

The Spirit and the Publicly Engaged Church

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What it Looks Like When it Goes Right

On May 24, 1996, a group of Islamic terrorists announced that they had “slit the throats” of seven French Trappist monks whom they had kidnapped from the monastery of Tibherine in Algeria and held as hostages for two months. Prior to the kidnapping, the superior of the monastery, Father Christian de Chergé, had left with his family this testament “to be opened in the event of my death.”ⁱ

If it should happen one day—and it could be today—that I become a victim of the terrorism which now seems ready to encompass all the foreigners living in Algeria, I would like my community, my Church, my family, to remember that my life was given to God and to this country. I ask them to accept that the One Master of all life was not a stranger to this brutal departure. I ask them to pray for me: for how could I be found worthy of such an offering? I ask them to be able to associate such a death with the many other deaths that were just as violent, but forgotten through indifference and anonymity.

My life has no more value than any other. Nor any less value. In any case, it has not the innocence of childhood. I have lived long enough to know that I share in the evil which seems, alas, to prevail in the world, even in that which would strike me blindly. I should like, when the time comes, to have a clear space which would allow me to beg forgiveness of God and of all my fellow human beings, and at the same time to forgive with all my heart the one who would strike me down.

I could not desire such a death. It seems to me important to state this. I do not see, in fact, how I could rejoice if this people I love were to be accused indiscriminately of my murder. It would be to pay too dearly for what will, perhaps, be called “the grace of martyrdom,” to owe it to an Algerian, whoever he may be, especially if he says he is acting in fidelity to what he believes to be Islam. I know the scorn with which Algerians as a whole can be regarded. I know also the caricature of Islam which a certain kind of Islamism encourages. It is too easy to give oneself a good conscience by identifying this religious way with the fundamentalist ideologies of the extremists. For me, Algeria and Islam are something different; they are a body and a soul. I have proclaimed this often enough, I believe, in the sure knowledge of what I have received in Algeria, in the respect of believing Muslims—finding there so often that true strand of the Gospel I learned at my mother’s knee, my very first Church.

My death, clearly, will appear to justify those who hastily judged me naive or idealistic: “Let him tell us now what he thinks of it!” But these people must realize that my most avid curiosity will then be satisfied. This is what I shall be able to do, if God wills—immerse my gaze in that of the Father, to contemplate with him his children of Islam just as he sees them, all shining with the glory of Christ, the fruit of his Passion, filled with the Gift of the Spirit, whose secret joy will always be to establish communion and to refashion the likeness, delighting in the differences.

For this life given up, totally mine and totally theirs, I thank God who seems to have wished it entirely for the sake of that joy in everything and in spite of everything. In this “thank you,” which is said for everything in my life from now on, I certainly include you, friends of yesterday and today, and you my friends of this place, along with my mother and father, my brothers and sisters and their families—the hundredfold granted as was promised!

And you also, the friend of my final moment, who would not be aware of what you were doing. Yes, for you also I wish this “thank you”—and this *adieu*—to commend you to the God whose face I see in yours.

And may we find each other, happy “good thieves,” in Paradise, if it pleases God, the Father of us both. Amen.¹

A good question for when Christians gather – including we Lutherans who operate in some ways in as much of an ecclesial remove from our Trappist brothers as the Trappists did from the Islamic Aglerian villagers – might be framed as follows: what sort of life must be lived in order to produce such a remarkable document? Which raises the accompanying question: what must it mean for a Christian to have one’s life become such a masterwork of faith?

I should say that, as implied by my framing the question this way, I regard Fr. de Chergé’s statement as a near-perfect instance of how the Christian worldview, in genuinely incarnational rhetorical fashion (as Eric Auerbach noticed decades ago), blends the most eschatologically sublime understanding of the beautified vision characteristic of Christian hopes for heaven (*theoria* in the original sense) with an earthy, humane awareness of human fallibility and epistemological humility. In other words, it is a slam dunk. An act of Christian virtuosity that I would assert is indicative not only of individual charisma, but of successful Christian formation. This is what it looks like when it all goes right, and it is both gratifying and humbling.

If the topic of this talk is a Publicly Engaged Church, then a Trappist monastery in a remote Algerian village might seem a strange place to start. Luther’s critique of monasticism, of course, was predicated on what became his disdain for the problematic material AND theological economies which would regard a life of monastic separation from the world as the pinnacle of Christian living.

But the case of the monks of Tibherine, the case is more complex. As depicted movingly in the 2010 film *Of Gods and Men*, which tells the story of the monks, a major reason why they stayed was because the monks’ medical training was the only means for the Algerian peasants in the nearby village to receive medical care. The village was their public; that is made clear by the film. What is also made clear by the film, though, is a kind of shadow curriculum regarding the day-to-day activities of the monks. The film is two hours long, but only about 30 minutes of that run time is given over to the plot by which the monks are threatened, decide to stay, and are eventually captured – in other words, only about ¼ of the movie is “plot” per se. The rest of the film (in a manner akin to another excellent recent film about monastic life, *Into Great Silence*) is an extended lingering on the part of the camera over the daily lives and routines of the monks – washing dishes, laboring in gardens, praying, writing, etc. In a manner quite

¹ <http://www.firstthings.com/article/1996/08/006-last-testament>

different from the standardized (and relatively didactic) tropes by which the average Hollywood film approaches “characterization,” in both films the interplay of monastic anonymity and almost uncomfortable perspectival intimacy allows for viewers to encounter a somewhat disorienting but ultimately rich combination of ritual space and deep humanity.

There is much that could be said about the effect of such lingering, but for our Lutheran purposes, we can return to the tension around monasticism that is our inheritance and broaden the question a bit more: what are the modes by which the Spirit forms us now, in the 21st century, such that we can engage the public and its diversity (including diversity that includes genuine otherness, and indeed otherness that wants to kill us) in ways that are true to the gospel, proper to the Lutheran understanding of the primacy of the spirit’s work in creating holiness, and honoring of the tension between the historical sources that inform us and the contemporary worldviews that shape us in contested but indisputable ways? I want to be clear that when I talk about “honoring diversity,” I do not mean that in a fuzzy, PC way, or even in the butterfly-collecting mode of trumpeting diversity (“some of this, some of that”) that is so easy for our institutions to adopt. I mean instead the raw, gritty, human work of existing in a world of violence in ways that honor the Prince of Peace and the gospel’s hold upon us.

Beyond the Dichotomy

It is natural that these goals as stated would be framed both in terms of pneumatology and in terms of public church. As the work of Cheryl Peterson and others has shown, it no longer makes any sense to discuss ecclesiology without pneumatology. The two most significant forces within global Christianity – Roman Catholicism and global Pentecostalism – both have diverse construals of the work of the Spirit in shoring up the authority of the church at the heart of their ecclesiologies. In Roman Catholicism, it is precisely pneumatology that undergirds the claim that the magisterium of the Catholic church, while not infallible in most instances, is nonetheless safeguarded from damnable error by the Holy Spirit’s preservation of the *ecclesia docens*. And in global Pentecostalism (under whose rubric, from a sociological standpoint, I would even include such ostensibly Lutheran churches as Mekane Yesus in Ethiopia), it is precisely the odd combination of unpredictability and routinization that attends encounters with the Holy Spirit on the part of adherents that forms the uniquely adaptable communities by which Pentecostalism has thrived. Point being, this conference has it exactly right to presume (and assert) that there is no functional ecclesiology that does not at least imply a pneumatology, to the point that it’s good to be explicit about the connections every once in a while.

But meanwhile, if in this lecture I’m yielding to the temptation to highlight a literal monastery and its engagement with its surroundings as a model for a public church, then know that I absolutely mean for that image to strike you as odd, and I’ll be trading on that oddness for the rest of this talk. I don’t mean for us to backtrack from Luther’s fundamental insight that the monastic communities of his time had largely become caught up in spiritual and material economies that were theologically tendentious and politically exploitative. Less is it a kind of apologia for New Monasticism or even the sort of ecclesial sectarianism that one finds in such theological movements as Hauerwasian ethics, MacIntyrean “New Benedict” options, or Radical Orthodoxy (and yes, I’m aware that adherents of all these movements would deny that they are sectarian in precisely that sense, and yes, I am here registering my skepticism about that denial. But that’s a matter for another time).

However, I do want in this talk to revisit the question of ecclesiology and pneumatology from the uniquely Lutheran perspective represented at conferences like this one, and in so doing I want to lay my cards on the table: while it is very, very easy to fall into the trap of thinking that public engagement is some kind of either/or between the church digging into its own unique identity or the church conforming itself to the standards of relevance set by its cultural surroundings. So easy, in fact, that I have often let my own work on ecclesiology and pneumatology fall into this false dichotomy. In my recent book (which was actually finished in 2011, but it came out last year²), I traded heavily on a distinction between what I called polis ecclesiology (i.e. the sort of Hauerwasian, MacIntyrean, community-centered model whereby the church is understood as a distinct public with its own authoritative and epistemological structures) and an ecclesiology of the church as diffusively spatialized event whereby the goal of theology and public engagement would be to discern where God's spirit is engaged in truth-telling within the world.

While I would be happy to have you still buy my book, and while I stand by that description of the dichotomy as one into which most contemporary construals of the relationship between ecclesiology and pneumatology do fall (particularly under the conditions of a divided church in which authority structures among churches remain contested), I will confess to everyone in this august setting that I am now at the point where I am no longer satisfied with allowing that dichotomy to stand as a normative (rather than a descriptive) account of the Spirit's formation of the church.

And the major reason for my growing discomfort (besides the fact, as my friend and mentor Paul Hinlicky has finally convinced me that it represents a kind of ecumenical dead-end, albeit a newer and more interesting deadlock than the one currently facing the ecumenical movement) is that I think when we tackle what the Lutheran tradition has to say about life in the Spirit and the ecclesiological implications of that formation, then far more interesting possibilities emerge. Those immersed in Lutheran theology ought to be used to the idea that following Luther into the depths of the incarnational logic inaugurated by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ presents opportunities to overcome rigorous binaries between the life of the church and the life of the world, since after all for Luther the church as God's beloved community is, in Romans 8 style, the harbinger of God's redemption of all creation, all that God has made. Meanwhile, in Luther's radicalization of the Tome of Leo's *communicatio idiomatum* (shown most directly in the shockingly carnal, or rather in-carnal, implications of the third mode of Christ's presence as outlined in the 1528 treatise *Confession Concerning the Lord's Supper*), it becomes clear to us that in this "heavenly mode" of Christ's presence with God, Christ not only transcends creation as God does (think John 1) but is also as deeply embedded in creation as is God's sustaining providence (think Augustine, for whom God is closer to us than we are to ourselves).

Loving the World More than It Loves Itself

This brings me to the main thesis of my paper, and it is twofold.

² Robert Saler, *Between Magisterium and Marketplace: A Constructive Account of Theology and the Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014).

If we are to understand the role of the Spirit in forming the church as a publicly engaged body, then we should draw that picture within the parameters of the following two insights from the Lutheran tradition:

- 1). God's people are called to love the world precisely AS the world to a greater degree than the world loves itself.
- 2). Cultivating such love, paradoxically but inexorably, requires deep immersion in the particular gifts of the church – the word preached, the body and blood received, ongoing and rigorous catechesis in theology (both doctrinal and speculative), art, aesthetics, spiritual disciplines, and so on.

In other words, I'm suggesting that the example of the brothers of Tibherine, precisely in its glorious strangeness, is iconic for a precisely Lutheran construal of the Spirit's formation of a publicly engaged church. It is precisely the act of going more deeply into the gifts of the church in a manner that is formative of baptismal subjectivity (to use a phrase employed by Hinlicky and others) that allows the church to be incarnationally engaged in the world.

I hope that you're skeptical about that, because I have about half an hour left to try and convince you that it is at least possible. To do that I will draw on Luther in dialogue with some other thinkers that I find helpful for this.

The Horizon of Need and the Thickness of the Christian Life

The argument of Luther's famed 1520 treatise *On the Freedom of a Christian* has at its core a thesis that Luther knew would be counterintuitive both by the synergistic soteriological standards of his day and, more penetratingly, by the standards of what Luther took to be the epistemological "default setting" of the Old Adam when it considers the role of human effort both in salvation and in worldly ethics. Simply put, Luther's target is the notion that only a synergistic model of salvation – one in which human agency responds to God's initial donation of grace by doing those good works which are within them (*facere quod in se est*) to the benefit, not only of their own standing vis-à-vis God's judgment, but also to the neighbor – can produce ethical action. Pious doubt about one's salvation, so the argument goes, translates to pious action manifested most naturally in works of charity on behalf of one's neighbor. The parallels to calls for a soteriology that replaces monergistic assurance with synergistic risk contingent on human agency in service to ethical care for the earth are fairly direct in this case.

What was behind Luther's rejection of this soteriology? At stake was not simply Luther's theological breakthrough vis-à-vis justification of the individual by grace through faith apart from works, but also his ethics. For Luther, far from it being the case that one needs a cooperative model of salvation in order to give sufficient theological grounding and impetus for charitable works on behalf of the neighbor, the exact opposite is in fact the case: ONLY under conditions of justification by grace through faith apart from works (that is, only under conditions whereby we do not NEED to do good works for our neighbor to be justified by God) are we free to do good works that are truly FOR the neighbor and not for ourselves.

The logic should be familiar to Lutherans: if I must somehow do good works - however praiseworthy and even necessary for the neighbor's well-being - in order to merit justification, then those works are

inescapably bound up in an economy of merit and reward that is not only existentially intolerable (how can I possibly know when I have done enough, and how can I possibly remain in any sort of pious doubt about that when the stakes are so high?) but also fully lacking in genuine *caritas*. The motive of care in such cases can never purely be the desired good of the neighbor. The horizon of need being addressed is not the neighbor's, but mine; or, at least, when push comes to shove, if the two horizons contradict each other at all, mine must needs win out over the neighbor's. The high school senior who realizes that she needs more "community service" lines of her college application and thus walks down to the soup kitchen may well do some proximate good for the homeless there, but the dominant horizon of need is hers and not the suffering neighbors ostensibly being served.

However, to the extent that the Word is received that we are justified by grace through faith entirely apart from our own works, then the soteriological and ethical framework is secured by which the horizon of the neighbor's need can take precedence over my own and thus shape the framework of the ethical response. As Luther puts it, the Christian:

"needs none of these things for his righteousness and salvation. Therefore he should be guided in all his works by this thought and contemplate this one thing alone, that he may serve and benefit others in all that he does, considering nothing except the need and the advantage of his neighbor. Accordingly the Apostle commands us to work with our hands so that we may give to the needy, although he might have said that we should work to support ourselves. He says, however, "that he may be able to give to those in need" [Eph. 4:28]. This is what makes caring for the body a Christian work, that through its health and comfort we may be able to work, to acquire, and lay by funds with which to aid those who are in need, that in this way the strong member may serve the weaker, and we may be sons of God, each caring for and working for the other, bearing one another's burdens and so fulfilling the law of Christ [Gal. 6:2]. This is a truly Christian life. Here faith is truly active through love [Gal 5:6], that is, it finds expression in works of the freest service, cheerfully and lovingly done, with which a man willingly serves another without hope of reward; and for himself is satisfied with the fullness and wealth of his faith.³

When we are freed of the existential burden of a soteriology that requires our good works for righteousness, we are entered into a more kenotic ethical economy whereby the horizon of the neighbor's need overtakes the need for us to preserve our own righteousness. It is liberating to do something purely for its own delight and goodness rather than because one expects to gain something by it. What's more, when our focus is reoriented away from our own need and toward the horizon of the neighbor, that which we do inevitably becomes more helpful and more just simply by the changed motivation and "economy" of activity.

So what emerges here, to repeat, is a situation in which, perhaps to a scandalous degree, Luther is understanding the public vocation of the Christian (and, by extension, the church) as kenotically emptying out its own "Old Adam" perceptions of how to be theologically righteous (i.e. sufficiently pure, religious, "churchy," etc.) in order to address the horizon of need of the neighbor – with all the messiness, "secularity," and gritty immersion into the blood, sweat, and tears of our world that that implies. Such a kenotic engagement IS the work of the Spirit in our world, and ecclesiology should take its cue from that.

³ Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, LW 31:365.

Now, I'm fully aware that, on the surface, that could be heard as fairly standard, even cliché' stuff – such as in the ill-fated 1968 WCC slogan “the world sets the agenda for the church.” But when placed within the context of Luther's writings as a whole, something far more interesting emerges. Indeed, even within Freedom of a Christian, it is clear – the ONLY way that the sinful Christian can be freed to engage the neighbor within the messy horizon of the neighbor's need (think Algerian monks giving medical care to Muslim villagers as other Muslims threaten to kill them) is for the Christian to engage in substantive, ritualized, and ongoing immersion into the thickness of the church's own unique practices – again, hearing the gospel that we are freed from the demands of law and the demands of self-justification, receiving God's own self at the Eucharist, and – and here is the challenge even to gatherings such as this one where proper distinction between law and gospel is at the heart of your work – ongoing spiritual formation that allows for Christians to have this gospel discipline the formation that we receive elsewhere (particularly from the forces of neoliberal capitalism).

A word about that:

The Optics of the Market and of the Cross

When I was a parish pastor in Gary, IN, which like most impoverished urban areas is heavily churched, I once received a phone call from a local newspaper asking me if our congregation wanted to place an ad in the paper's “Religion Classifieds” section (which already tells you something right there). Without my asking, he proceeded to tell me that many local churches found it helpful to get the word out about their service times, etc.

This is common practice, and I have no real problems with it. But then he proceeded to say the following, “After all, it never hurts to get a leg up on the competition.”

Think of that imagery. Churches advertising so as to get a leg up on their “competition,” i.e. other Christian churches. Trinity Lutheran vs. Christ the King Lutheran, advertising their wares in a manner structurally indistinguishable from Wal-Mart vs. Target.

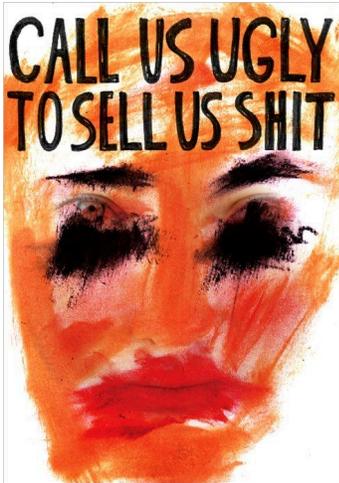
My point is not to knock church advertising. My point is that I suspect many of us American Christians have internalized, wittingly or not, the notion that the church operates in what sociologists [have called](#) a “spiritual marketplace” in which our functional role is to provide a “product” in order to meet a given “demand.” In my own work I've tended to argue that the main issue with missional theology in the mainline churches have to do with a “if we build it, they will come” mentality; thus, what we should notice here is how neatly that mentality corresponds with capitulation to consumerism.

That's one problem. But it's a problem that we are not going to get our heads around until we realize how thoroughly consumerism comes with its own theology, its own psychology, its own ideas around what truth, beauty, and meaning constitute.

The Christian author Donald Miller, speaking at an ELCA Youth Gathering in 2006, once pointed out that conservative estimates are that the average American views hundreds, if not thousands, of advertisements every day (between Internet, tv, t-shirts, magazines, etc.). He then went on to describe – in terms that I continue to find quite compelling- that the main goal of advertising is to poke a tiny hole in our lives, a hole that can then be filled by the product on sale. If you put these two facts together,

then the psychological picture that emerges is one in which most of us are walking around having thousands of tiny holes poked into our self-image, our sense of happiness, EVERY DAY.

And the effects of this are not benign. A stunning recent piece of art on the front of an avant-garde magazine focusing on women's issues puts it bluntly. The image is of a young woman in heavy makeup, shaded in such a way as to simultaneously imply overuse of cosmetics and perhaps even physical or mental abuse, looking down, and the caption simply reads: "Call Us Ugly to Sell Us Shit." The feeling of ugliness, the attack upon the peace that comes with one's worth coming from something other than work and consumption, translates into further consumption.



We know what the concrete effects of this are. Eating disorders rampant among women AND men. Personal household debt through the roof. And so on. But all of these material effects are tied up in the deeper material problem, and that is this: WE CANNOT BE SATISFIED. And what I mean by that is not that we personally are incapable of being satisfied, but rather that we are all caught in a matrix of forces that have a deep interest in ensuring that we WILL not be satisfied, because satisfaction is dangerous.

The word "satisfaction" comes from the Latin "satis facere," and it literally means to "make enough," that is, to be in a condition in which one feels that one has enough. What I am saying is that in the 21st century we North Americans, along with an increasing percentage of the rest of the planet, are caught amidst forces who would be deeply threatened were we all to collectively decide that we are "satisfied," that we have enough of a given product. If I'm satisfied with my blue jeans, I'm threatening the sale of Levi's. If I'm satisfied with my car, I'm of concern to Toyota. Indeed, the main indicator by which we measure the health of national economies in geopolitical terms is the "GDP," which measures GROWTH of economies as the primary indication that they are healthy.

This is not to say that Toyota, Diesel, the government, or anyone else is evil, though, because THEY TOO are caught up in the system of having to sell in order to survive, in order for people to feed their families. This is not "us" against "them." This is us against ourselves. And that's a spiritual problem.

One way we might conceptualize this is to think of the "optics" of the market. How does consumerism teach us to "see" the world?

Two theologians who have thought about these matters are Paul Griffiths (a Roman Catholic theologian who teaches at Duke University) and David Bentley Hart (an Eastern Orthodox theologian).

For Griffiths, the most corruptive aspect of the United States as such a “human city” is that it operates with a deficient notion of autonomy in which freedom is defined solely as the absence of dependence upon others. Moreover, perfect realization of this deficient autonomy finds actualization within a space whose logic feeds almost solely upon the construction of identity through unlimited consumption.

Ownership goes almost as deep [as commitment to autonomy]. Status is given principally by display of what is owned, and by capacity to increase what is owned and displayed. Among thoughts not thinkable is the idea that display can be excessive or that it is possible to own too much. The grammar of ownership has the syntax of consumption as a dominant element: the owner is someone who can buy; the act of buying, of purchasing, is the act by which owning is made real; and so the purchasing act is one that ought to be performed as frequently as possible. To limit it, ascetically to constrain it, is understood not only to be odd and peculiar and strange, but also antisocial, a virus within the body politic. Frequent purchase, the act of consumption, is what we are urged and exhorted to; and so ownership is front-loaded into purchase, and purchase front-loaded into consumption. We become, ideally, owners who will not be deterred by the fact that we already own something from repurchasing it. We define ourselves, and are defined by others, principally in terms of what we would like to purchase. And when our autonomy is threatened by violence from without, by the decay of the body, or by betrayal, we comfort ourselves by going shopping...We can (we do) collude, as good shoppers, in our own tranquilization and the evisceration of compassion, sensibility, and love. We can (we do) deprive ourselves of the joy in the material world available only to those who refuse ownership of it.⁴

Griffith’s point is that, to the extent that a community such as the church wishes to be the chief formative influence upon the sort of ends that believers choose, as well as the practices by which they reach these ends, it is (at least in the North American context, and increasingly the global one) in deadly competition with a force that has both the interest and the power to form both ends and practices within its domain. In other words, if the church has its own inherent logic, then so does the marketplace.

An equally vivid picture of the “marketplace” as a sort of overarching diagnosis of the Christian church’s “other” is found in David Bentley Hart’s *The Beauty of the Infinite*. According to Hart,

The market transcends ideologies; it is the post-Christian culture of communication, commerce, and values characteristic of modernity, the myth by which the economies, politics, and mores of the modern are shaped, the ideal space where desire is fashioned; it is the place that is every place, the distance of all things, no longer even the market square, which is a space of meetings, a communal space, but simply the arid, empty distance that consumes every other distance.⁵

⁴ Ibid. 227-8. Cf. Griffiths, “Reading as a Spiritual Discipline,” in *The Scope of Our Art: The Vocation of the Theological Teacher*, ed. L. Gregory Jones and Stephanie Paulsell (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), esp. 34ff.

⁵ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 431.

Like Griffiths, Hart credits this market “empty distance” as having enormous power to shape desire (and thus, by extension, desired ends); unlike Griffiths, however, he envisions the market not as a rival public to the church but rather as the paradigmatic anti-public, a “no-space” which can thus insinuate itself into every space. Hart is clear that his naming of this force as the “market” is not a direct referent to free-market capitalism *per se*; rather, he sees the market as a kind of mentality which can, if necessary, inculcate itself into a variety of economic arrangements.

Hart’s account also proposes a link between the autonomous modern self who misconstrues freedom as pure autonomy to follow desire and the interested amenability of the marketplace to precisely such a formed personality. The hinge between the two is commodification, not simply of material products, but of those features of a person’s identity (particularly those formed in communities outside the marketplace, e.g. religious faith) that are not immediately possessed of an exchange-value within the market:

The market, after all, which is the ground of the real in modernity, the ungrounded foundation where social reality occurs, makes room only for values that can be transvalued, that can be translated into the abstract valuations of univocal exchange. And in the market all desires must needs be conformed to commodifiable options. The freedom the market acknowledges and indeed imposes is a contentless freedom, a “spontaneous” energy of arbitrary choice; and insofar as this is the freedom that is necessary for the mechanisms of the market to function, every aspect of the person that would suppress or subvert this purely positive, purely “open” and voluntaristic freedom must be divided from the public identity of the individual, discriminated into a private sphere of closed interiority and peculiar devotion... persons (arising as they do from the often irreducible stresses of particular traditions, particular communities of speech and practice, even particular landscapes and vistas) must be reduced to economic selves, by way of a careful and even tender denudation and impoverishment; thereafter the “enrichment” of the person can only occur under the form of subjective choices made from a field of morally indifferent options, in a space bounded by a metaphysical or transcendental surveillance that views the person as utterly distinct from his or her aboriginal narratives, allowing these narratives the status perhaps of quant fictions but preventing them from entering into the realm of the real on other terms (as, say, persuasions, forces of contention that cannot be reinscribed as part of the playful agon of the market).⁶

This is heady language, but the point is relatively clear: when the marketplace shapes our identity, when all of the holes that advertising pokes into our identities come home to roost, then the effects are devastating both for our own identities and our communities. Think again of that image of the woman: commodification is abuse, but it is also the same sort of erasure, of eff-face-ment, that comes with both overuse of cosmetics and the facelessness conferred by abuse.

⁶ Ibid., 432.

And I would suggest that, if we are to think about how mission interacts with the world's questions around truth, beauty, and meaning, we should take this aspect seriously. My point in all of this has been to suggest that we live in a culture where powerful forces (beyond any given individuals; think of the Bible's talk of "principalities and powers") are at work keeping people DEEPLY (one might even say "spiritually") dissatisfied so that the systems that profit from such dissatisfaction may flourish.

We may think eventually to try and change those systems; however, from a missional perspective, I would argue that all politics depend first upon worldview. So, theologically speaking, what is an alternate worldview to the one shaped solely by the marketplace?

In this setting I'll assume that you're all up on the Heidelberg Disputation, but let's just get the text fresh in our minds.

Theses 19-21 are, of course, the famous ones. Of particular interest here is Thesis 20 and its explanation:

20. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.

The manifest and visible things of God are placed in opposition to the invisible, namely, his human nature, weakness, foolishness. The Apostle in 1 Cor. 1:25 calls them the weakness and folly of God. Because men misused the knowledge of God through works, God wished again to be recognized in suffering, and to condemn wisdom concerning invisible things by means of »wisdom concerning visible things, so that those who did not honor God as manifested in his works should honor him as he is hidden in his suffering (*absconditum in passionibus*). As the Apostle says in 1 Cor. 1:21, For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. Now it is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross. Thus God destroys the wisdom of the wise, as Isa. 45:15 says, Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself.

And then Thesis 21 goes on to state, famously:

21. A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.

This is clear: He who does not know Christ does not know God hidden in suffering. Therefore he prefers ,works to suffering, glory to the cross, strength to weakness, wisdom to folly, and, in general, good to evil.

Consider this last thesis in connection with what we have been discussing: a theologian of the cross calls a thing what it is. Why? For Luther, it is for this reason: WHEN GOD WAS MADE MOST MANIFEST IN THE LIFE, DEATH, AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST, THIS TOOK THE FORM OF THAT WHICH THE WORLD CALLED UGLY. Jesus was a peasant carpenter and itinerant teacher from a backwater town who briefly engaged large crowds for a month or so, eventually fell out of their favor, and was crucified as a criminal by the Roman empire (one of the most shameful deaths for a Jew). God's truth in Christ took the form of what the world found ugly and pathetic.

As Lutheran theologian Vitor Westhelle has argued, this heritage from Luther – training us to see the presence of God in that which the world despises, calls ugly, regards as worthless – may be one of the most stunningly relevant aspects of our tradition in a world in which what Luther might call a “theology of glory” (that is, assuming that truth is most present in that which is beautiful, powerful, well-praised, etc.) dominates the logic of the marketplace. If the marketplace gives us a kind of optics, a “way of seeing” that sees ugliness in order to keep us purchasing, then the “optics” of the cross trains us instead to see the world as God’s good creation in which it is precisely the outcasts, the marginalized, and the “ugly” in which we might expect to see God’s Spirit most at work (note that this applies to people, but perhaps increasingly also to creation itself as it suffers the effects of our constant need to consume unsustainably).

What does this have to say to the publicly engaged church? I think it’s this: if God hides in suffering, in that which the world calls weak, then perhaps one of the most significant contributions that Lutheran Christianity might bring to our context’s ongoing conversations about “truth, beauty, meaning, and justice” might be to think with others – Christian or not – as to how our minds have been trained to see beauty in those places advantageous to the marketplace, and to ask then how a different kind of optics, a different kind of “eyes” for the world, might disclose the presence of truth in that which cannot be easily commodified and sold within what Hart calls the “agon” of the market. To the extent that we as a culture can gradually emerge from our addiction to the consumerism that is killing us, it will not only have material effects but also spiritual effects. And one of those spiritual effects is that the good news, the gospel of a God who hides in weakness and suffering in order to find us and the world that God loves precisely amidst that suffering, might become a story that resonates with the pathos of the world to an even greater extent. This is what I mean when I say that an incarnational logic of the cross, born from formation by the gospel and its gifts, results in a situation in which the properly formed theologian, the properly formed Christian, loves the world more than the world loves itself.

The church cannot call the world ugly to sell it shit, or even to sell it gospel. The church must call the world blessed to preach gospel to it.

Implications

But let me conclude by making a few suggestions for what the things I’ve been able to sketch only briefly.

I’ve suggested that Luther’s Freedom of a Christian teaches us that the gospel frees God’s people to engage the horizon of the neighbor’s need apart from the economies of self-justification. But I’ve also argued that this is not a one-off insight but requires ongoing and deep formation in the spiritual gifts and disciplines of the church. In incarnational fashion, the deeper we go into the things of Christ, the more “secular” (worldly) we become in that we engage more deeply the world qua world as the site of God’s love and of God’s redemption (this is what Bonhoeffer was getting at at the end of this life, I’m convinced – his saying that the Christian life needs to become more fully worldly is not a departure from the quasi-monastic vision of Life Together, but the further extension and radicalizing of it. I can say more about that in the Q & A if you like).

And I've suggested that part of what is at stake (and in keeping with the optical themes of Fr. De Chergé's letter) is a kind of optics of the cross that resists the optics of the marketplace. But here again formation and spiritual discipline is key. It is not optional as to whether or not we are formed – whatever formation is not done by the church, the market will do for us. But rather than thinking of church formation as a bunkering down in a kind of alternative society, the fundamentally Lutheran theological insight is that going deeper into the particulars of the church and the thickness of Christian life is not a retreat from the world, but a deeper dive into it. As the church becomes more itself, it becomes more secular, because the *saeculum* belongs to God by creation and to Christ by redemption.

As far as I can tell, Crossings does distinction between law and gospel pretty well. But my parting challenge: how can this group continue to think about the ways in which Lutheranism in its current manifestations empowers our people with the thickness of the Christian life, the material and spiritual disciplines that create a Fr. de Cherge (even if a Lutheran one), and – most of all – the realization that to go deeper into the love of Christ is to love the world as God loves it, which means more than it loves itself? I have been arguing that theology must give rise to formation, and a shadow supposition is that – as much as we theologians would love to think otherwise – such formation is not automatic from even the best theological formulations. It needs Spirit-led work. Are we up to the gift of that challenge?

ⁱ <http://www.firstthings.com/article/1996/08/006-last-testament>