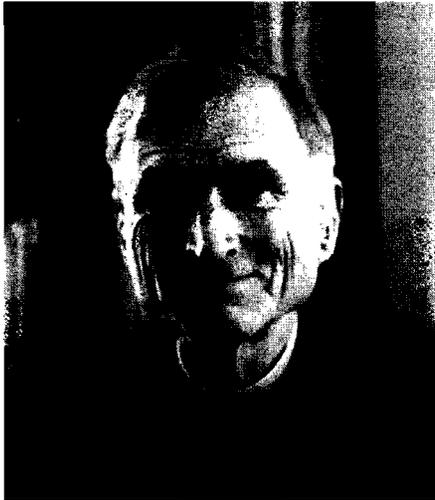


UNSUNG HERO

A Lutheran Who Makes a Difference

Richard J. Niebanck

A Hero of the Two Kingdoms



Richard J. Niebanck

What are the implications of the gospel for daily life? Ask Pastor Richard J. Niebanck! Look at his words and actions. He has witnessed to the gospel of Christ crucified and its necessary implication: Freedom for the right use of reason in daily life.

From 1963 to 1985 Pastor Niebanck served on the staff at LCA Headquarters. From 1974-85 he was the Secretary for Social Concerns in the Department for Church in Society, Division for Mission in North America. A graduate of Hamilton College, Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, and the New School for Social Research, Pastor Niebanck's legacy has been to chart a course for Lutherans who know the church is properly free from captivity to the politics of the left or the right – or even the middle.

In 1994-95 Pastor Niebanck participated in drafting the "9.5 Theses Concerning the Confession

of Faith in the ELCA." From Thesis #6 on the Vocation of the Baptized and Good Works:

We reject the false teaching that would elevate advocacy for self-chosen high-visibility causes above the common participation of Christians in the life of the world as husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, employers, workers, artists, teachers, doctors, lawyers, politicians, etc. The Word of God is silenced among us and driven out of the Church whenever the daily vocation of Christians is denigrated.

Pastor Niebanck has a keen eye for the triumphalism that tempts Christians to pride and despair:

..Today I see such **triumphalism** in the Church Growth ideology in which one grows a church as one might grow a business. . . . I see it in a **social activism which is dedicated to the transformation of this world according to a Biblical blueprint.**

This triumphalism breeds "an **abiding anxiety over whether we've 'gotten it right' or 'given of ourselves enough'**" (Review: Three Books on Peace, *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 5:7, 6/05).

A Public Stand

In 2001 when the Upstate New York Synod Assembly voted to bless same-sex unions, Pastor Niebanck wrote a public letter announcing that he was out of communion with his Synod bishop and staff. As a consequence Pastor Niebanck stated: 1) He would not commune at any synodically-sponsored eucharist or at any altar at which the Syn-

odical Bishop was presiding; and 2) Neither the Synodical Bishop nor his representatives shall conduct or participate in his funeral when the time arises.

Like Luther, Pastor Niebanck is a churchman for whom faith means confessing "openly, not only by words, but also through deeds and actions" (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration 10:10).

Is the answer to church troubles today in tradition? No. Niebanck:

The church's answer to the fragmentation of tradition in the name of special interests cannot be the reconstitution of tradition. Humpty Dumpty cannot be put back together again. **A magisterium faithful to the Gospel cannot be created by outfitting bureaucrats in bishops' regalia** ("Grace and Public Theology: The Peril and Promise of a Post-Critical Epoch" *Lutheran Forum*, Lent, 1989, p.8).

Not "tradition" but the Word of the cross is the treasure of the church. Niebanck:

The answer to [the] ever-present hermeneutical risk is **God's setting before us ever again the Holy Cross in which His revelation is complete.** It will not be in our vain attempt to regain an abstract idea of transcendence, but it is in God's unfathomable holiness revealed once and for all in Jesus Christ: a man, he died for women and men; a Jew, he died for the whole world; a time-and space-bound denizen of first century Palestine who died our death, he lives as Lord of all time and space, of all things made through him, both visible and invisible. It is in the face of this Man that the Father's love, through the Holy Spirit, is made known to a fallen world (*Ibid*).