

# Implications of Luther's Treatise on Good Works for Four Common ELCA Practices and Ideas

Colleagues,

Today's posting comes from Timothy J. Hoyer, ELCA pastor of Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Lakewood, New York. Peace & Joy!  
Ed Schroeder

FYI. #1. Re: recent book reviews posted on ThTh. I've learned that Barbara Rossing's Rapture Exposed is out in paperback. Another one of you tells me: "Please draw attention to the article in Pro Ecclesia XII/4, Fall 2003, by Matthew Becker, being a 30 page summary of his work on J von Hoffman."

FYI. #2. A few more dewdrops showed up on the Manipur fleece this week. Now \$5K of liquidity.

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*People are constrained by the law. All speeding drivers slow down when they see a police car up ahead on the highway. People are held back by what they think is immoral or not the right thing to do. And they don't like that. So, when they are told that they are free from the law because they are right to God*

by faith in Christ, too often their initial response is that they are glad that they can finally do whatever they want.

But that is to act in bad faith toward Christ. That is to bury him again and say that what he wants-their forgiveness from God-means nothing. That is to betray his leadership of forgiveness and love. That is to reject Christ's gift of his Holy Spirit as one's new guide in life. And remember, the Spirit always and only guides with Christ and his forgiveness and love. The Spirit never guides using something else, because that would also betray Christ's leadership.

St. Paul had to repeat his message of Christ making people right with God to Christians in the city of Corinth because the Corinthians said that they were now allowed to do anything they wanted because, if there were no law, then everything was lawful. Paul told such Christians that they mistook their freedom in Christ to be freedom in their own desires. Freedom in Christ is more than libertinism's sort of freedom from the law. Freedom in Christ is to be in Christ, to live following Christ as Lord and Master, not to be in oneself and one's own desires. Of course, Christ as Lord and Master is not Christ as the demanding boss giving orders. Christ as Lord and Master is Christ serving forgiveness and love by a cross. One may be free from the law, but only when one is a slave to Christ.

When Luther repeated Christ's and Paul's message of justification by faith in Christ alone, that is, people are right to God by faith and are free of the law, his listeners also began to do as they pleased and to ignore even the laws of their towns. A friend of Luther's told him that people thought he was implying that good works were no longer required and did not have to be done at all. He asked Luther to preach some sermons about faith and good works. When Luther eventually agreed and began to write, he got caught up in the message and

*instead of sermons wrote the Treatise on Good Works which was published in 1520.*

*Luther wrote of good works, but the good works of faith. "The first, highest, and most precious of all good works is faith in Christ, and as it says in John 6.28-29, when the Jews asked him, 'What must we do, to be doing the good work of God?' Jesus answered, 'This is the good work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent' (Luther's Works, Vol. 44, p.23). "It is from faith as the chief work and from no other work that we are called believers in Christ" (p. 25).*

*Faith in Christ, always and only faith in Christ, is how works are good to God and how "all good works exist" (p. 24). In Luther's day, Christians were taught that only certain works were good to God, such works that were commanded by the church-pilgrimages, joining a monastery, fasting, or being a priest. Regular work or secular work, such as caring for a family, baking bread, working on a farm, were considered to be nothing to God. But Luther, building on faith, said, "God is served by all things that may be done, spoken, or thought in faith" (p. 24). "In this faith all works become equal, and one work is like the other; all distinctions between works fall away, whether they be great, small, short, long, many, or few. For the works are acceptable not for their own sake but because of faith, which is always the same and lives and works in each and every work without distinction, however numerous and varied these works always are" (p. 26). "Faith makes no distinction among works, then where faith is present such trumpeting and urging of one kind of work above another cannot exist. Faith desires to be the only way of serving God, and will allow this name and honor [serving God] to no other work, except in so far as faith imparts it, as it does when the work is done in and by faith" (p. 33).*

Next, Luther asserts justification by faith alone even though others said that “faith alone” caused people to think that good works were no longer needed. Luther talks of the “work of faith,” which is to trust, love, and fear God to be gracious and kind for Christ’s sake. He states that nothing tells a Christian what to do except faith in Christ, not even the law, the Ten Commandments, or what some call “The Third Use of the Law.” “A Christian person living in this faith has no need of a teacher of good works, but he does whatever the occasion calls for, and all is well done” (p. 26). “If every person had faith we would need no more laws. Everyone would of themselves do good works all the time, as their faith shows them” (p. 35).

To Luther, the contrast was between “A Christian who lives in this confidence toward God knows all things, can do all things, ventures everything that needs to be done, and does everything gladly and willingly, not that he may gather merits and good works, but because it is a pleasure for him to please God in doing those things” (p. 27) and “On the other hand, whoever is not at one with God, or is in a state of doubt, worries and starts looking about for ways and means to do enough and to influence God with many good works” (p. 27). Those who do not believe that faith in Christ is the chief work and the only work that makes a person a follower of Christ are the ones who, because of their unbelief, make “church work” more important to God than other work.

Next, Luther, in this treatise, goes on to show how faith does good works. When a Christian has everything go wrong with their life, their goods, their honor, their friends, or whatever they have, they still get to believe that their works are well-pleasing to God, and “that God in his mercy ordains their sufferings and difficulties for them, whether they be small or great. The great thing in life is to have a sure confidence in God when, at least as far as we can see or understand, God

shows himself in wrath, and to expect better at his hands that we now know" (p. 28). Even more, "Beyond all this is the highest stage of faith when God punishes the conscience not only with temporal sufferings but with death, hell, and sin, and at the same time refuses grace and mercy, as though he wanted to condemn and show his anger eternally. To believe at such times that God is gracious and well-disposed toward us is the greatest work that may ever happen to and in a Christian" (p. 29).

The next work of faith is prayer. "But what else are God's blessings and adversities than a constant urging and stirring up to praise, honor, and bless God, and to call upon him and his name?" (p. 40) Also, in the same way, a Christian "is to be on one's guard, to flee from and to avoid all temporal honor and praise, and never to seek a name for oneself, or fame and a great reputation" (p. 42) so that only Christ's name is honored and blessed and praised. God's name is honored and hallowed "when we name it and call upon it in adversity and need. And in the final analysis this is why God sends us much trouble, suffering, adversity, and even death as well" (p. 46).

To trust that God is gracious in times of adversity is not something a person would do on their own. So Christ has "bequeathed and distributed not interest, money, or temporal possessions, but the forgiveness of sins, grace, and mercy unto eternal life, that all who come to [his Supper] shall have the same testament. He died with the intent that this testament become permanent and irrevocable. In proof and evidence of this he has left his own body and blood under bread and wine, instead of letter and seal" (p. 55-56). A Christian thus accepts Christ's invitation to supper, to worship in church, and does so in order not to make Christ a liar.

To do these works of faith, to honor God's name, to receive

Christ's mercy, to pray to God in times of blessing and adversity, is enough to keep a person busy every day. Faith also keeps a Christian busy in being obedient, in parents giving their children the mercy of Christ, in Christians being meek caring for their neighbors' and enemies' needs, in caring for their spouse and being chaste, in using all of one's possessions to feed the hungry, and in speaking well of others. There is so much of such work to do that a Christian will never get all that work done. So, how can anyone think that justification by faith in Christ alone does not talk of good works?

### **Implications**

Here are four practices and ideas in the ELCA that are effected by faith being the chief and only work of the Christian: "Servant of Christ" awards, bigger churches are better churches, church work is to be honored more than other work, and "the Bible says so."

"Servant of Christ" awards are given by some synods to people who have done an extra amount of volunteer work for their congregation. This award is given by the synod to teach everyone else that they should be just as busy volunteering in their home congregation in order to be a good Christian, or to be a servant of Christ. If one does not do as much work for the church, then one is not a servant of Christ. When a Servant of Christ award is given, it is as if the church was saying, "Look at how good this person is and how many good works they have done. You are not as good and should do as much as this person." But how ridiculous for the church to say such a thing when the work of faith is the chief and first work and that there is no distinction in other works or in how many a person does. How different that award is than the comfort of living in faith. "For Luther whatever is done in faith-even if it be to

*suffer and endure the infirmities and loneliness of old age-is pleasing in God's sight, for faith fulfills all commandments and makes all its works righteous" (p. 19).*

*Perhaps the Servant of Christ award could be given to a person who seemingly does little. "The wonderful and righteous judgment of God [Servant of Christ award] is based on this, that at times in the privacy of his home a poor man, in whom nobody can see many great works, joyfully praises God when he fares well, or with entire confidence calls upon God when he is in adversity" (p. 41). Give the reward to the husband who comes to church once a month and during the week tends his wife who is in a wheelchair, who wheels her to the car and gently lifts her in, and does this many times for many years and no one in the church ever sees him do it. But such works of faith are not highly regarded by the church or by members of a congregation, nor are they seen except by the Father in heaven. The "Servant of Christ" awards are given out of doubt that God is pleased with works by faith alone or that even the smallest work-"picking up straw" is awarded God's pleasure because of faith.*

*Congregations that offer lots of programs-parenting classes, sports, outings for youth to water parks or camps, book clubs, movie clubs-are regarded as better, more Christian, than small congregations that offer only worship, Sunday School, confirmation, and a youth group. The bigger churches that have all those programs are seen as successful, as the model for other congregations. Yet, in all the publicity for those larger churches, one does not hear about faith, about the work of faith in times of adversity, as the reason to join the church.*

*People are encouraged to participate in the large church's programs as if their programs were more the proper church thing to do than to join the library's book club or the birthing classes at the hospital.*

*Which congregations are serving God? Are not they all? Small congregations, which are over half the congregations of any Christian denomination, are equally as pleasing to God because they proclaim faith in Christ. In this society where size matters, people feel better about their congregation if it's bigger and improved, as if Christ forgiving people is not enough reason to feel good about one's congregation. To feel that size matters is to regard Christ forgiving people as less important than the annual craft sale. Faith desires that faith only is seen as serving God.*

*Another idea included in size matters is that the pastor of a large church is to be more respected than the pastor of a small congregation and to be paid more. If ten pastors of the ten largest congregations in a synod make a statement about divorce and remarriage, they are to be listened to much more than if fifteen pastors of fifteen churches with less than seventy people at Sunday worship were to send a letter to the bishop and all the synod asking for pastoral care in times of teenage pregnancy and possible abortion. Do pastors of large congregations have a different Christ? Do pastors of small congregations not also offer the same mercy of Christ? There should be the same respect for pastors no matter the size of their congregation, and there should even be the same pay.*

*Similar to Servant of Christ awards is the idea that church work-church council, choir, property committee-is to be more worthy of God's approval than machine work, waitressing, bus driving, or working as a cashier, a shelf stocker, or an electrician at the print shop. Congregations put a lot of effort into cajoling their members to participate in some church activity and that their church is doing what a church is supposed to do when they get people to participate in some church activity. However, congregations could, according to faith in Christ alone, encourage people to eat dinner together*



as a family, or to talk to a neighbor they meet in the grocery store or to take pride in their work and do it honestly and respect the people they work with and say only good things about them. Congregations could encourage their members not to do church activities but to call on a housebound neighbor or visit at the county nursing home. "Thus the Christian who in faith stays at home to support the family and to care for his wife and children rather than make a pilgrimage does a truly good work, and one which is commanded by God. Prevalent teaching and popular piety, however, would have it the other way around" (p. 19). A Christian is not Christian or a better Christian because of their church work. A Christian is a Christian only because of their faith in Christ. "It is from faith as the chief work and from no other work that we are called believers in Christ" (p. 25).

Lastly, there is way too much shouting of "The Bible says so" among Christians. Christians loudly voice, "The Bible says this is wrong! The Bible says we can't do that! The Bible is against such things! The Bible says those people are doing terrible things! The Bible says we must be like this, do this, and behave this way!" In the whole Treatise on Good Works Luther never says, "The Bible says so," yet he quotes the Bible quite often. How does Luther quote the Bible but not join the loud voices of "The Bible says so"?

Luther bases his teaching on faith in Christ, on the death and resurrection of Christ, on Christ's promise to forgive people and give them eternal life. "Faith must spring up and flow from the blood and wounds and death of Christ" (p. 38). "We must listen to the words of Christ when he institutes the mass and says, "Take, eat; this is my body, which is given for you." In like manner he says over the cup, "Take it and all of you drink of it: this is a new everlasting testament in my blood, which is shed for you and for many for the remission of sins. Do

*this, as oft as you do it, in remembrance of me...[Christ] has bequeathed and distributed the forgiveness of all sins, grace, and mercy unto eternal life, that all who come to this memorial shall have the same testament" (p.55-56). So Luther repeatedly and assuringly says that faith is the key, the source, the foundation for everything. "God is served by faith." "Faith is the chief work." "If he finds his heart confident that it pleases God..." "Faith (that is the faith or confidence that God is gracious at all times) is the very first, highest, and best from which all other works must proceed, in which they must exist and abide, and by which they must be judged and assessed" (p. 30).*

*The Bible is a witness to Christ and his testament of forgiveness. And that is how Luther uses the Bible in his treatise. When Luther says that faith is the first and highest work, he quotes John to say, "See? What I teach about faith is what John also witnesses about faith." When he writes that faith makes precious what others think shameful, even death, he quotes the same testimony from Psalm 116.15, "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints" (p. 28). He is teaching and preaching the same thing the witnesses of Christ testify to, and he proves it by giving an example of their witness about faith in Christ. "This good will and favor [of God through Christ], on which our confidence rests, was proclaimed by the angels from heaven when they sang on Christmas morn, 'Glory be to God on high, peace on earth, good will to men' [Luke 2.14]" (p. 29).*

*Luther seems to look at the Bible and ask, "How does this verse talk about faith in Christ? What does this verse say about faith?" It's as if he approaches the Bible and reads the Bible expecting everything he reads to be about faith in Christ. For example, "And in Psalm 4.6-7, 'The light of thy countenance hovers over us (that is, the knowledge of thy grace through*

*faith) and thereby thou hast made my heart glad" (p. 37). The parenthesis is Luther's own insert. Luther expects to find faith in every verse of the Bible, "For as faith expects, so does it come to pass" (p. 37). Or, "Thus Isaiah rebukes the people of Israel in Isaiah 48. [1-2], 'Hear this, you who bear the name of Israel as if you were the people of Israel, you who swear by the name of God and think you still stand in truth and righteousness.' That means that they did not act in true faith and confidence, which is real truth and righteousness, but trusted in themselves, their works, and in their own abilities" (p.42).*

*Thus, Christians get to use the Bible and interpret the Bible and use the Bible always in a way that proclaims faith in Christ, and to speak it just like St. Paul, "God shows his love toward us as exceedingly sweet and kind in that Christ died for us while we were yet sinners" (p.38). Christians should never shout, "The Bible says that is wrong! We must be true to the Bible. We must only do what Scripture says. The Bible is against that and the Bible is the word of God that cannot be changed." Such ideas about the Bible have nothing of faith in them and nothing of Christ in them. People misuse the Bible that way because they doubt that the work of faith in Christ is all that is needed to be a Christian and to please God. So they look to the Bible to tell them what other works must be done and what works not to do, as if by doing what the Bible directs them to do they will be doing good and God-pleasing works. Luther never uses the Bible that way. He speaks of faith in Christ and then says the Bible also says the same thing and quotes a verse to illustrate how the Bible is also all about faith in Christ.*

*Faith in Christ is the first, highest, and most precious work. On the work of faith all other works depend and from it all others flow. Let the ELCA use faith in Christ to direct its*

*actions and ideas.*

*Timothy Hoyer*