

THE LOGIC OF LUTHER

By Rich Lusk

I think the logic of the Lutheran Reformation can be summarized in one sentence, attributed to Luther himself:

"God does not need your good works, but your neighbor does."

The first half of that statement is *justification by faith*. God doesn't need our works to satisfy his justice or earn his favor. He justifies us apart from those things through Christ. Christ already made propitiation and secured God's good will towards us. All that Christ did on our behalf, offered to us in Word and sacraments, is received by faith alone. Works have no place in bringing about the transition from wrath to grace, or in moving us from a state of condemnation to a state of justification. God doesn't need our works; he rescues us by the work of his Son.

The second half of that statement is the *priesthood of all believers*. Since we are no longer focused on doing good works to try to earn justification or quench God's wrath, we are now set free to serve our neighbors in love through our daily vocations. Good works take on a horizontal focus. We serve God as priests by serving one another, doing something useful and oriented to the public good. We do not do good works to earn salvation before God, but to demonstrate salvation before our neighbor.

I would not say my one sentence summary of Lutheranism captures everything biblically; the Calvinistic wing of the Reformation was more holistic, no doubt, which is one reason why I remain firmly committed to the Calvinistic tradition. But you can see here Luther's genius, and how potent his theology was at the time. Before Luther, monks were kept busy doing "good works" like climbing the castle stairs on their knees or saying 500 "hail Marys" to try assuage an angry God. But such works didn't do anything to help neighbors; they were completely privatized and, in a sense, selfish, because they focused totally on the salvation of the self. After the Reformation, folks came to know the issue of God's wrath was settled at the cross, and so good works could become genuinely *good*, by focusing outwardly and publicly on the needs of others. Faith in the gospel

turned loose love for neighbor.

Luther's writing on true Christian liberty captures this: Having been set free by God, we are now slaves of our neighbors. Freedom and slavery go hand in hand. The vertical issue having been settled, we can focus on the horizontal. Since our relationship with God has been restored by Christ through faith, we can get to work restoring relationships with our neighbors through love. In this way, Luther's rediscovery of the gospel unleashed human energies and potentialities not seen since the generation of the apostles. When man no longer has to futilely expend energy climbing a ladder into the heavens, he can get to work transforming the earth.

Calvin was getting at the same thing when he said, "It is certainly the duty of a Christian man to ascend higher than merely to seek and secure the salvation of his own soul." That higher calling -- *higher than even securing your own salvation* -- is getting God glorified in the world through service to neighbor. This is why the Reformation gave birth to modern science, capitalism (= free markets), republican government, etc. -- it unleashed a new energy focused on making life better for all, as a form of neighbor love. And it achieved that in a marvelous way. The Reformation managed, at least for a while, to cut us loose from total preoccupation with self (and the self's salvation), and gave rise to an others-oriented, communal, public ethic. The Reformation is standing proof that we cannot have cultural transformation without the gospel, but if we do have the gospel we will most certainly get cultural transformation. The Reformation also stands as a warning: as our culture gets more and more preoccupied with the self (who can deny this is the present trend?), we can expect useful culture energy to dissipate, until we finally stagnate and even regress. We are at an impasse, a true fork in the road: either we will recover a full and courageous proclamation of the Reformational gospel, leading to cultural renewal, or we will sink into a truly dark age.