

The Revolutionary Philanthropy of God—
The Dogmatic Engine of Paul L. Lehmann’s Theological Ethics

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1/Introduction

The publication of this fine collection of Lehmann’s essays is a welcome occasion to recollect the seriousness, the salience, and the stature of Paul Lehmann as a figure of 20th century Christian theology. Appreciation for Lehmann’s significance has faded more than it ought to have done. Writing in relation to one of the two *Festschriften* published in 1974 to honour his retirement, Swiss theologian Henry Mottu remarked that ‘Our generation, after Barth’s death, is so lonely, so desperate and without guiding figure that it is a sort of relief to know that you, Paul, are still among us with some other great teachers as Ricoeur, Gollwitzer and a few others’.¹ Jürgen Moltmann wrote in that same *Festschrift* of the ‘deep and good traces’ Lehmann’s influential writing and teaching had carved into the theological landscapes of America, Germany, and beyond.² Perhaps some fifty-years on this volume will help a new generation of readers to discover those ‘good and deep traces’ of Lehmann’s legacy. We owe a debt of gratitude to all those who laboured to pull it together.

My own small contribution reflects upon the title of the volume: *The Revolutionary Gospel*. It is very apt, for it draws attention to the fact that the mainspring of Lehmann’s theological ethics was the gospel of God with its entailments, consequences, and affordances. As he once put it, ‘The concreteness, dynamics, and direction of the biblical apprehension of divine activity in the world provide theology with the structural materials for doing its work’.³ The *form* of that divine activity is rectification and redemption; its *focus*, the person and living presence of Christ; its *fruition*, the truing of humanity. Lehmann’s shorthand for this divine activity is the ‘politics of God’ and for its outworking, ‘humanization’. In one of his best known formulations, to be concerned with the gospel of God is to bind our attention to ‘what God is doing to make and to keep human life *human* in the world’.⁴ In this Lehmann

¹ Henry Mottu to Paul L. Lehmann, personal letter dated 6 July 1974, *PLL Papers* box 21, file 66, 1 page.

² Jürgen Moltmann, ‘A Letter to Paul Lehmann’, *USQR* 29:3 & 4 (1974), p. 149.

³ Paul L. Lehmann, ‘The Context of Theological Inquiry’ (1956), p. 72.

⁴ Paul L. Lehmann, *Ethics in a Christian Context*, p. 99.

concurs and extends Bonhoeffer's claim that 'God became human so that human beings might become human'.⁵ The two friends agreed that, as Bonhoeffer says, 'The philanthropy of God (Tit. 3,4) revealed in Christ's becoming human founds the [] love of the Christian for everything that is called human on earth'.⁶

This evangelical affirmation of God's revolutionary philanthropy in Christ is the dogmatic engine of Lehmann's theological ethics.⁷ Any stake the Christian may have in the business of social and political revolution finds its ultimate origins here, driven and disciplined by the humanity of God's own politics.

2/

Today, when it is widely suggested that only by '*Unlearning Protestantism*' can we hope to repair the deleterious effects of the '*Unintended Reformation*'—to invoke the title of two recent books—Lehmann's passionate commitment to a decidedly *Protestant* style of doing theology seems rather unfashionable.⁸ To make matters worse, he regularly confronts readers with the claim that the business of the Reformation in fact remains worryingly *unfinished*.⁹ Lehmann diagnosed an historic 'loss of nerve' on the part of the Reformers and their descendants when it came to working out the wide-ranging social and political consequences of the gospel of justification by grace through faith alone. He himself felt the burden of the 'great unfinished task of Reformation ethics' and was ambitious to see the theological radicality of Protestant faith pressed into every corner of Christian doctrine and morals.¹⁰ Indeed, it is arguable that Lehmann's whole career was devoted to the labour of 'getting the Reformation in America' in just this sense.¹¹

⁵ DBWE 6: 96. Translation altered.

⁶ DBWE 4:285.

⁷ 'But when the goodness and loving kindness [PHILANTHROPIA] of God our Saviour appeared... ' (Titus 3:4). Barry Harvey's book length exploration of Lehmann's work, *The Politics of the Theological* ends with a section exploring the 'dogmatic grammar of the politics of God' (p. 218f.) in which he considers Lehmann's handling of the doctrine of the Trinity.

⁸ Cf. Gerald W. Schlabach, *Unlearning Protestantism: Sustaining Christian Community in an Unstable Age* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010) and Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

⁹ In fact his James W. Richard Lectures in Christian Religion, delivered at the University of Virginia in October 1958 open with a lecture entitled 'The Unfinished Reformation'—PLL Papers Box 19, files 1-3.

¹⁰ Paul L. Lehmann, 'The Dynamics of Reformation Ethics', *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* (1950), p. 22,

¹¹ See my essay, 'Getting the Reformation in America—The Making of Paul L. Lehmann as Public Theologian', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 31:1 (2018), pp. 79-107.

This matters because Lehmann's account of the dynamism of God's philanthropy has a decidedly Protestant complexion. Grace seeks and finds human beings in their sin and, binding them to Christ by way of his rectifying work, reconciles them to God and impels them toward their neighbours in the freedom of their new reality. The dynamism of divine love becomes concrete in the saving work of election, incarnation, justification and redemption: sin having become our 'second nature', natural life in the usurped creation is inescapably and manifoldly misanthropic; grace supervenes upon our inhumanity, the advent the new that creates faithful and humane possibilities *ex contrario* within world of sin. Justifying grace finds us, on Lehmann's account, firmly in the 'still yet unredeemed world' of which Barmen V speaks.¹²

It is precisely because our 'justification rests upon the incarnation and atonement [and] not upon creation', Lehmann holds, that 'it is revolutionary'. Oriented to the contradiction and re-making of the world by divine judgment and grace, an 'ethics of justification',¹³ invests heavily in 'an analysis of theological order according to which God is on the side of social change—social change, herald of "things which are not, to bring to nought things that are" (1 Cor 1:28)'.¹⁴ Lehmann comes to this conviction early: already in 1942, he can describe matters in this way:

A critical intelligence which is also a believing intelligence will be guided not by the continuous but by the discontinuous relation between the gospel and the world. There is a discontinuity between the gospel and the world because the gospel fact that God is revealed in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour is neither discernible in nor derivable from the context of things in the world. This discontinuity defines the conflicting complexity of circumstance as the nexus of broken possibilities which remain possibilities not because they express partial ethical achievements but because they have been healed from without.¹⁵

Or again he observes how:

According to the Reformation, the pattern of correct Christian thinking is shaped by the principle of *discontinuity*. Revelation and history, faith and reason, grace

¹² *Barmen Theological Declaration*, article 5, see Douglas S. Bax translation in Eberhard Jüngel, *Christ, Justice, and Peace: Toward a Theology of the State* (London: T&T Clark, 2014), p. xxxiii.

¹³ Paul L. Lehmann, 'Toward a Protestant Analysis of the Ethical Problem' (1944), p. 7.

¹⁴ Lehmann, 'Dynamics of Reformation Ethics', p. 22.

¹⁵ Paul L. Lehmann, 'Obedience and Justice' (142), p. 38.

and nature, the gospel and the world, are neither mutually exclusive nor supplementary. They are perpendicular to one another. . . . Only in so far as there is a sharp break between gospel and the world are the redemptive act of the Creator and the faith of the redeemed genuinely new acts. . . . the freedom of divine activity in a rebellious world.¹⁶

In contrast to Christian humanisms secured by appeal to the doctrine of creation and the significance of inalienable natural facts (including the *imago dei*), Lehmann's humanism is funded by appeal to God's transcendent, adventitious and redeeming grace and the humane future it makes possible and pursues; rather than looking back to created origins, it looks to Christ as the advent and outworking of that 'freedom of divine activity in a rebellious world' whose *telos* the remaking of our humanity.

This means that the dynamism of God's philanthropy is firmly tethered to Christ as the 'Archimedean point' or 'pivotal centre of all learning and life': Lehmann repeatedly invokes Pascal's remark that 'Jesus Christ is the point of its all, and the centre toward which everything tends'.¹⁷ And it is around this centre that theology discerns and speaks of its *context*. Lehmann began to speak of Christian theology as 'contextual theology' as early as the 1950s. In one programmatic passage he explains that:

A contextual theology has. . . . chiefly to do with the self-disclosure of God to which faith responds and from which human reason fruitfully undertakes its critical task. A contextual theology has to do with an on-going community of faith and life and with the whole compass and corpus of goings on in heaven and earth.¹⁸

In another essay, he suggests that contextual theology

. . . does not inflate the pathos and the conflicts of the world of time and space and things and people. [Rather] it steadfastly adheres to the task of explicating the

¹⁶ Paul L. Lehmann, 'A Protestant Critique of Anglicanism', p. 157.

¹⁷ Lehmann, 'The Context of Theological Inquiry', p. 72. Pascal, *Pensées*, §556: 'Jésus Christ est l'object de tout, et le centre où tout tend. Qui le connaît, connaît la raison de toutes choses'. Talk of the incarnation as the 'Archimedean point' is recurrent, see for example Lehmann, *Ideology and Incarnation*, p. 27: 'In the incarnation, the ecumenical movement has been given just such an Archimedean power on which stand and from which to move the earth'.

¹⁸ Lehmann, 'The Context of Theological Inquiry', p. 72.

event which has changed the face of reality, and the bearing of this event upon the human condition. . . in the social and natural world of which [we are] a part.¹⁹

As these passages make clear, Lehmann's concept of 'context' holds together ideas which have perhaps, fallen apart since. The question of context is the question 'Where am I and why does it matter?' The defining centre of the fundamental context of Christian theology is, for Lehmann, the self-disclosure of God in Christ which makes—or better, *re-makes*—a world around it. That world in turn—in the manner of Bonhoeffer's account of *Christuswirklichkeit*—encompasses both the society and polity of the Christian *koinonia*, and then also the actualities of our cultural, economic, social, and political situations. This nesting of contexts is key: for only in attending to these nested contexts in their dynamic interrelations does theology become properly contextual and so concrete. The truth and theological significance of our ecclesiastical and social-political worlds finally remains opaque—and our thinking about them abstract—unless and until is it illumined by revelation and discerned in its light; so too, does our knowledge of divine revelation remain abstract unless and until it is acknowledged and understood as the power of redemption of *this* all-too human world of *ours*.

So it is that the revolutionary gospel of God's philanthropy funds a contextual theology and ethics dedicated to discerning and describing what God is doing to make and keep human life human. God's gracious, free, rectifying, and redemptive 'doing' incites and elicits a corresponding human 'doing'. Writing in 1944, Lehmann explains:

[T]he believer in the God who acts and who calls, who creates and who redeems always begins by moving against the focus of power in the existing situation. Such a focus of power is always personal; therefore the believer moves against himself—the white man against his whiteness, the black man against his blackness; the strong man against his strength, the weak against his weakness. Such a focus of power is always also social. Therefore, the believer moves against the political, economic, cultural, communal concentration of power in any given historical moment.²⁰

The justifying God of the gospel is *for us* precisely by moving *against us* in our inhumane self-righteousness and so also against the ramified calcifications of this inhumanity—the

¹⁹ Paul L. Lehmann, 'The Formative Power of Particularity', p. 307.

²⁰ Lehmann, 'Toward a Protestant Analysis of the Ethical Problem' (1944), 16.

‘congealed politics’ as it were of previous generations—expressed in our inherited social and political and legal forms.²¹ This is why, ‘an ethic of justification . . . is a revolutionary ethic’.²² Jesus Christ, Lehmann says, calls into the question ‘*die Richtigkeit der Stetigkeiten*’—i.e., ‘the propriety of the stabilities’.²³ Notably, God’s overthrow of the existing powers begins at home, in our own very persons as complicit inhabitants of just those ‘stabilities’. Justification by grace robs us of all righteousness of our own even as it imputes to us the righteousness of Christ, ever alien, ever extrinsic. What this means is that those who subsequently are impelled to ‘move against the focus of power’ in the existing social and political situation do not do so from a position of self-possession and strength—a position of *right*—but as those undone by judgment and grace and so in repentance, humility, and hope for others. Lehmann emphasizes that Christians and revolutionaries—Christians *as* revolutionaries—always ‘bear a righteousness not their own’ (Phil 3:9). They cannot and do not pursue their own righteousness; rather, their ethical and political adventure seeks only the righteousness of their neighbours.

Justification involves a purposeful loosening, a salutary alienation from the received ‘stabilities’ of our present moment, because the real and pressing demands and possibilities of divine justice are neither immanent nor analytic within them. The shape and purpose of divine philanthropy is worked out in redemption as grace overreaches nature and promise overtakes history; scripturally, we might say that it is Exodus and Ezekiel and Easter which supply the ‘narrative grammar’ of the humane politics of God here. Lehmann’s life work, for just these reasons contended for what we might call faith’s ‘preferential option’ for freedom over order, for love and justice over law, and for social and political change over defence of the *status quo*.

One final observation: Lehmann consciously eschews any pursuit of the *corpus Christianum*, i.e., the achievement of a comprehensive Christian political settlement. His Protestant vision is decidedly post-Constantinian. ‘I look’, he once said, ‘for a Protestantism imaginative enough, self-critical enough, sober enough to permeate the culture of the future not from the dominant but the sectarian centre of its own life’.²⁴ What Lehmann

²¹ That ‘law is congealed politics’ is of course an axiom of critical legal studies.

²² Paul L. Lehmann, ‘Toward a Protestant Analysis of the Ethical Problem’ (1944), 15.

²³ See Barry Harvey, *The Politics of the Theological* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 1995), p. 224.

²⁴ Paul L. Lehmann, ‘Protestantism in a Post-Christian World’, p. 10. And he continues: ‘By the sectarian centre of its own life, I do not mean a centre of divisiveness but the kind of centre of its life that understands what our Lord himself meant by the mustard seed, the grain that must fall into the ground and die, by the leaven in the lump’.

provocatively calls the ‘sectarian centre’ here is not the community itself or its distinctive *ethos* but rather the orientation provided by the living God of the gospel graciously come low to serve and to save in Christ. This is why it is axiomatic for Lehmann that ‘Christian ethics is not concerned with *the good*, but with what I, as a believer in Jesus Christ, and as a member of his church, am to do. *Christian ethics, in other words, is oriented to revelation and not toward morality*’. ²⁵ If this centre does not hold, then Lehmann feared, then so also dissolves the ‘formative power of particularity’ which actually makes Christian faith, thought, and life serviceable to God’s philanthropic purposes in the world.²⁶ Christian political service is always, as Lehmann styles it, *catalytic*. Christians never look to be political victors but merely salt, and light, and leaven in service to God’s own philanthropic politics.

3/ Concluding Remark

When *The Transfiguration of Politics* was published in German translation in 1987, the elder Lehmann provided new forward which drew attention once more to ‘the revolutionary gospel’. The adventure of Christian political service becomes concrete—and therefore faithful and serviceable—within the determinative context of the philanthropy of God of Jesus Christ. This, Lehmann explains, ‘presupposes that the human situation is determined by and understood from the Word of God, and that therefore (to speak with Karl Barth) the ‘word concerning the substance of the matter’ is concretely and liberatingly realised precisely as a ‘word to the situation’.²⁷ The promise of theological ethics lies in its service to the justifying presence of Christ in his Word in all its critical, salutary, and re-creative power. It is this—God’s philanthropy, the ‘substance of the matter’—which finally must come to timeous expression in our politics. For the genuine humanity of the revolution, when it comes, will

²⁵ Paul L Lehmann, *Ethics in a Christian Context* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 45. See Christopher R.J. Holmes, *Ethics in the Presence of Christ* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), pp. 4-5 where this is firmly recognized. This view of the distinctiveness of Christian ethics is a clear echo and conscious extension of the claims set out in Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics* MSS—see *Ethics*, DBWE 6 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), p. 47 (the opening of ‘Christ, Reality, and the Good’ and even more sharply ‘God’s Love and the Disintegration of the World’, pp. 299-300).

²⁶ Lehmann regularly appeals and/or alludes to William Butler Yeats’ poem, *The Second Coming*, when reflecting on the dynamics of such themes in church and wider culture.

²⁷ Paul L. Lehmann, ‘Vorwort zur deutschen Ausgabe’, in *Christologie und Politik* (Göttingen, 1987), p. 7. Writing in 1972 Lehmann had observed: ‘At least thirty years ago, Barth refused to give theological status to the distinction between *ein Wort zur Sache* (content) and *ein Wort zur Lage* (situation). He was prophetically and proleptically correct’—‘Contextual Theology’, *Theology Today* 29:1 (1972), p. 4.

turn upon our hearing and owning the powerful eloquence of what the God of the gospel is actually doing in the world to make and to keep human life human.

END