

A Review of William Lazareth's "Christians in Society: Luther, the Bible and Social Ethics"

Dear Folks,

Here's the review of a very useful book which I recommend to you, even with the caveats which I articulate below. Peace,
Robin Morgan

A Review of William Lazareth's "Christians in Society: Luther, the Bible and Social Ethics" Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001

William Lazareth's book, "Christians in Society: Luther, the Bible and Social Ethics," offers the reader some useful resources, enlightens some aspects of Luther's thinking and leaves some important questions unanswered. In Lazareth's preface he writes that his intended audience is theological students, pastors, priests and lay people interested in exploring a central theme of Luther's works through primary and secondary texts. As a member of two of those groups (theological student and pastor) I started the book with interest and have been impressed with the breadth and depth of his knowledge of Luther's works. However, I am left with the feeling that, if Lazareth has it right, truly understanding social ethics in a law and promise Lutheran way is still

outside my grasp.

His first chapter is a very helpful literature review of scholarship written in reaction to the accusation that law and gospel theology leads to social quietism among Lutherans. Separating rather than distinguishing the two kingdoms theology in Germany culminated in the Nazis use of Luther to justify their positions and actions. Lazareth goes back to the nineteenth century throne and altar ethics of German churches as well as Ernst Troeltsch's scathing critique of such ethical quietism and gradually makes his way forward to Barth, Niemoller, Mannermaa, Neuhaus and Benne. Lazareth seems to be asking whether Lutheran theology is constitutionally bound in such an open-to-evil quagmire. The first chapter's title, "The Post-Nazi Recovery of Lutheran Public Responsibility," and the resounding NO which Lazareth trumpets throughout the rest of the book is his answer.

To begin his exploration of Luther and the foundation of Lutheran social ethics present in his works, Lazareth states that we must return to the Bible. Luther used three principles of biblical interpretation: "1) the authority of the Word of God in the Bible, 2) the organic relation of Scripture to the church's dogmatic tradition and 3) the Bible as the history of the people of God." (33) It was this starting point of Scripture rather than the philosophical grounding of the Scholastics that led Luther to his understanding of law and gospel as the fundamental components of God's interaction with the world. Lazareth, through the use of innumerable Luther quotes, makes it clear that Luther saw God's law and God's gospel at work in both the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. "What is truly biblically distinctive about Luther is the dialectical way in which he witnesses to God's temporal twofold rule by law and gospel within each of these two kingdoms of fallen creation and renewed redemption." (116)

Parts two and three of the book parse out this statement at length. Chapters three and four detail God's kingdom versus Satan's kingdom. Chapters five, six, seven and eight explore the two functions of God's law (judgment and preservation) and the two functions of God's gospel (justification and sanctification).

Because I don't have even a fraction of Lazareth's scholarly understanding of the breadth and depth of Luther's works, I can't go into a point by point analysis of this book which I do recommend to anyone committed to the future of law and promise theology, especially in light of social ethics. However, I would like to look at two issues that caught my eye and, I believe, are examples of problems still unanswered with Lazareth's final solution to how Christians are to do social ethics in the world.

The first point is about the Large Catechism. Lazareth says that "In Luther's Large Catechism, the 'Christian difference' is also dialectically demonstrated between the negative you-shall-nots of the Decalogue text as such and his own positive explications of the Ten Commandments for spirit-empowered baptized Christians. Thereby baptized Christian catechumens, at once sinful and righteous, are both goaded by apodictic demands insofar as they are still sinful and guided by their evangelical explications insofar as they are already righteous." (226) I don't hear the 'Christian difference' in the Large Catechism. Especially in my favorite paragraph concerning social ethics (Kolb and Wengert, 419:246, 247) in the explanation of the seventh commandment "You are not to steal" where Luther goes on at length about our responsibilities to the poor and the consequences of not being obedient to God's will, there is no gospel, only law. I don't hear new commandment in Christ here in Lazareth's "Christian difference" motif, I hear third use of the law.

Secondly, Lazareth talks about God's primal and permanent command, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." He says it was the pre-fall command to Adam and Eve and it is the new command in Christ to us as redeemed Christians. What's new about loving your neighbor as yourself? Love is one of those words in American English that is difficult to use when making precise theological statements considering its overuse in our culture. What is inherently Christian about this love? Parents have sacrificed themselves for their children without being Christian, soldiers sacrifice themselves on behalf of their country. Lots of people have loved their neighbor as they have loved themselves, whether for good or for ill. It may be refined law, but law nonetheless.

Maybe I'm just in a grim mood, it is Ash Wednesday after all, but I'm wondering if our need to define our capacity to function more ethically than anybody else in the world is more a manifestation of our sinfulness than it is of our genuine ability to sustain new creation action in our lives and the lives of our communities. When Lazareth is talking about original righteousness and the image of God that Adam and Eve had before the fall, he quotes Luther as he ruminated about the fate of that original image on human kind: "Since the loss of this image through sin, we cannot understand it to any extent. Memory, will, and mind we have indeed; but they are most seriously weakened, yes, to put it more clearly, they are utterly leprous and unclean... . Therefore when we speak about that image, we are speaking about something unknown. Not only have we not experience of it, but we continually experience the opposite; and so we hear nothing but bare words... ." (61) Lazareth favorably uses this Luther quote where he is saying that, even now, we have no clue about the original divine image. Why does Lazareth then go on to articulate so much about which we know almost nothing?

We do act as new creation human beings as we partake of the sacrament and hear and trust the gospel preached rightly. We are transformed and manifest the fruits of the Spirit and bring new creation realities into the lives of those around us while also doing an even better job in our old creation assignments. But we do this old and new creation activity within the structures of the world that God set in place for the preservation of creation and, as such, are under the law. Granted, some of our “new” activity does indeed undermine the lawful patterns of the world’s good and godly structures. Such as when we respond with forgiveness where reciprocal fairness is called for. But that’s another topic. Even the structured church is one of these structures that fluctuates with the changing circumstances, particularly the political and economic climate.

Strangely, for me this doesn’t feel like a capitulation to some lesser state, but rather the freedom to acknowledge who I really am, totally saint and totally sinner, wholly justified and partially sanctified. I am bound to my community and the work that needs to be done here in St. Louis not because I have some superior gnosis as a Christian, but because God calls all human beings to preserve the creation. And I have the privilege of telling people about my Lord who gives me new creation life, no matter how hidden it may be in this old creation world.

The most useful statement Lazareth makes for me as a theological student and pastor in 2003 is something he quotes from his chapter “Christian Faith and Culture” in a three volume work called *Christian Social Responsibility* edited by Harold C. Letts and written in 1957:

“We have thus established three fundamental theses which can serve theologically to undergird the necessity and justification of Christian social responsibility. First, that

there is no sphere of life which is a law unto itself, autonomous of the absolute sovereignty of God, however free it must remain from ecclesiastical domination. Secondly, that all persons, even apart from Christ, are capable of a high degree of social justice in the building of a peaceful and humane society in which the Christian offers his or her critical co-operation and responsible participation. Thirdly, that it is in and through the personal and corporate witness of his faithful followers in their civic vocations, as well as their church worship, that Christ's lordship—however hidden in its servant form—is made manifest in our communal life in contemporary society.” (29)