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## Reformation Sunday • Romans 3:19–28 • October 25, 2015

Robert Rosin

*Concordia Seminary, St. Louis*, [rosinr@csl.edu](mailto:rosinr@csl.edu)

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“Greeks seek wisdom,” Paul once wrote, and they had plenty to offer. Over the centuries, sages had tried to make sense of things with varied results. Their wisdom of the time had come to accept the idea of fundamental chaos as a starting reality, which they then sought to overlay with some kind of organic order, with each part of the physical and social world assigned to its proper slot. After early attempts sought a foundation with air, fire, water, or numbers but found no real bottom, Plato upped the ante with a structure tied to ultimate ideas that gave shape to all below. It was a scheme he really could not prove, but with people looking for answers, this seemed like the “killer app.” Aristotle would modify (though not precisely counter) that framework while adding a kind of logic and a sense of morality that would prove so persuasive and useful that Aristotle would come to rule the roost, theology included, in the centuries before Martin Luther. “If . . . if . . . therefore” became received wisdom and drove the answer to the central question that dogged people: how can I be saved? If God is perfect and makes no mistakes, and if God gives the law and says “keep it,” therefore . . . Make sense? Unfortunately, yes—with a logic, a wisdom, that would (and still does) drive to distraction. Okay, grace assists, and there’s no pure works-righteousness. That would be Pelagianism, which the church had spurned. But in the end, when lives are weighed in the balance, even when enabled by grace is it wise with a wave of the hand to dismiss what we do? And how much is enough?

St. Paul is anti-wisdom of this sort (and he’d studied it plenty and knew whereof he spoke). While today’s text is Romans 3, for a moment reach over to 1 Corinthians 1:19 and watch the cross do demolition, echoing Isaiah (29:14): I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and make rubbish out of the intelligence of the intelligent. So Christianity madly turns its back on “if . . . if . . . therefore.” Here in Romans in the first two verses Paul piles on just to make sure we get the point: if we had any ideas of striking a bargain, to weasel out, or to try another way, forget it. Laid low, the believer can only ’fess up to reality and confess, with no right to expect anything. God has got us dead to rights.

And then comes one of the most beautiful words in verse 21: “But.” But—not because of the law but in spite of and apart from it . . . It’s not a matter of “righteousness” as a quantity being amassed and presented (and just how much is enough?), but rather it’s “righteousness” as a quality given from and by Christ Jesus. There is still a cost—verses 23–25—but . . . What comes after the “but” makes all the difference.

The gospel flies in the face of logic, which is why Luther (in his 1517 “Disputation against Scholastic Theology”) said Aristotle is to theology as darkness is to light. The cross is such obvious folly as even a child can see. A grandmother was once telling her granddaughter what happened on Good Friday and why this was important—that we have done wrong (and we know what happens when people do wrong)—but instead God gave up his Son to die on the cross. The little girl thought a moment and then said, “I think God must be crazy.” Yes! Crazy, indeed. Crazy to do it because he is crazy in love with us. For no good reason, except he just is. There’s no making of

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lists with logical reasons to hang on to us, to do what he did. Nevertheless. It’s unbelievable—but believe it! Gates of paradise are flung wide open, Luther wrote, trying to describe the realization. Thank God God is a contrarian.

And so God puts his stamp, his order on the chaos we have unleashed. In Christ he mixes in, hands-on with hands pierced, silencing those who would boast, even as that silence fills instead with laughter and joy and praise for his grace, love, and mercy—his gift.