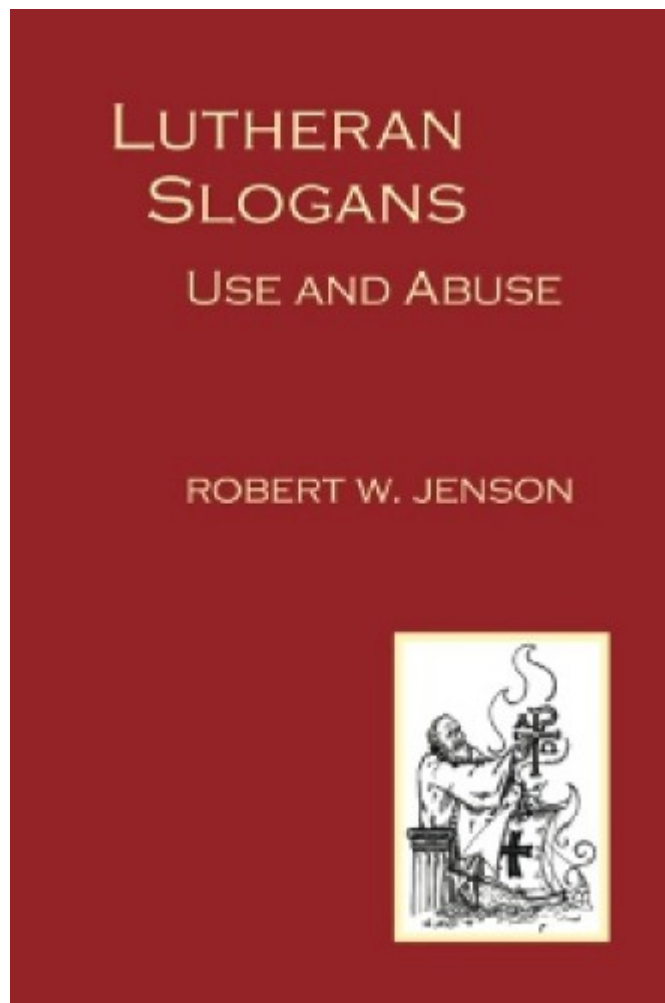


Turning discourse into slogans

By [David Heim](#)

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In Review



Lutheran Slogans

by Robert W. Jenson

American Lutheran Publicity Bureau

I recently heard a panel discussion in which the conversation turned to the sorry state of American political discourse, which too often descends into sloganeering--assertions about "smaller government," "equal rights," "personal responsibility" or "liberty," as if that ends the discussion.

One of the panelists was biblical scholar N.T. Wright, who commented: "Turning discourse into slogans is a classic postmodern thing to do."

His point, I take it, is that if each person has access only to his or her own personal truth and there is no publicly accessible version of truth in which we all participate--as apologists for postmodernism would contend--then disagreement can never turn into argument; it can only lead to an exchange of personal assertions, expressed in convenient slogans.

Wright's comment on "turning discourse into slogans" illuminates a good bit of our culture. In a way, however, it is itself a kind of slogan--a catchy way of making a point. It's not the end of the discussion of postmodernism and its effects.

Slogans, in that sense, are useful if they serve to provoke thought and enliven discussion rather than shut it down.

Think of Stanley Hauerwas's famous slogan, "The church doesn't have a social ethic; it is a social ethic." This remark is meant to challenge a particular kind of ethical reflection, not end an argument. When it does the latter, it ceases to be useful.

In a new little book (80 pp.) titled *Lutheran Slogans: Uses and Abuses*, theologian Robert Jenson defines a slogan as "a placeholder for and pointer to" a constellation of arguments and propositions. Slogans are necessary, he says,

both for practical reasons (we need shortcuts in arguments) and rhetorical ones (we need vivid ways of summing up a position). Problems arise when slogans take on a life of their own and become "untethered from the complex of ideas and practices which they once evoked."

Jenson

proceeds to examine some classic theological slogans ("justification by faith," "sola scriptura," "priesthood of all believers") that have become untethered and either twisted out of shape or applied in contexts that alter their meanings.

So

for example, "justification by faith" is often used as a standalone summary of the Christian message--in which case it can easily be construed as another kind of work ("So have I really believed?"). The phrase is meant, he says, not as a summary of the gospel but as a rule about the gospel for preachers, directing them to construct their message around God's saving work, not human accomplishments.

Jenson's

book is available from the [American Lutheran Publicity Bureau](#).