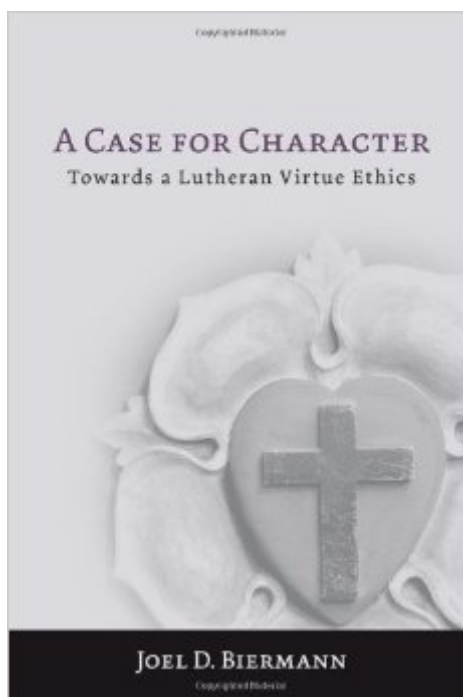


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# A Case For Character: Towards A Lutheran Virtue Ethics



## Synopsis

Over the last several decades, perceptive observers of Western civilization have documented what virtually everyone has perceived: as the old foundations of society have toppled, morality and personal character have been set adrift and often vanished altogether. How can character be cultivated when it seems no one is willing or able to provide a definitive description of character to which humans should aspire? Equipped with explicit texts and a rich heritage detailing the content of human character, it would seem that Christianity is ideally positioned to address this problem. Yet even the church has often been complicit in undermining and eviscerating a rich, meaningful account of character. While the reasons for this are many and complicated, one of the more potent singular factors is actually theological. Contemporary Lutheranism, in particular, has struggled with the appropriate place of morality and character formation, as these pursuits often have been perceived as at odds with the central Christian doctrine of justification. *A Case for Character* explores this problem and argues that Christian doctrine, specifically as articulated within a Lutheran framework, is altogether capable of encouraging a robust pursuit of character formation while maintaining a faithful expression of justification by grace alone through faith alone.

## Book Information

Paperback: 192 pages

Publisher: Fortress Press (May 1, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1451477910

ISBN-13: 978-1451477917

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.7 x 8.9 inches

Shipping Weight: 11.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars Â Â See all reviews Â (10 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #129,229 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #44 in Â Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Christian Denominations & Sects > Protestantism > Lutheran #209 in Â Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Theology > Ethics #2781 in Â Books > Religion & Spirituality > Religious Studies > Theology

## Customer Reviews

Many Christians have noticed the death of character in the Western world. More horrifying is the Church's refusal to teach God's will and shape the character of her members. This is especially true in the Lutheran Church. Many pastors, theologians, and laypeople refuse to talk of ethics. Their

excuse? They are defending the Gospel, the message that we are declared right with God by grace through faith for the sake of Christ. However, does the Gospel really prevent us from teaching ethics and cultivating character? In the first chapter, Dr. Joel Biermann gives a brief overview of Virtue Ethics and how it does not share the common weaknesses of Deontology and Utilitarianism. He also introduces his reader to Stanley Hauerwas, who accused the Reformation of divorcing Doctrine from Ethics. Is this a fair estimation of the Reformation Movement? In the second chapter, Dr. Biermann introduces his reader to four Lutheran theologians (Yeago, Benne, Hutter, and Meilaender) who believe that modern Lutheranism has neglected ethics and that many Lutherans are Antinomians (those against the Law) and Soteriological Reductionists (salvation is all that matters). He reviews their proposed solutions and finds them wanting. In the third chapter, Dr. Biermann considers the Lutheran Confessions. Through ample quotations from the Confessions and from the authors of the Confessions, Biermann proves that the Lutheran Fathers did have a place in their theology for Ethics and that they believed Ethics was intimately related to Justification. For example, the Confessions clearly state that God redeemed us, so that we can keep the Law. In other words, the Gospel serves the Law (Large Catechism 2:2, 69). He also argues that Luther and Melancthon taught a biblical kind of Virtue Ethics (i.e. they believed the goal of mankind is to live as a human creatures through faith toward God and love for creation and that this goal gives us our Christian virtues). In the fourth chapter, Dr. Biermann considers several paradigms that Lutherans have used to organize their theology. He considers the Motivation Paradigm and the Law-Gospel Paradigm and finds that they do not permit much room for Ethics. He then considers the Two Kinds of Righteousness. However, even this paradigm does not distinguish between the believer's active righteousness and the unbeliever's active righteousness. So, Biermann considers several writings of Luther and Melancthon, combine their insights, and suggests the Three Kinds of Righteousness as a paradigm. The 3KR both protect justification by grace, but also promotes the growth of Christian character. In the fifth chapter, Dr. Biermann places the 3KR in a Creedal Framework and emphasizes the importance of the Christian Narrative for character formation. He emphasizes that God redeems his creatures, so that they can live as creatures were meant to live. This brings the first, second, and third articles of the Creed together and shows us that both justification and ethics are parts of a larger whole. Finally, Dr. Biermann urges all Lutherans to adopt Virtue Ethics and to use the Christian community, worship, and catechesis to form the individual Christian's character. This book is an excellent defense of Virtue Ethics, character formation, and the new obedience of the Christian. It corrects many theological errors that prevent Christians from seeing God's Law in a positive light. I especially appreciated how Dr. Biermann emphasized that Christian

Virtue Ethics is about the mundane activities every person experiences and not about far-fetched ethical dilemmas. The one criticism I have of this book is that it could have offered some concrete examples of character formation in the Church. For example, Biermann introduces his book with the story of a pastor who ignores Paul's exhortations within his text during his sermon. He could have offered us an example of a sermon that does not ignore these ethical exhortations, but embraces them in such a way that does not result in works righteousness.

While I don't agree with Dr. Biermann in every particular he sets forth, I highly recommend this book as an insightful and helpful critique of, first, what exactly is wrong with contemporary Lutheran attitudes toward ethics and living a faithful Christian life, and second, a way forward to correct this problem. Dr. Biermann explicates a theory, derived from Martin Luther and Philipp Melancthon, that there are "three kinds of righteousness," a framework that is compatible with the three uses of the Law and with the three articles of the creed. Having spent time in both a liberal Lutheran denomination and one that is much more confessionally Lutheran, I have seen a variety of problems and pitfalls attendant in ignoring ethics, or assuming they will take care of themselves if we only preach more Gospel, or fearing that if we speak of anything besides justification, people will think they have to earn their salvation. All of these approaches are false and not consonant with our Lutheran heritage, as Dr. Biermann aptly demonstrates. The framework he proposes combats these notions and will surely pave the way for greater understanding and everyday pursuit of God's will (without doing so legalistically) for all who read and engage his book with an open mind.

In a society that denies absolutes, says that each person decides for self what is good, and in general has forgotten proper behavior, Biermann calls for the church to actively teach Christians how to act toward other people and how to conduct themselves in a sinful world. Not to earn God's favor - that's already given as a gift because of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Rather, because God has given us His favor in Christ, Christians need to learn how to live as God's people - and the church, based on Scripture, needs to teach that skill.

Dr. Biermann is an excellent writer. He thoroughly examines every angle and anticipates objections before they arise. Worthwhile reading for Christians, particularly for Lutherans of any stripe.

A thorough and excellent review of Lutheran ethics, it seems to me, though I am no expert ethicist. My experience in ministry over the past 60-70 years would verify what Joel Biermann sees as

necessary to continue to work on virtue ethics... Allen Nauss

Biermann is leading Lutherans into considering how horizontal righteousness is a meet, right, and salutary topic for us to be discussing, and actions to be doing.

A valuable read and most needed in a culture that major in looking good rather than being good.

Very good explosion on Christian ethics!

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