# Which Gospel Creates a “Community of Joy?”

Colleagues,

A few weeks ago Marie and I were in Phoenix AZ. Sunday rolled around. Where to go for “church?” Easy decision. The Community Church of Joy, flagship mega-church of the ELCA—12 thousand members and a 360 acre “campus.” We knew it only from the hearing of the ear. Now we would participate, see it “live.” Our host, Harvey Stegemoeller, at whose home we were staying (also a co-confessor during the Preus Wars of the 1970s) took us there. Below you have our “report.”Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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*March 21, 2003*
*Pastors Kallestad & Wright*
*Community Church of Joy*
*Phoenix, AZ*
*Dear Walt, Dear Tim,*

*Marie and I attended the 9:35 service last Sunday (March 16, 2003). Harvey Stegemoeller introduced us to you, Walt, after the service. Yesterday (Mar. 20) we returned home to St. Louis, and I want to address this right away.*

*The gist of my comments below is that although the two of you were leading us in worship on the theme “Battling the Enemies of Joy,” I think you succumbed to the enemies. And I imagine you do not believe me when I say that.*

*To be more pointed, your words in leading us in worship did NOT bring joy to Christ. If he were listening in—as he claims to be present where two or three are gathered in his name—he may have wept, as he did over Jerusalem. Jerusalem did not bring him joy even though it thought that what it was doing was pleasing to God. Ditto for the Community of Joy 9:35 service.*

*Here's why I say that:*

*First off, Tim.*

*Your words about the Lord's Supper were in clear contradiction to the words we have verbatim from Christ. And ironically you contradicted Christ immediately after you quoted him correctly as you spoke the words of institution for the Lord's Supper: "This IS my body, this IS my blood." And then immediately thereafter as you invited us worshippers to receive, you gave us a second opinion (apparently your own): "The bread REPRESENTS Christ's body; the grape-juice(!) REPRESENTS Christ's blood."*

*I trust that as a rostered ELCA pastor, you're aware that "half" of the Reformation conflict in the 16th century was fought over your "re-write" of Christ's promissory words in the Lord's Supper. Zwingli claimed REPRESENT, Luther claimed IS, and made a powerful case for "IS" as the Good News that brings Joy in the sacrament. Which side are you on? Does no one call you to account for this? Not only is this a clear contradiction of the Lutheran Confessions on which you most likely took an ordination vow, once upon a time, but also it contradicts what the "Foundations of Our Faith" folder says about Community Church of Joy in its section on the Lord's Supper. The word there is IS, not REPRESENTS.*

*The issue is not "mere words," of course, but Christ's word of promise to BE there in the bread and wine for forgiveness of*

*sins, life and salvation. If there is no "IS," then there is no Gospel, no forgiveness of sins, life and salvation. And that means no Joy, the sort of Joy Christ wants communicants to have. Also no Joy for Christ with your re-write of his promise. What on earth prompts you to do that?*

*Despite your contradicting Christ's word in inviting us to receive, Marie and I opted to trust Christ's own words—and disbelieve yours—and so we received the sacrament.*

*For you, Walt—and I'm not just a crotchety curmudgeonly old griper—I try in vain to see how Christ himself found any joy in your sermon. I don't say that with glee, but with sorrow.*

*Simple reason for saying that is this: Christ's cross and resurrection were never mentioned once in your message to us. And if not even mentioned, therefore not "needed" to get us to the joy you were commending. I'm pretty confident that you don't actually believe that, but that is what you proclaimed to us. Any proclamation of "Joy" (or peace, or faith, or hope, or love) that doesn't NEED Christ crucified and risen to get the hearers to that joy (or peace, or faith, or hope, or love), is NOT the Christian Gospel. In the words of St.Paul (Galatians) it is an "other" Gospel. In keeping with the theme of the day, Christ was robbed of Joy, and we in the pews got robbed too. In Paul's Galatian language, "then Christ died for no purpose."*

*I listened hard for Christ-grounding in the joy you were preaching to us, and it was absent. In fact, Christ's name only got mentioned a couple of times, usually as a synonym for God, and then at the end as you urged us to take Christ into our hearts because "your relationship to Christ" is the basis for joy. True, but that's not yet preaching the Gospel of Christ so that folks GET such a relationship, and as spin-off from that get the joy that the NT speaks of. The NT is unanimous that the*

*only way to escape the enemies of the joy of our salvation and regain that joy is—again as Paul says to the Corinthians—to "preach Christ crucified (and risen)." You never mentioned this explicitly CHRISTIAN Good News. How come? How come some "other" Gospel?*

*When Chareen (is that her name?) then came to the mike to tell her story ["The Beauty of Joy" in your printed outline] she too gave Christless witness. And you commended her to us as a powerful example of Christian Joy. In the conversation with her you once even asked her a "Christ-related" question, but she didn't follow your lead. She didn't speak of Christ and didn't need to mention his name (or his cross and resurrection) to continue her story. Lots of God-talk, sure, but "generic God talk" is not Christian. Jews do it, so do Muslims. Lots of other folks too. And her confession at the end: "Turn to God. If you put all your trust in God, everything will turn out all right" is not the confession commended by the NT. I'm guessing that you know that such a confession is also the confession of Muslims. Yes, she did admit that she had sinned by lying to her parents. Yet to talk about God and even God's forgiveness, but never confessing Christ, the very grounds for God's mercy to sinners, is Islam or Judaism, but not the Christian faith.*

*I'm confident that you do not believe that "Christ died in vain," so why did you proclaim to us a joy that didn't need to be grounded in Good Friday and Easter?*

*Sure, every preacher can have a "bad" day, but to hear at the Community of Joy a sermon on joy that bypassed Christ is jolting. If any congregation ought to have "joy" right, it should be one that calls itself by that name. I once taught homiletics. Christ-less sermons were frequent. They still are. When students handed in such a sermon, it got returned with these comments: "Still needs a little work in order to pass as*

*Christian proclamation—and I know you want to be preaching Christ's good news to your hearers."*

*One possible resource for you last Sunday to get Christ into the center of your sermon on joy could have been the lectionary Gospel for the day, but that was not part of the service, sorry to say.*

*Before Harvey Stegemoeller introduced us to you we overheard you and him talking about your recent medical trauma. I'm a firm believer in God giving us signs. Perhaps you are too. Heart problems for preachers might be a signal from Christ that they need to refocus on the "heart" of the Gospel, which is also the heart of Christian joy. A quick concordance check of the word in the NT makes it perfectly clear that the Christian joy arises always and only from the crucified and risen Messiah. Any joy grounded elsewhere comes from some other source, some "other" gospel.*

*In preaching from an OT text (Psalm 13) as you did, it is easy to preach a Jewish sermon. Christ is not mentioned in the text, so when you "preach the text" you might be tempted to think you can get along without putting Christ into the center of your sermon. This was precisely one point of debate reflected in the Apology to the Augsburg Confession (Art IV). Because of the Christ-less sermons so common in the church of his day, Melanchthon says: When the Gospel promise is not present in a Biblical text [like Psalm 13]—and you intend to preach on that text—"the promise of Christ must be added" so that what gets preached is what Christ wants his people to hear.*

*Walt and Tim, all these paragraphs are not intended to say I'm right, and you're wrong. They come from the same pastoral heart that doubtless beats within you two. My intention is surely your intention too: that those who gather at Community of Joy*

*might indeed have Christ's joy, and that their joy be "full." [John 17:13] There is only "one way" for that to happen—that they be connected (and re-connected Sunday after Sunday after Sunday) to Christ who in John 17 "goes to the Father" and is "glorified" on Good Friday & Easter.*

*If you get to read this before next Sunday's worship, check out what's going to happen. The test is simple. For the sermon: Did Christ die in vain? For the Lord's Supper: Is it "is," or isn't it? For a Community of [His] Joy the answers here make all the difference.*

*I commend that joy to you—and through your pastoral work to the folks Christ has entrusted to your care.*

*In His Peace & in His Joy!*
*Ed Schroeder*

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*Tues. March 25, 2003*

*Dear Ed,*

*Your critique was interesting. I believe you missed out on the true meaning and message of the "good news" that was being communicated. I totally disagree with your judgemental evaluation. I am not convinced that is the reason we worship! All I know is that lives were transformed during the very moments you were judging. In 25 years at Joy there has never been one week go by where a life is not totally and radically transformed by the power of the gospel. Maybe Joy does not do it the way you would do it…..however God gets the job done! Maybe it is a good thing that neither you nor I are God!*

*Dr. Walther P. Kallestad*
*A Community of Joy*

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*March 27, 2003*

*Dear Walt,*

*Thanks for your response. It seems we're on two different wave-lengths. Possibly tuned in to two different programs, both of which claim to be "Gospel." I think I understand yours. My hunch is that you don't understand mine. But I could be wrong—on both counts.*

*Even so, for the sake of that Gospel—one more time.*

*I reprint your text [with bracketed numerals inserted] and comment where the brackets are.*

> *Your critique was interesting. I believe you missed out on the*
> *true meaning and message of the "good news" [1] that was being communicated.*
> *I totally disagree with your judgemental [2] evaluation. I am not convinced*
> *that is the reason we worship! [3] All I know is that lives were transformed*
> *during the very moments you were judging. [4] In 25 years at Joy there has*
> *never been one week go by where a life is not totally and radically transformed*
> *by the power of the gospel.[5] Maybe Joy does not do it the way you would*
> *do it.[6]….however God gets the job done! [7]*
> *Maybe it is a good thing that neither you nor I are God! [8]*

*[1] "you missed out on the true meaning and message of the good news'"*

*That is exactly the point of debate between us: Just what is the "true meaning and message of the 'good news'"? What I heard you preach in that service was not "the true meaning and message of the 'good news.'" So my claim is that your sermon "missed out" on that Good News. This is not mud-slinging. It is a debate about substance. To wit: the N.T. "core" for THE Good News is "Christ crucified and risen," isn't it? These specs are the necesssary content for bringing Christian faith, hope, love, joy to people. Your sermon never mentioned this crucified and risen Messiah. So by this definition—and my claim is that this is Christ's own definition—it was not HIS good news that got preached, but someone else's. We probably disagree on what the specs for THE gospel are. You know my thoughts. I'd like to hear what you think those specs are.*

*[2] "judgmental"*
*In my Webster this word is "harsh—and often baseless—criticism." Yes, I was critical (= making an evaluative judgment) and perhaps to you it was harsh, but it was not baseless. Listen to the tape/video of your 9:35 a.m. sermon (March 16) and see if my ears heard correctly. I was not trying to "trap" you as I sat in the pew, but was listening for the Gospel that I live by, the only Gospel that Christ commands us pastors to preach, and urges us listeners to trust. I was wishing to be re-fueled for the coming week with that Good News. Nowhere did we hearers get THAT Gospel..*

*[3]"the reason we worship!"*
*I made no comments at all on "the reason we worship," nor on the sort of worship at Community Church of Joy. My entire letter focused on the proclamation you offered, and also on the Zwinglian theology Tim proclaimed at the celebration of the Lord's Supper.*

*[4] " lives were transformed"*

*Of course, lives can be transformed by your winsome preaching. My point is: what was this preacher's message? And from that message what sort of transformation arises? Doesn't the N.T. Scriptures claim that without a Crucified and Risen Christ being proclaimed, "lives" are not, nor can they be, transformed into what Christ wants them to become? They may be transformed into something else, but not into "conformity" to Christ. Once more, you may call that harsh. But the point of our debate is a matter of substance, not niceness or harshness. It may be a hard word, but it's all over the NT. And it's no harder than Paul's own words about the other gospels he encountered in the very churches he founded, gospels that often bypassed the crucified/risen Christ and thus, so he claimed, rendered Christ's death "in vain."*

*[5] "totally and radically transformed by the power of the gospel"*
*Which gospel? That's the issue here. I wish you would make the case—for what I sense you do believe—that a sermon without Christ crucified/risen, can still be a "Gospel" sermon. But which Gospel is that? Muslim clerics and Jewish Rabbis proclaim their own sort of "gospel" to their hearers. Those sermons are full of God-talk, but Christ crucified/risen is NEVER mentioned—for obvious reasons. Our Christ is NEVER the power for transformation in those sermons. Yet from such sermons human lives get transformed. People also get joy. There is power in those "other" gospels to do that. But the end-product is not what the "true" Gospel of Christ produces. So I ask you: What's the difference? What makes your sermon "Christian" gospel and the other sermons Jewish or Muslim when none of them offers the Crucified/Risen Christ to the hearers for their transformation?*

*[6] "Maybe Joy does not do it the way you would do it."*
*Sorry, I think you're side-stepping. Our debate is not about*

*how "I" want it done vs. how "Joy" does it. Our debate is about "Christ's" mandate to all of us on "the way to do it," namely how to proclaim HIS gospel. And if "the way" that I'm proposing to you is not His way, then you need to instruct me, show me, from the Scriptures that what you preached is what Christ authorizes his disciples to proclaim as his Gospel.*

*[7] "however God gets the job done!"*
*Your church's "Foundations of Faith" document says: "we affirm and identify with the Confessions of the Lutheran Church." So I'll ask a VERY Lutheran question: Which one of God's two "jobs" are you talking about? Those Lutheran Confessions—and I know that you know this—confess that God is constantly doing two "jobs" in the world—law and promise. And, of course, they got this from the Bible. In II Cor. 3, for example, Paul asserts that God does two "jobs" (Paul calls them "ministries") on sinners. One's a ministry that "kills," the other a ministry that "gives life." When the crucified/risen one is not preached, God's ministry that "gives life" does not happen. Nevertheless God's "other job" gets "done," namely, the "ministry of condemnation—the ministry of death." The Lutheran Reformation, your tradition and mine, was all about this. Christless sermons do indeed "do" a job, but it's not good news for sinners.*

*[8]"Maybe it is a good thing that neither you nor I are God!"*
*True enough. But irrelevant for our debate. Because there are objective criteria—call it the New Testament—for determing what is and what is not Gospel-preaching.*

*Summa:*
*Your words say it crisply. It's all about "the true meaning and message of the 'good news'." My contention is that what we heard that Sunday was not "good enough" to pass Christ's own test for Good News. If you think it was, then I need to be*

*edified—by you.*

*You may find it difficult to believe, but I too have a care for the people in your Community Church of Joy. Why else would I expend so much effort in responding to you? Answer: Because there is an even "better" gospel in the N.T. and in our Lutheran confessional heritage. I want you and them to benefit from it.*

*Peace & Joy!*
*Ed Schroeder*

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As of April 30, 2003 there has been no further exchange.