

The Faith/Works Conundrum

Dear Folks, This past weekend I got a new computer and cleaned off my desk in the process. At the bottom of one pile (don't tell me you never have piles on your desk!) I discovered this reflection I wrote a while back and realized that it was, unfortunately, still part of my struggle as a parish pastor.

The context of the piece was a Lutheran Confessions class I was taking with Ed through the Lutheran School of Theology here in St. Louis. I had decided that I needed a confessions "tuneup" after a couple of years in the parish. As you'll see when you read it, I was finding the faith/works conundrum that the Reformers and the Confutators argued about at Augsburg to be a living reality in my own life.

I'm hoping that I'm not the only one who struggles with this issue and that you'll share your thoughts and experiences with us. Next Thursday I'd like to be able to publish a compilation of what you've sent in as Thursday Theology #91. So, if you send me something, I'll assume you're giving me permission to use it next week and I'll publish it with your name unless you ask to be anonymous.

For those of you who aren't Lutheran and/or don't remember the context of the Augsburg Confession: In 1530 Holy Roman Emperor Charles V summoned to an imperial diet in Augsburg both sides of the religious debate that was dividing the Empire and making it difficult for him to present a united front against the Turks who were threatening Europe from the south. The Reformers prepared the Augsburg Confession to present their position to Charles V (remember, heresy equals treason at this time). The Confutators were the men from Rome who responded to the Reformers on behalf of the Pope, allowing some of the Reformers' points to stand, but disputing others. The Apology

to the Augsburg Confession was the Reformers' response to the Confutators' critique.

Article four was the linchpin in the debate between the Reformers and the Confutators and the center of my reflection as well. Is justification by faith in Christ alone without works the only criterion for salvation? We might, as descendants of the Reformation, offer an automatic yes to that question, but I wonder if it's really as automatic in our lives as we sometimes assume. The question may not come up exactly the way it was phrased in the 16th century, but the faith/works conundrum is alive and well in the 21st century as far as I can tell.

I hope this inspires some thoughts in you, even if the empire isn't at stake or is it?

*Peace,
Robin*

I recently read an article in "Civilization" the magazine of the Library of Congress, entitled, "Why Can't We All Just Relax?" The author, Verlyn Klinkenborg, explores why, with all the labor saving devices, doubled productivity of American workers since WWII and advanced technology, we have one third less leisure time now than we did in the early 1970s.

Klinkenborg rightly highlights the heretical sound of a 1935 essay by Bertrand Russell called "In Praise of Idleness" and that "in a society where, for better or worse, we all define ourselves by what we buy, leisure is now just another (highly profitable) market, just another commodity."

However, I wonder if our self flagellation about materialism and

its penance – simplify, stop and smell the roses – is merely another cover-up for what we refuse to acknowledge; that eventually the Conductor will be coming through our car and we'd better have a ticket for him to punch.

Justifying our existence through activity, measured by whatever yardstick we use, is as much a part of life today as it was in the 16th century. Though we have edged our Judeo-Christian heritage far from the center of our world, we still know that there's no free lunch.

As one who ministers in a neighborhood where anarchy isn't just knocking at the door, he's sitting in the living room, drinking beer and watching TV, I am concerned, along with the Confutators, about the doing of good works. It would certainly be easier to hook something eternal onto the care of the world so that people would be motivated by self-interest to take care of business. Today, rather than going to the Bible, we might take our cues from public television's begging week strategies, the environmentalist's planetary doom scenarios or the fear that lurks in the back of every red blooded American's mind – what if we lose our position as the richest, most powerful nation in the world?

The Reformers, in surveying our present landscape, would say that people today have no resources with which to do good works because the Good News of Jesus Christ has not been preached in all of its efficacy to these terrified and anxious consciences. Our materialism, addictive behaviors, even our refusal to live and work on behalf of the community's good is because people, for the most part, are bereft of faith in the promise that Christ has set us free to live for Him rather than according to the dictates of the world. We clutch at what we know or what we have; we drown our inadequacies in anything that will get us through the night.

The Church's primary call is to preach the Gospel and administer the Sacraments so that the gathered congregation can be brought to faith, created in Christ Jesus and then sent into the world to do the good works that God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.