lutheran distinction, these consuming tasks belong to the left hand realm of God's activity within this world. The works are done for the sake of sustaining and supporting the good functioning of the creation—an objective established by the Creator and affirmed in the work of redemption. So, when Christians do what they have been given to do, and fulfill their responsibilities in the home, in the workplace, in the city and country, and even in the church, this is done for the simple reason that they are creatures acting as creatures are intended to act. Working within and for the sake of the various estates or venues of God's creation is what God's creatures do. Such service, then, is not directly a matter of one's relationship to God—the purview of God's "right-hand" activity—and has, in a sense, nothing whatsoever to do with the gospel. Vocation is for the left-hand realm; it belongs to this world.

A TWOFOLD RULE

In keeping with the legacy of Luther and in an effort to sharpen the argument and refocus on the task, consider the following two-part axiom:

> *A life of Christian stewardship has nothing to do with the Christian's relationship with God.A life of Christian stewardship has everything to do with the Christian's relationship with God.*[14]

On the face of it, the first statement may seem altogether impossible. Yet, in light of the previous argument, it proves to be an accurate, albeit provocative, expression of the truth. By now, it should be obvious that what commonly and conveniently has been called stewardship is, in fact, little more than living responsibly within the structures and obligations of the created realm. Our work in the world has its basis in the fact that we are a part of the creation and have a role to play within that creation. Whether or not we confess or even acknowledge the reality of the Creator is not altogether relevant; more important in this context is that we recognize and perform our creaturely roles. The point of the axiom's first statement is that stewardship is the practice of living faithfully and dutifully, using personal and corporate resources, abilities, and opportunities for the sake of the rest of creation. Stewardship merely names the activity and practice of responsible living within creation and is not a practice peculiar to Christians. Indeed, even a Christian carries out the tasks of such competent daily living simply for the sake of the creation—it is the task a Christian has been given. And so the first half of the stewardship rule, excluding God from the work of stewardship, is perhaps not as impious as it initially appeared. Truly, that God cannot be the intended recipient of human efforts at good works or service is apparent when one considers the absurdity and even impiety of hoping to offer God anything—as if God had need or desire for what his creatures are able to give. Thus, it is good and right that a Christian focuses not on "serving God," but on serving neighbor.

The second breath of the twofold rule also speaks truth since a life of stewardship is grounded in God's gracious act of justification, animated and driven by the ongoing presence of the Spirit, and shaped by the will of the Creator. While Christians may be engrossed in the effort to meet the responsibilities toward fellow creatures—as well we should be, we are at once continually

aware of the profound realities of our relationship before God. We know that we stand there, before God, only by grace; that justification is the incomprehensible gift of a God who loves without limit; and that apart from the Spirit's comfort and power, no work of service and no good deed would be possible. All of the Christian life—including the life of service within creation—is lived within the overarching context of God's justifying work. In that sense, stewardship has everything to do with the believer's relationship with God. Rightly grasping sanctification as the monergistic work of God the Spirit within and through the Christian, it is also quite true that stewardship has everything to do with God—it is God alone who makes possible and indeed actually accomplishes the service that defines stewardship.[15] Finally, as faithful stewardship fulfills the Creator's purpose, it will naturally conform to the Creator's design and will. That is to say, God and his intention for the creation determines the actual shape of Christian stewardship. Without God's normative will, stewardship's reality would be arbitrary and subject to the whims and fancies of each individual. On the contrary, worthy stewardship is always normed by God who provides the necessary direction and shape of the service.

Like the other essential tensions that mark Christian faith, the tension at the core of rightly understanding stewardship is not to be resolved. Both aspects of the stewardship axiom advanced above must stand and be granted full latitude to declare their truth. By conditioning or mitigating one side of the rule in light of the other, diminishes the overall impact of the truth. Maintaining the tension calls for a degree of vigilance, of course, but careful attention to upholding a duality is hardly a new prospect for the conscientious disciple. So, those who live faithfully commit with abandon to the needs of the neighbor, striving to accomplish good for the neighbor; while at the same time, acknowledging that they are nothing, and can do nothing apart from God's sustaining grace. They give themselves completely to the work within creation, knowing always the complete dependence upon the Creator for everything.

THE FAITH OF OUR FATHERS

Christians who live as the blessed beneficiaries of the rich legacy of C. F. W. Walther are usually familiar with his instruction on how best to provoke the fruits of faith in the lackadaisical congregation that is stingy in good works. With great conviction, the theologian and churchman

argued that only the gospel is able to produce the desired harvest of good works: "The word of God is not rightly divided . . . when an endeavor is made, by means of the commands of the Law rather than by the admonitions of the Gospel, to urge the regenerate to do good."[16] With conviction equal to their theological forebear, Walther's heirs have submitted to this counsel, but in the process, sometimes have tried to outdo Walther himself. Not content to follow Walther in trusting the gospel's ability to transform people into genuine disciples zealous to perform God's will within the world, some of Walther's ecclesiastical descendants take a further step by refusing the law any positive role in the Christian's life of discipleship.

One only needs to read the whole of Walther's treatment of law and gospel to detect the error in this antinomian train of thought. Walther himself certainly did not dismiss the value of the law in training and even exhorting good works from Christian people: "Here we have a true pattern of the correct sequence: first the Law, threatening men with the wrath of God; next the Gospel, announcing the comforting promises of God. This is followed by an instruction regarding the things we are to do after we have become new men."[17] In fairness, it should be noted that earlier on the same page, Walther tells his students: "The moment a person accepts the grace which brought God down from heaven that grace begins to train him. The object of this training is to teach him how to do good works and lead an upright life." Clearly, Walther wants to include instruction in Christian living within the purview of the gospel. If one operates with a sharp understanding of the law as that which demands our works and the gospel as the word which forgives and comforts, it is difficult to understand how one might advance the idea that grace instructs. A significant question yet to be addressed, then, is the way that one defines and understands the law, and its role in the Christian life.

How one reads and understands Walther is more than a question of history or textual hermeneutics. It is illustrative of a theological approach that has had a profound impact on the thinking of many Lutheran theologians, leaders, and congregations in the recent past—with remarkable practical consequences still felt today. The problem is a peculiar form of antinomianism closely tied or even identified with what has been called "law/gospel reductionism."[18] Obviously, a host of factors contributed to the rise of this errant theological paradigm; and the part played by a misappropriation of Walther's teaching is probably not the most compelling among them. Still, given the stature and influence rightly accorded this synodical father, Walther's legacy

is significant—and in the current discussion about stewardship, it is crucial. Coupled with the pervasive influence of law/gospel reductionism, the idea that Walther rejected any place for the law in the production of good works has made a lasting impact on the way that many pastors and congregations have understood and practiced stewardship. Indeed, the reigning assumption typically elevated to the status of a theological dictum, or at least a theological shibboleth, is that a genuine stewardship worthy to be called Lutheran must be motivated only by the gospel. The law, naturally, is absolutely excluded aside from its necessary preparatory work of laying bare and convicting sinful and selfish hearts. Indeed, the faithful practitioner of this theological method is usually quick to label any attempt to use the law in a positive way as a form of legalism that gravely threatens the gospel and Christian freedom.[19]

The outcome of this thinking has been what often amounts to a practice of stewardship and stewardship training that is limited to eloquent presentations of God's giving and grace with an expectant, if not overly confident, hope that the result will be the desired life of fruit-production. Admittedly, this is not a fundamentally wrong understanding of the Christian life. Walther did not create the idea of gospel as motivation de novo. Like any orthodox theologian, Walther would have disavowed any suggestion that his work was innovative. His desire was an accurate expression of the truth as it had always been taught. So, it is not surprising to find the idea of the gospel's power to motivate present in St. Paul: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."[20] And the same line of thought is readily apparent in the work of Luther, as the authors of the Formula were well aware: "O, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good works incessantly."[21] Walther, Luther, and St. Paul concur. It is altogether reasonable and arguably admirable, then, that practical contemporary expressions of Lutheran theology would emulate their ancestors and offer an understanding of stewardship as the spontaneous result of justification. God gives grace . . . the Christian produces a life of good works. God showers his love, and believers respond with committed and humble service—done.

With such compelling and credentialed evidence in support of what may be called the standard understanding of stewardship, it may seem foolhardy to propose any other approach. Yet, responsible theological thinking demands a more comprehensive—and more effective—concept of

stewardship. Walther's example of a willingness to use the law in more than only its exposing and killing function was noted above. A similar broad conception of the law, evidenced by a willingness to use the law as a fitting instrument for training in Christian living, can also be found in Luther and St. Paul's writings. Luther's catechisms abound with such examples: "It is useful and necessary, I say, always to teach, admonish, and remind young people of all of this so that they may be brought up, not only with blows and compulsion, like cattle, but in the fear and reverence of God . . ."[22]

One of the most memorable instances of Luther's willingness to use the law to instruct and even motivate, though, is found in a letter Luther sent to his son Hans, composed while the reformer was advising the Augsburg delegation from the safe distance of Koburg castle. After promising to bring Hans "a nice present from the fair" if he continued to do well in his studies and pray diligently, Luther describes at length a delightful garden of joys reserved for children "who like to pray, study, and be good." The concerned father then offers a final word of encouragement to his son in Wittenberg: "Therefore, dear son Hänschen, do study and pray diligently, and tell Lippus and Jost to study and pray too; then you [boys] will get into the garden together."[23] Luther was not above using what some might call bribery in the effort to instill good habits in his child.

The Apostle Paul's epistolary pattern of concluding with explicit instruction and exhortation for specific behavior is well known and variously explained. Seeking cover in a technical term such as "paranesis" or in a novel label like "gospel admonition" to account for Paul's practice is a typical way of dodging the bare fact that the apostle seems to experience no discomfort in using the law to teach and even incite his readers to zealous Christian living.[24] One of the most interesting instances in the Pauline corpus appears in 2 Corinthians 8 when the apostle is concerned about that young congregation's readiness to contribute toward the famine relief effort for the first-century saints in Jerusalem. Certainly, Paul recognizes the impact that God's love shown in Christ should have on these new believer's and the use of their resources to help others.[25] There is an expectation that the gospel will make a difference in the lives of these people. However, Paul does not merely declare the gospel and then wait for a spontaneous outpouring of generosity and good works. Quite the opposite, a careful reading of the entire chapter reveals a concerted effort on the part of the founder of the Corinthian congregation to ensure robust support for the financial campaign using a host of tactics.

Paul begins by praising the gift of the less affluent Macedonian Christians; then, inciting a spirit of competition, the apostle admonishes the Corinthians not to be outdone (verses 1–8). Paul presses his case with an appeal from the standpoint of fairness, or as it colloquially captured, today, "what goes around comes around" (verses 10–15). Finally, he makes a bald appeal to pride: when Titus comes to collect, they should be ready and not shame themselves and Paul (verses 22–24). Paul's strong approach continues into chapter 9, and it takes little imagination or insight to detect even more instances of Paul's pragmatic appeal to his reader's less altruistic motives. The most natural reading of this text presents a readily recognizable picture of a persuasive fund-raising effort that relies on a variety of entreaties and motivations to provoke the desired response from his readers. Well aware of man's broken nature—and equally cognizant of the Christian's nature as both old Adam and new creation—Paul is not above reinforcing his financial appeal with arguments aimed at the new man (reminders of God's giving in Christ) as well as the old (appeals to competition, pride, and self-preservation). The power of the gospel is not dismissed, but neither is the effective use of the law overlooked.

THE PLACE OF THE LAW

The critical question, inevitably, reasserts itself: what role *does* the law play in the Christian's life of stewardship? It is clear that Paul, Luther, and even Walther readily employed exhortations and inducements to right behavior that exceeded mere reliance on the new motivations touched off by the power of the gospel. As mentioned above, there have been assorted efforts at creating original terms and redefining existing ones with the hope of steering around a positive understanding of the law. Ultimately, however, the issue centers on the nature and place of instruction and exhortation within the Christian's life.[26] Is such exhortation an aspect of the gospel—perhaps even a "second use of the gospel"?[27] Are such good works the "fruit of the Spirit" and therefore unrelated to the law? The urge to subsume encouragement and admonition to Christian living within the parameters of the gospel is understandable. It honors the New Testament truth that in Christ we are new creations.[28] Nevertheless, to insist that the sort of exhortation or even enticement employed by Paul, Luther, or Walther is not the law but an aspect of the gospel is a theological mistake with significant practical consequences. The error, it seems, stems from the

erroneous assumption that the law is inherently negative and therefore a repressive burden from which one must be freed. The law does have a condemning, killing effect. Indeed, Melanchthon put a sharp point on this in the Apology with his declaration: *semper accusat*.[29] But, the law does not *only* accuse.[30] The Formula of Concord provides the definition that resolves the question about the law's place in the life of a believer: "Law has one single meaning, namely the unchanging will of God, according to which human beings are to conduct themselves in this life."[31] God's plan, his design for the right functioning of creation, is his will for the creation and is given expression as the law. When the creation is operating according to God's will, it is operating according to the law.

The believer is first a creature—the handiwork of God designed for a purpose within the creation. When the believer is living a fully human life, conforming to the intention of the Creator, the believer is living within God's will, and so living within the law. Obviously, this is not a constraining, demeaning, or negative thing. In fact, it is liberation.[32] The law accuses and condemns when we sin, but it is not inherently onerous. Our problem is not God's law, but our own sin. Rightly understood as the will of God, it is clear that the law has existed as a part of the creation from the beginning. Adam and Eve followed God's will, thus obeying the law, without experiencing guilt, condemnation, or irksome compulsion. They were simply doing what they had been created to do. They were living as God's crowning handiwork exercising dominion over the creation. The same dynamic is at work for Adam's children who live today within the creation, but now in the reality of the gospel's restoration. In Christ, they are declared forgiven and restored to a right relationship with their Creator and returned to their places within creation to fulfill the Creator's intentions for them. They do these tasks—their varied vocations—according to God's will, that is, according to the law. The law is the shape of the Christian life. This life is not a burden, but a joy. The redeemed and restored creature is doing what he was created to do.

A form of antinomianism—whether complete disregard for God's revealed will in the name of gospel freedom or simply a reluctance to employ the law positively for fear of legalism—is not the only detrimental result of a wrong understanding of the law. A thoroughgoing negative definition of the law forces the inclusion of Christian exhortation and instruction in holy living ("New Obedience" is the term preferred in the Augustana[33]) into the category of gospel. But, such instruction calls for action from the Christian, which, however motivated, is clearly not a sheer

declaration of forgiveness, grace, and comfort for a fallen human being. In fact, the call to action—even action on the part of a gospel-infused believer, is never a word of gospel in the pure sense. Rather, it is a call to conform to God's will, that is, a call to conform to the law. To include this call within "the gospel" is to add a component of human work to God's gracious gospel work, thus blunting or obscuring the bald word of divine monergism. In a strange and tragic irony, the desire to enhance the gospel by excluding the law from the life of new obedience actually diminishes the gospel by loading it with an expectation of human performance. This serious danger is easily averted simply by embracing a more holistic and biblical understanding of the law as God's will for his creation.

A WAY OF BEING

Conformity to God's will rightly describes the Christian life, and thus also rightly describes discipleship as well as stewardship. Stewardship, then, is not a matter of fund-raising gimmicks, capital campaigns, budget planning, building maintenance, time and talents surveys, or organizing volunteers. Stewardship is more simply and profoundly, God's people living responsibly within their God-given relationships. As demonstrated above, it is a mistake to assume that this happens automatically or spontaneously. The church and its shepherds should be intentional and deliberate about the process of shaping and encouraging responsible stewardship, or faithful discipleship, or fruitful Christian living—the terms are essentially interchangeable. The process of formation is infinitely varied and nuanced, and yet always in conformity with God's will. Gospel-soaked reminders of God's grace have their place, but so do lessons on personal finances, and accountability partners aimed at correcting destructive habits. Appeals to live within the gospel's reality can be coupled with classes on improving family relationships. The goal, always, is to bring God's people into greater conformity to God's will, not by seeking to micromanage every detail or by offering a checklist for every situation, but instead by seeking to instill in each believer the character of a disciple. Good practices and habits clearly have a role to play, but the focus, ultimately, is on the way of being that is being formed and enhanced. Following our Lord's often misapplied direction, we teach people consistently to invest all of their resources in the right things, confident, that their hearts—their character—will follow and their being will be further shaped into

God's design for his creatures: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."[34]

Stewardship is not a *part* of the Christian life. Stewardship is not an important auxiliary component of Christian living. Stewardship is not ancillary to the practice of Christian faith. Stewardship is not optional. One cannot claim fidelity to Christian truth in other respects while ignoring the practice and inculcation of faithful stewardship. Proclamation of the gospel, a focus on forgiveness, or a rigorous commitment to orthodox doctrine, are all worthy practices and defensible paradigms for Christian life and ministry; but none of them obviate the practice of good stewardship. The doctrine of justification cannot be the camouflage beneath which one hopes to hide from the expectations of a call to serious stewardship. The gospel does not negate or displace stewardship; it restores the creature to a life of responsible stewardship. Good theology yields good stewardship; more than that, good theology demands good stewardship.

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1 Two notable examples are the work of Gustaf Wingren, *Creation and Law*, trans. Ross MacKenzie (Muhlenburg Press, 1961), esp. 25–29; and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall* trans. John C. Fletcher (Touchstone Books, 1959), esp. 49–52.
2 This is, of course, the point of departure and so the foundation for the Westminster Shorter Catechism and the theology that builds on this foundation.
3 Most, but not all, work is fitting . . . it should be clear that some activities otherwise rewarded in the world may actually put one at odds with God's intentions for his creation and its caretakers.
4 This is clearly expressed in Romans 8:18–25.
5 Paul exults in this great plan of salvation in Ephesians 1:3–14.
6 *Luther's Works* eds. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 56 vols. American Edition (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Press, 1958–86), 26:2–12.
7 Ibid., 12.
8 *LW* 48:332.
9 Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Evansville, IN: Ballast Press, 1999).
10 Gustaf Wingren, "Justification by Faith in Protestant Thought," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 9 (December 1956): 375–376.
11 Matthew 25:31–46.
12 From "The Freedom of the Christian" *LW* 31:371.
13 The Small Catechism in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 365–367.
14 Obviously, the form of this axiom is a shameless and pale appropriation of Luther's dictum in "The Freedom of the Christian," yet another of Luther's landmark essays from the prolific decade of the 1520s. *LW* 31:344.
15 For the definitive presentation of sanctification as the work of God apart from any human contribution, see Adolf Köberle, *The Quest for Holiness: A Biblical, Historical and Systematic Investigation*, trans. John C. Mattes (Harper & Brothers, 1938; repr., Evansville, IN: Ballast Press, 1998).
16 C. F. W. Walther. *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, trans. W. H. T. Dau. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928), 4. (Walther makes stronger arguments in the explication of this, his 23rd thesis. See pages 384–390.)
17 Ibid., 93.

18 Others have explored this problem at great length and with helpful insight. For a brief but highly influential treatment see David S. Yeago, "Gnosticism, Antinomianism, and Reformation Theology: Reflections on the Costs of a Construal," *Pro Ecclesia* 2, 1 (Winter 1993): 37–49. A through exploration of the many factors involved in producing 20th- and now 21st-century antinomianism is provided by Scott R. Murray, *Law, Life and the Living God: the Third Use of Law in Modern American Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002).
19 The most thorough elaboration of this position may be Gerhard Forde's locus on the Christian life in Carl E. Braaten, and Robert W. Jenson, eds. *Christian Dogmatics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 2:391–469.
20 Romans 12:1 ESV.
21 FC SD IV.11 in Kolb and Wengert, 576.
22 LC I.330–332 in Kolb and Wengert, 430–431. Another significant but lengthy example is Luther's encouragement at the close of his discussion on the second commandment in the Large Catechism (LC I:70–76 in Kolb and Wengert 395–396). Here, Luther describes and advocates practices that habituate children into the ways of Christian living.
23 *LW* 49:323–324.
24 For example, in Ephesians 5, the apostle offers specific counsel for the arrangement of the Christian home, while in Romans 13, his concern is the political and fiscal conduct of the Christian in wider society. It is also noteworthy that the Small Catechism's table of duties is little more than a list of verses drawn primarily from Paul's letters offering concrete guidance for the conduct of life with its manifold responsibilities.
25 Paul reminds them of their standing in the gospel in verse 9.
26 Many of these, including the classic effort of Paul Althaus and his academic progeny are considered in Murray's book.
27 This term was suggested by William Lazareth in "Antinomians: Then and Now," *Lutheran Forum* 36, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 21.
28 2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 6:15.
29 Ap IV:38, 128 in Kolb and Wengert, 126, 141.
30 Many have articulated this position, but perhaps one of the first was Henry J. Eggold Jr. in "The Third Use of the Law," *Springfielder* 27 (Spring 1963): 20.
31 FC VI, SD VI:15 in Kolb and Wengert, 589. In the spirit of the Formula, it is worth noting that Chemnitz expounds on this understanding of the law in his marvelous, but underused, *Enchiridion*. "But when the question is asked, which the works are that God has ordained that we should walk in them (Eph 2:10), then God Himself leads us to His commands and precepts (Dt 12:32; Ez 20:19; Rom 3:27). And as Paul is about to point out what the well-pleasing and perfect will of God is with regard to good works (Rom 12:2), he leads us to love, which is a brief summary of the Law, and then he expressly lists the commandments of the Decalog (Rom 13:9; Gal 5:14)." Martin Chemnitz, *Ministry, Word, and Sacraments: An Enchiridion*, ed. and trans. Luther Poellot (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 198)1, 100.
32 For a full treatment of conformity to the law as the only path to genuine human freedom, see Reinhard Hütter. "(Re-) Forming Freedom: Reflections 'After *Veritatis Splendor*' On Freedom's Fate in Modernity and Protestantism's Antinomian Captivity," *Modern Theology* 17, no. 2 (April 2001): 117–161.
33 AC VI in Kolb and Wengert, 40.
34 Matthew 6:21.