

Whose Church is it Anyway?

Dear Folks,

For the last Thursday Theology of the millennium (won't you be glad when we don't hear that word anymore?) I'm offering you two thoughts.

The first is a one page "My Faith Journey" (normal seminary fare in the 90's) which I wrote this past fall. I'm sending it because I assume most of you know Ed, but most of you don't know me and so it's about time I introduce myself.

The second follows naturally from the first and hopefully will provoke some discussion from you because I think "Whose Church is it Anyway?" is one of those questions that's going to be with us for a while.

Happy New Year and if this really is the end of the world,
See You in Heaven!!

Robin

My Faith Journey

Yesterday Greg showed up at my office door. Edward, the church's maintenance man, was working with the front door open so Greg came downstairs and asked if I had time for some prayer. He'd had to call the police on a friend who'd pulled a gun on him in the heat of an argument and Greg wanted me to pray for his friend, their relationship and his hope that they could settle their differences before they got to court.

As I listened to and prayed with this man who doesn't seem to be able to hold a job, usually has alcohol on his breath and has nowhere permanent to stay, I realized that my faith journey has been leading me to this place. I have been searching for the Authentic, for spiritual paydirt.

I was part of the Methodist church as a kid, but when my parents got fed up with church politics, we didn't worship anywhere during my teen years. In college I got involved with a fundamentalist group (a cult, really), learned a lot about the Bible, but ended up leaving in the midst of more politics and corruption.

I drifted for awhile, pretty disillusioned with churches in general, until my husband and I decided we needed to take our kids somewhere to worship and we ended up in a Lutheran church (which isn't hard to find in Minnesota!). We attended a large congregation in St. Paul until Hal got a new job and we moved to St. Louis.

Again, we found a Lutheran church to go to, though I went more reluctantly this time because it was smaller and harder to be anonymous. One week when I stayed home sick, the man who was to become my mentor taught Adult Forum. Hal brought home the flyers from the lay theology classes Ed taught and I decided to call and find out what they were about. Within a week I was sitting in one of his classes and it ended up being a pretty straight shot from there to seminary.

I spent two years taking classes at Eden Seminary in St. Louis as well as classes with Lutheran professor here in town (through what has since become the Lutheran School of Theology in St. Louis). After my internship, I commuted to LSTC to finish up my academic work.

While waiting for a call, I started volunteering at Immanuel to learn more about city ministry that I had become aware of through a Women of Color/White Women dialogue group at LSTC. I was called as assistant pastor in March 1996 and stayed for almost two years. I left at the beginning of 1998 to do full time work on a PhD in Historical Theology at St. Louis

University. Though I didn't intend to return to Immanuel, I couldn't stay away. I'd fallen in love with the people. I returned full time as co-pastor in May of this year and have been in the process of helping the congregation restructure with extensive help from a woman who grew up in the neighborhood and has an MBA in marketing.

We have begun to attract folks like Greg who have been estranged from church for a long time. We now call ourselves the "Come as You are Church" and we mean it. Either Jesus Christ is good news for anybody anywhere, or we have to stop using the word Gospel.

Last Sunday we added eighteen new members to Immanuel's roster (By the way, Greg, who now plays trumpet in our band on Sunday morning, was one of them). Six folks in the group (one adult, one teenager, four kids) were baptized. Since Immanuel's total membership had previously been forty, eighteen is a fairly significant increase.

On the heels of the joy of this new step in Immanuel's life, a related issue came to my attention through an article in the latest Christian Century called "The Reinvented Church: Styles and Strategies." Donald F. Miller talks about "new paradigm" churches and as he ticked off the characteristics of such congregations I realized that, though so many of the churches Miller was talking about in the article are white, upper middle class churches, Immanuel shares some common traits with them. "They are appropriating contemporary cultural forms...they are restructuring the organizational character of institutional religion and democratizing access to the sacred by radicalizing the Protestant principle of the priesthood of all believers...they view God as capable of supernatural intervention in our lives...they touch each other when they pray."

I'm so grateful for the boundaries, the markers of law/promise theology to help guide me through this "paradigm shifting." I feel like a sheep dog guiding the flock over rough, unfamiliar terrain. I am thankful for the instincts of the cross to help me keep the flock moving together and away from cliffs and pits and such.

On the other hand, there are situations where the theology gets stretched at times. For example, because of a myriad of circumstances, we offer communion to anyone who walks in the door on Sunday morning for worship. We don't make an announcement about all baptized Christians being welcomed at the table, it's strictly "y'all come."

I know theologically that it's wrong. I also know it's the right thing to do at Immanuel. I also know that though I do not like holding these two opposing positions at the same time, I have no desire to write indigenous north St. Louis liberation theology that moves the Eucharist into the position of an initiatory sacrament to resolve that conflict inside of me. The Come as You Are Church welcomes everybody. We love first, ask questions later.

Does the church belong to the traditionalists who've been holding down the fort for centuries or the zealots who just met Jesus yesterday? To the pipe organists, the cellists, the flutists or the rock band members? To the intellectuals or the mystics?

Yes.

“The Grace of God has Appeared.” Which Grace?

Colleagues,

Back in the days of the old lectionary—before the three-year cycle came to be—we had the same readings year after year for every Sunday and festival day. And so it came to pass in THOSE days that Titus 2:11-14 was always the epistle for “Christmas Day, The Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord.” That text was assigned to us first year neophytes at Concordia Seminary—now almost 50 years ago—for our first attempt at writing a sermon. [No, I don’t still have that sermon on file, “in the barrel” as preachers like to say. For which we can all be thankful.]

Titus 2:11 ff. fits the feast. No doubt about it. But it doesn’t elicit images of manger, madonna and magi. It’s Christmas theology, not the Christmas story. Or is that really an either/or? Listen for yourself.

“For the grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.” [NRSV]

That Titus text came to mind in an exchange I’ve had recently with one of you. It focused on the opening term of the Titus text: the Grace of God. My conversation partner was a Seminex grad, one of our brightest and best. I’d commented on an essay of his that he’d given me to read. I’d wondered out loud to him

why he eschewed Lutheran lingo in places where I would've expected it. In response he urged me to notice that the theology of the entire piece was grace-full. "The title and several passages stress that it's the grace of God in Jesus Christ that most powerfully motivates people to work for justice. So Lutheran teaching shapes the work, even though the section on the Bible didn't start with the law/gospel formula." What could be more Lutheran than that?

My first response was "Hmmmmmm." But then these thoughts followed and I passed them on to him.

One item that we sought to pass on to students at Seminex was a specific angle on the Lutheran Confessions. We claimed: it was NOT "grace alone" that was at the center of the Reformation hubbub in the 16th century. Our evidence for this came from the "other side" itself at that time. In their first response to the Augsburg Confessions' Article IV (justification by faith) the pontifical theologians say:

"First of all, no one of all Catholics has ever thought that we might attain to blessedness by our merits without grace. For grace must precede, accompany, and follow, even as our mother Church has taught us to pray, 'We beseech thee, O Lord, that in all our actions the gift of Thy grace may go before and its assistance follow after us.'"

So the brouhaha was not about grace, not even about "grace alone."

The Roman critics of Augsburg go on to say that it's the "faith alone" (sola fide) element which is mistaken, probably even heretical. No surprise then, that when author Melanchthon has to defend his "faith alone" theology in AC IV he prefaces his response in Apology IV with a couple of "how to read the Bible"

paragraphs, his Biblical hermeneutic of law/promise.

When you look at the grace of God through those law/promise lenses, you get something like this. There is Grace and then there is Grace. Even when talking about God's grace, we need to heed the axiom of the second great "Martin" of 16th century Reformation theology, Martin Chemnitz. [Of him it was said: if the second Martin had not come along, the theology of the first Martin would have disappeared in the 16th century, i.e., would have disappeared among the Lutherans!] Chemnitz's axiom is: "Law and promise must be distinguished at every point in Christian doctrine."

So God's Law has its grace and God's Gospel has its grace—and the twain do meet, but ought not to be mixed—"must be distinguished"—lest both get lost. Law's gift of grace is the stuff Luther describes in his explanation of the First Article of the creed in the Small Catechism. "I believe that God has created me networked with all creatures and has GIVEN me...." All these creator's gifts are freebees, yes, but gifts that obligate. Remember the ending of Luther's explanation here: "for all of which I am obligated to thank and to praise, to serve and obey him. This is most certainly true." These grace-gifts obligate. Au contraire the grace-giving that begins as the creed's Second Article unfolds. There comes the grace-gift that not only does NOT obligate us, but that rescues us from the unfulfilled obligations, the debts we've incurred from mucking up in the earlier grace-gift business with God.

Throughout world religions, I'd say, any deity worth her salt is "grace-y." Well, lots of them at very least. No deity can get away for long without being in some sense benign [= gracious] to the devotees—for whatever variety of reasons.

So it seems to me that grace is not THE Reformation aha! that

got our tradition going. Not only that, “Grace” is not even the unique bailiwick of Christianity. Some kind of grace, even grace alone, is in, with, and under the fabric of world religions as well as many of the more recent home-made ones now mushrooming around us.

Which brings us back to Titus 2. What’s unique about the “grace of God which appeared in Jesus Christ,” is not that it was GRACE appearing in the mangled Messiah, but the KIND of grace, a “NEW wine” kind, as this Messiah later claimed. Such NEW grace, brand new—as the Greek word used in the NT signals—then called for NEW Wineskins both to receive it (call it “faith”) and to live it (call it the NEW commandment). Isn’t Titus 2 telling us that?

“For the grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.”

The words “appeared” and “manifestation” are the word “epiphany” in the original. Epiphanies are surprises, really different from what’s routine. So the “grace of God appearing in Jesus Christ” is not run-of-the-mill grace. And what’s so different about this grace is that the Jesus who’s at the center of it “gave himself for us that he might redeem us.” Where in the annals of “generic” grace was there ever any grace like that?

In fact, I’d propose a different rendering of the opening line, possible I think from the Greek text since the “salvation” term is not a noun, but an adjective. That would go like this: “For a saving grace of God has appeared for all,” concrete in the one

“who gave himself for us to redeem us.” No grace that obligates here. That’s a grace that liberates. It liberates us from the “you’ve gotta” of the law’s grace-gifts into the “you get to” of a new paedagogy (Greek root rendered “training” in the text is “paideia”).

We get to “renounce the God-empty pressure (passion) that permeates our world.” We get to live lives with newness (brand new!) in three dimensions signalled by those three terms “self-control, upright & godly.” [A sermon by Luther on this text interprets these three words to be humankind’s three primal relationships—to self, to others, to God.] They signal the new 3-D wineskins in which we “get to” live when we’re imbibing the new grace at Christmas. And, of course, there’s a new “get to” for the future too. We get to “wait with blessed hope” for what’s yet to come, the final epiphany of this “great God and Saviour.” It could happen in A.D.2000.

Even if we don’t get THAT epiphany next year, we already have its predecessor in what epiphanied at Christmas. May the epiphany of THAT grace render you Y2K compliant for the entire Year of Our Lord 2000.

Pax et Gaudium! Ed

Readers’ Response plus Two Macedonian Calls

Colleagues,

For this week, two responses to past issues of ThTh plus two

Macedonian calls.
Peace & Joy! Ed

A. THE TWO MACEDONIAN CALLS—

1. First one comes from Klaipeda, LITHUANIA.

In 1997 Marie and I were ELCA “mission volunteer” working at the Protestant Seminary in Klaipeda. For English-language worship and nurture Marie and I joined in Sunday evening worship with the folks at Lithuanian Christian College [LCC]. We’re still in contact with a number of them. LCC staffers are mostly volunteers, folks who call themselves evangelicals, most of them from Canada & USA. The college’s roots are Mennonite. Here’s the actual call—

“I am writing mostly to ask that whatever prayer circles you have please add to their list our faculty need for NEXT semester, which begins Jan. 14! We have NO teacher for our Western Civ. class of 160 students! The course has been taught this semester by the president of the school, but his travel schedule next semester makes that impossible. We are looking for a retired or on sabbatical college professor of history or a practiced high school teacher of history with an MA. This is one of the core courses for our freshmen, and the need is urgent. Of course, if you or anyone in the congregation has any ideas of whom we might contact, (please contact the Crossings Community at our [email address](#).) Then I’ll be back here in Lithuania.”

This plea comes from Crossings colleague and dear personal friend, Jane Holslag. Jane’s a pastor in

the PC-USA, now in her third year teaching at LCC. Contact us too, please, if you have any leads.

2. Second one is from NIGERIA (via Australia!)

Brian Schwarz, Lutheran mission exec downunder writes:

"I participated in a WCC-sponsored Multicultural Ministry conference in Sydney. There I met a pastor from the Church of Christ, a Nigerian African Independent Church. He asked me what kind of help I could give his church, which is just starting its own seminary. I offered some books and possible contacts. Do you know anyone else who might be interested in a stint in Nigeria? Does the ELCA have a program of aid for this kind of church? I'd be pleased to hear from you anything that might be helpful for this man and his church."

If you have something for Brian on this, E-mail us at info@crossings.org

B. A RESPONSE TO THTH 74 "PREACHING THE NAME"[I have been unable to contact the author (a ThTh subscriber), who sent me this via snail-mail, to get permission to print his name. It's clear that he wants to add this piece to our ThTh conversation. So this much for now: the author is an erstwhile dean of an Episcopal cathedral in the USA.]

"Thanks to a former student of yours and mine, [name], I got hold of your marvelous piece on a Reformation view of homosexuality, a piece I shared with Bishop [so-and-so]. I have since subscribed to Sabbatheology and am being enriched by it."Your piece on Preaching The Name was very, very good. I agree with all of it save this: I am not sure the fault lies with the seminary's failure to

teach good Bible and Theology, rather the seminary's failure to prepare seminarians for the real world of ministry and its stresses.

"For years I have been involved with Tavistock Group Relations training and then with the Grubb Institute, in both cases working primarily with religious leaders. From this work I have learned some interesting things about the practice of ministry in a real church which struggles to deal with the basic issue of our total dependence on the grace of God, a job it does badly because dependence is such a frightening thing to us all.

"If you want to know what I mean by dependence, think of those moments in your life when you have felt truly weak; those are dependent moments. (Paul had some things to say about being weak, that is dependent on God and therefore strong.) We are all fearful in a greater or lesser degree of this dependence. Adam and Eve hated it.

"Now go out into the real church and listen to what the clergy say: in a Grubb conference not too many years ago, the clergy spoke about the tension they felt between apostolic religion and civil religion, a tension that tore them apart.

"But more recently at a Grubb conference most of whose members were clergy in charge of large suburban congregations, it became apparent to the staff that the clergy were in great pain, all of it unspoken. At the same time we felt they were harbouring a secret. Finally we put it all together and shared it with the membership. The pain they felt came from the necessity of keeping their faith a secret – a necessity if they were to be successful clergy.

"It is not as if only some feel this tension, this stress. We all do. The question is how much stress there is in the job and how much we can take.

"In my case I have been able to be relatively faithful because I have always worked in urban parishes where the gospel is far more welcome than in the suburbs.

"Do you remember the now very old book, The Noise of Solemn Assemblies, in which a sociologist of religion examined the question "Why don't they practice what they preach?" only to discover that they/we do practice what we preach. It is just that in 90% of American churches what we preach is the "blessing of the OK society" (the author's term).

"Perhaps this will enlarge the discussion a bit by confronting the real cost of discipleship and how much any of us are willing to face it."

C. CONTINUATION OF THTH 78: AN UPDATE ON LC-MS AND JDDJ
Last week's ThTh 78 discussed a widely-publicized statement from the President of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod about the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification."

1. First some more accurate data—

Some of the background information I posted to you last week (ThTH 78) was not on target. Since then I've learned this: the name of the LC-MS-sponsored international network of Lutherans is "The International Lutheran Council" [ILC] and not Lutheran World Conference, as I guessed it was. The ILC has approx. 3.5 million members, 80% of whom are in the LC-MS. Member church bodies in the ILC total 30-plus. Some ILC churches also affiliate with the

Lutheran World Federation. Their publication is "The ILC News." Its current editor is a pastor in South Africa.

2. Today (Dec. 16, 1999) this letter to the editor appeared in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch:

"A large ad in the Dec. 9 Post-Dispatch and other major newspapers criticizing the international Lutheran-Roman Catholic agreement on the doctrine of justification appeared to speak for The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod."As the immediate past president of that church body, I want to assure your readers that the ad does not present the official position of the church body on that agreement, nor was its content or placement authorized or approved by any official board, commission, council, agency, or convention of the church body. In reality, the ad represents the personal opinion of the current president, and it was paid for by a private contribution, not church body funds.

"I know of no one in our church body who would disagree with the ad's statement on the Gospel of Jesus Christ or its promise to work toward reconciliation among Christians. However, the fact is that thousands of members and congregations of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod are chagrined by the ad, not only because of its misleading statements about the joint agreement as well as the position of the Roman Catholic Church, but also because ads in the public media are not a helpful way for church bodies to deal with their differences.

"To all who may have been offended by this ad, I

offer this unofficial but very profound apology and assure you that the vast majority of the 2.6 million members of our church body continue to regard all fellow Christians with friendship and good will, and to rejoice whenever there is progress in resolving the doctrinal differences that have divided us over the years.”

*Dr. Ralph A. Bohlmann, President Emeritus
The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod*

3. Stay tuned.

The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and Lutheran-Roman Catholic Consensus

Colleagues,

Two items again today.
Peace & Joy! Ed

I. THE LCMS AND JDDJ

Well, that was a surprise. Yesterday's number of USA TODAY, not exactly one of the major religious journals in our nation, carried a full-page "Comment" by the president of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod [LCMS] with this banner headline: Toward True Reconciliation. A Comment on Lutheran-Roman Catholic Relations. The focus was JDDJ, the

“Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” which the Roman Catholic church and the Lutheran World Federation co-signed on Reformation Day a few weeks ago. Seems that some of the unlettered out in the provinces have either congratulated LCMSers or critiqued them for going along with the Catholics on this one. And already on more than one occasion LCMS president Alvin Barry has had to say: “No, that’s not us.” Presumably this page in USA TODAY will set the record straight nationwide.

As an LCMS has-been I read his text with specific lenses, of course. For example...

1. I twinge at his claim that “45 percent of the Lutheran church-bodies in the world did not support the declaration.” N.B., that’s 45% of the CHURCH-BODIES, not of the world’s Lutherans. I’ll bet that half of those church bodies (maybe more) are members of the Lutheran World Conference—I think that’s the name—an international consortium of LCMS-friendly folks. Created by the LCMS not too many years ago, it has as one of its platform planks a firm “No!” to the Lutheran World Federation [LWF], those folks who did sign off on this declaration at Augsburg a few weeks ago. LCMS-insiders tell me that what holds them together, besides their opposition to the LWF, is their access to funds from St. Louis for taking such a “firm” confessional stance. Granted, numbers say nothing about what’s true and what isn’t. Yet some of those “church-bodies” are very very small, some with but a handful of congregations. So Barry’s “45% did not support the declaration” pushes the envelope of the truth about the real numbers.
2. And truth is Barry’s concern. He says: “We rejoice that we have much in common with our fellow

Christians in the Roman Catholic Church...[but]... We could not support the declaration because it does not actually reconcile the difference between us concerning the most important TRUTH of Christianity.” Barry then states that truth, articulating the Christian Gospel in LCMS language, nuanced in the rhetoric of post-Reformation Lutheran orthodoxy. As one of you readers, an Anglican, once said about Anglican theology: “What’s there is not bad, but it’s not complete.” For now I’ll let that pass. It’s the next paragraph, I suspect, that will get Barry into trouble, when he tells the world of USA TODAY what “the Roman Catholic Church teaches.”

3. Here’s his full text: “The Roman Catholic Church teaches that something more than trust in Christ is necessary for us to be saved. It teaches that we are able to merit, through our works, eternal life for ourselves and others. We believe this teaching obscures the work of Jesus Christ and clouds the central message of the Bible.” Since the JDDJ, signed by the Pope’s envoys at Augsburg this fall, says the exact opposite of Barry’s first sentence here, I can’t imagine that he won’t catch flak for telling the world what the Roman Church teaches. Granted, there may well be some, maybe even multitudes of, RCs who do teach what Barry describes, but after Augsburg 1999, they no longer are speaking for “the Roman Catholic Church.”
4. There are also LCMSers—and ELCAers too—who teach and preach a Lutheran variant on “more than trust in Christ is necessary for us to be saved.” Such Lutherans have finessed a way to do this even while they are reciting the Lutheran shibboleth, “faith alone.” The heresy goes all the way back to the

Judaizers in the Galatian congregation of the N.T. era. In Galatia Christ was indeed confessed as Lord and Savior, but then some "plus" was added to that Gospel. The add-on is something liturgical or ethical or experiential or affective, some plus that you've "gotta" have before you are "really" saved. That's the "opinio legis," say the Lutheran confessions, that opinion about the law, which has infected the human race since Adam. It's a "Jesus yes!" proclamation followed by a "yes, but..." Since it's an opinion in people's heads and hearts, it's seldom fazed by any JDDJ sorts of theological statements. Of course Judaizers deny that they are doing this. [I know that I do when I'm Judaizing.] Like major league demons, as Jesus once said, it may take "prayer and fasting" to exorcise it. Though Gospel-plussing can be subtle, you can't hide it entirely. Eventually "by their words (not their works) ye shall know them."

5. In our pre-Seminex hassles a quarter century ago with the LCMS we were being hounded by the "'you gottas" of the then president. One specific one was his "Statement on Biblical and Confessional Principles" laid before us and the not-so-gentle pressure: you gotta sign. To our ears those principles were clear add-ons to the "faith alone" principle we were committed to. Missouri's current president stands fully in the tradition of that earlier president. Wouldn't it be a hoot if the ensuing debate that his full-pager yesterday may well elicit leads the RC partners to exposing Barry's "you gottas" as urging "something more than trust in Christ is necessary for us to be saved," the very charge he lays at their door.

6. So stay tuned. It could just be that the next major round of Lutheran-Catholic dialogue does not take place between the signatories of JDDJ, but between the non-signatory LCMS and the Roman Church. Wouldn't that be ironic? Surely the One sitting in the heavens is already laughing. Just imagine. RC voices using JDDJ in arguing with Al Barry on just what the doctrine of justification really is—and "they" showing "him" how his "teaching obscures the work of Jesus Christ and clouds the central message of the Bible."

II. ANOTHER ONE ON JDDJ

[In ThTh #75 we sent out some responses we'd received to ThTh74. One of those responses said that JDDJ was hyping faith the way scholastic theology did. It was "fides caritate formata," a formula that says "faith fleshed out with works of charity is the faith that justifies." It was not JBFA, justification by faith alone. Here's a response from Nathan Schroeder, a Crossings alum, to that critic.] I am moved to respond to "'S,' a prof at one of those seminaries," who was concerned about the role of works in the JDDJ. I am not a scholar of Lutheranism as you and he (she?) are; but I don't see what he/she saw in **JDDJ**.

As I read the document, it is in the shape of a chi (X): it starts broadly with background, focuses to a central point, and then broadens out to consider some implications of the central point. And what is the central point? I think it is paragraph 15, which comes to the conclusion: "Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works." To reiterate: By grace alone, in faith, ... we are

accepted by God. Sounds like JBFA to me.

Section 4.7 later (in the widening part of the chi) explicates this confession with regard to good works. The section starts: "We confess together that good works – a Christian life lived in faith, hope and love – follow justification and are its fruits." Note the language of sequence: good works follow justification. Justification comes first, then the good works; so how can the justification be dependent on the works? This section goes on to reiterate in the Catholic paragraph: "When Catholics affirm the 'meritorious' character of good works, ... their intention is... not ... to deny that justification always remains the unmerited gift of grace." Likewise in the Lutheran paragraph: Lutherans "understand eternal life in accord with the New Testament as unmerited 'reward'"

I am reminded of the hymn text: "For faith alone can justify; Works serve the neighbor and supply/ The proof that faith is living." Such a concept of "proof" can be problematic to some; but to whom need we "prove" our faith? To the church, to our neighbors, to the Spanish Inquisition? No; "Judge not, lest ye be judged." To God? Heavens, no; He who sees into our very hearts needs no outward evidence of their contents. To our pastor? A pastor, perhaps, is called by God and the Church to inquire as to our faith, but even there I'm not sure. I think the true purpose for works "proving" the existence of faith is to prove it to ourselves. Like Nicodemus, we often don't understand what we are told; so this can be our measurement of our understanding. If we say (even to ourselves) that we have faith, but we find ourselves unmoved to charity and unmotivated toward love, then this confession, this declaration, indicts our understanding of what faith means. "Not everyone who says 'Lord, Lord'

shall enter the kingdom." A true faith in Christ will lead a person to a Christian life of love; anything that calls itself faith, but leads another direction, is false. But it is not for us to observe others and condemn their faith for the lack of works visible to us; the matter is strictly between the believer and God.

[For next Thursday: An erstwhile dean of an Episcopal cathedral here in the USA responds to ThTh #74 "Preaching the name."]

The Gospel as Advent Theology

Colleagues,

First a correction. Second some Advent Archival Items. Third a word about the Tin Cup (again).

I. CORRECTION: Two items of introduction were missing in ThTh 76 last week, Annemie Bosch's essay "Memory and Forgiveness." They were already missing in the original cyberspace transmission I received and then passed on to you. One was this notation: "This article was written for and published by African Enterprise. It may be reproduced in whole or in part, provided its author and African Enterprise are acknowledged. To learn more about African Enterprise visit their website " [Ed's comment: GO and see that!]

The second item was a brief paragraph about the author: "Annemie Bosch is an elder for a local congregation in Pretoria and a long-time helper and supporter of African Enterprise. With her late husband, the renowned

missiologist David Bosch, Annemie worked tirelessly through the Apartheid years, and still works in the present for reconciliation and justice in South Africa.” Not having those words in hand I composed a few sentences about Annemie myself. But way too much hype, she subsequently told me. “I am not a missiologist, definitely not a ‘major voice’ in IAMS. Missiology was one of my majors for the BTh degree – and I perhaps know a little more about missiology because I was married to David.” To which I responded noting that already in Jesus’ day there was confusion about who was major and who was minor in the Kingdom.

II. ADVENT ARCHIVAL ITEMS – Two Texts from Advents Past

First One: THE FUTURES MARKET FOR ADVENT

Church vocabulary in the (Latin) Middle Ages had two words for the future: *futurus* and *adventus*. The word *futurus* designated what lay up ahead in view of what could be extrapolated from the past. This future was to some degree predictable. [E.g., weather forecasts are *futurus* stuff.] *Adventus*, on the other hand, signalled something up ahead that arrived from the other direction. Not at all the consequences of the past, this future was an invasion from up front, from what had not yet happened.

Small wonder that the early Christian community latched on to *adventus* as the word for their future in the light of the Good News. What they had once expected from God was not what actually came. Even if some of the clear-eyed ones had a hunch that the deity would arrive enfleshed, none could even imagine what this humanized deity finally did. For that there was no precedent. It was indeed a new thing.

One apostolic advertisement for adventus goes like this: "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor human heart even conceived, that's what God has coming from the future toward those who trust him." (I Cor. 2:9) But can anything so un-conceivable be described at all, if it is so radically brand new? Paul answers yes. It is grounded in the Jesus story.

What happened from Bethlehem to the Ascension was adventus, nothing you could have deduced from preceding human experience. Here's one way Paul re-words it: "In Christ God was doing a balance sheet, settling accounts, you might say, with the tenants in his world. But God did this by not calculating their trespasses as debits against them. Call it a New Creation." (II Cor. 5)

From what all of us know about balance sheets, is this any way to reconcile accounts? Of course not. But our convictions about balance sheets are deduced from our past experience. Call it Old Creation. We know of no case where accounts ever get settled by simply cancelling debts and never returning to collect—either in the world of economics or of personal relations. Our lives in what we call the "real" world seem to make sense only when we use a debit-credit calculus for human relations. But not so for God, the God of Gospel-adventus.

Yet if you don't count people's debits and credits, how on earth do you reconcile the books? How does God do it? Answer: With another surprise, an adventus original. "God had his Son, the Christ, take ownership of the debits of us all, and in the transaction transferred to us all this Son's own native credits." (Ibid.) What a deal—our liabilities for his assets! Our frightful futurum for his advantageous adventus. What a way to run a railroad! Yet

in view of who the beneficiaries are, why should we quibble?

So the Good News for Advent lies in the new futures market. Sinners, even very moral ones, are offered an alternate future to the one they normally expect. Therefore expect the unexpected this Advent. Expect what otherwise never happens in the Old Creation, God's debts-for-assets exchange—Christ's assets for our debts. It's a "froehlicher Wechsel," as Luther calls it, and as Bob Bertram translates it, "a sweet swap." That's the way God reconciles accounts operating out of God's own future, or, as the Lord's Prayer puts it, the way "God's will is done in heaven."

No wonder the Bethlehem shepherds were scared stiff on Christmas Eve. The heavenly messenger sings that in the manged Messiah God's will is now "being done on our earth as it is in heaven." How can you run things on earth with such a management system, such strange bookkeeping? Yet, if true, it is good tidings. And if we are the beneficiaries, then an earthly "gloria!" is our best response to the angel's heavenly one.

And, oh yes, one more thing. In the time of your own Advent waiting, get some practice in settling your own accounts by sweet-swapping (call it "forgiveness"). Take advantage of Advent. See what happens when you transact your own business of living by this Christic-calculus. Folks with whom you settle accounts in this way may well think you crazy. All the more so if they are committed to cornering the market for their own futures by "trespass-counting." But that's their problem. They are not crazy enough.

For we have it on good authority that sweet-swapping is the way of the future, the one that lasts. The Christ of Advent says we have it coming to us. We have his word for it.

[EHS November 1992]

Second One: AN ADVENT FOLK HYMN

Here's a German folk hymn, both tune and text, discovered some years ago by Steven Mager (our church musician at Bethel Lutheran in St. Louis) and then translated—in several versions—by M&E Schroeder. Below is one of the renderings. [Melody and Mager's setting available on request, although I don't know how to transmit musical scores via cyber-space.]

*Dear Christians, rejoice, for Advent is here,
See the first candle bright & clear
Attention on these, our holiest days.
Prepare your hearts for God's own ways.
Christians, be joyful, with one accord
Near at hand is the Lord.
Dear Christians, rejoice, for Advent has come.
The second candle signals John.
In our darkness too his message brings light,
Points us to Christ, from faith, not fright.
Christians, be joyful, with one accord
Near at hand is the Lord.*

*Dear Christians, rejoice, for Advent is here.
See the third candle, bright and clear.
Our God, three in one, sent Mary his call
To bear his Son and bless us all.
Christians, be joyful, with one accord.
Near at hand is the Lord.*

*Dear Christians, rejoice, for Advent is here.
See the fourth candle, bright and clear.
The circle is closed, we soon will be fed
At Bethlehem, God's House of Bread.
Christians, be joyful, with one accord.
Near at hand is the Lord.*

III. TINCUPThTh-beneficiaries may become ThTh-benefactors in supporting the Crossings team (Robin Morgan, Marie & Ed Schroeder) heading for South Africa next month. The event is the Tenth conference of the International Association for Mission Studies in Pretoria January 21-28. Christology for the New Millennium is the theme. A few days after the conference Robin will return to parish duties in St. Louis, whilst we (Ed and Marie) stick around for a couple more weeks. Our agenda, d.v., is to visit 3 seminaries as well as Christian folks we know in S. Africa, to check out the ministries of former Seminex students now pastoring in Malawi and Kenya, and then conclude with a homecoming (and some guest lecturing) at the Mekane Yesus Seminary in Addis Ababa. MYS was our work world in 1995. Benefactors get US income-tax-deductible benefit by sending your check to Crossings, Inc., P.O.Box 7011, Chesterfield MO 63006-7011. Mark your check: "Crossings in Africa."

Peace & Joy!
Ed

Mission in the New Millennium – A South African Voice

Colleagues:

1. January 21-28, 2000 d.v., will find both of your ThTh editors in Pretoria, South Africa at the 10th every-four-years conference of the IAMS [International Association for Mission Studies]. Marie and Ed have been IAMS members for almost 20 years and have attended IAMS 5,6,7,8,9 during those years. This time Robin Morgan is also attending. For 8 days we'll be wrestling with the conference theme: "Reflecting Jesus Christ: Crucified and Living in a Broken World." Readers of ThTh know about our – and, we trust, yours too – primal commitment to this agenda.
2. Today's ThTh essay is part of the fabric of the upcoming conference. Its author is Annemie Bosch, a South African missiologist. 15 years ago at IAMS 6 in Zimbabwe, I was guest at Annemie and David Bosch's home in Pretoria before the conference. Dear David, a major voice in missiology, then and still now, died in a tragic highway accident a few years ago. Orbis Press had just published his Lebenswerk, his magnum opus, TRANSFORMING MISSION. It continues to be THE classic text in the field. Annemie is herself a major voice in IAMS. Robin, Marie and I will be in conversation with her and some 200 other missions-dedicated folk from all over the world in Pretoria.
3. The total costs for this adventure come to around \$2K for each of us. ThTh receivers are welcome to help us foot the bill. Those of you who do so may get US income-tax-deductible benefit by sending your check to Crossings, Inc., P.O.Box 7011, Chesterfield MO 63006-7011. Please

mark your check: "Crossings in Africa."

Peace & Joy!

Ed

THEOLOGICALLY SPEAKING

October 1999

**Memory and Forgiveness: Vehicles for Reconciliation
by Annemie Bosch**

**This is the fourth essay in a series on mission in
the new millennium.**

INTRODUCTION

Today I saw the film A Reasonable Man and marvelled at the ingenious way the script writer used the story to create a better understanding between the racial groups in South Africa. Last week I was in Mamelodi at a conference where Prof. JNJ (Klippias) Kritzinger told the story of his life and then went on to draw some conclusions from his own story, trying to analyse the racist element in the Church. In the discussion afterwards two participants said that his story had come across powerfully, whereas the analysis had left them floundering. To this Klippias answered: "What more evidence do you need?"

In our context, the context in which I am trying to get under the skin of my neighbour, "storytelling is more important than theological lectures." These two snippets underline the power of storytelling. In this discussion I want to explore storytelling as one of the most powerful catalysts in breaking down barriers between people – a tool entrusted to us by God and already used with great effect in recent transitional processes in South Africa.

HISTORY AND STORY IN SOUTH AFRICA

There was the miracle of April 1994 [the election of Nelson Mandela as president of South Africa]. Preceded by unbearable tension during the last few weeks before the election, it seemed as if civil war was inevitable. For five weeks during 1993 Michael Cassidy from African Enterprise and his team brought together divergent groups of politicians. Many of them had never even spoken to each other before and most of them regarded the others with suspicion. Yet, as they listened to each other telling their personal stories, something started to happen. Across all dividing chasms each began to understand something of what made "the other" tick. Although such understanding does not automatically bring agreement, it does make it more difficult to remain hostile or to write off "the other." This, coupled with country-wide prayer and non-stop efforts by such as Cassidy, contributed to averting catastrophe, realising an inclusive and peaceful election.

Another of these processes was the hearings of the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation (TRC). As people told their stories, terrible though they were, bonds were forged, an atmosphere of empathy and hope – even of elation – was created among those present. How sad that only a handful of whites ever attended the TRC hearings. What a wonderful opportunity was missed – an opportunity to break down old stereotypes, to rejoice with the people, to build new relationships and to be given hope for the future. And now we have already had a second free election and the TRC hearings are a thing of the past, yet the healing process has only just begun.

In any case, authentic inner healing is more than simply telling your story. Telling your story is a liberating experience, but without faith in Jesus Christ it will remain a mere shadow of that deeper reconciliation the Gospel tells us about. I think the Church has an enormous responsibility to pick up where the

TRC left off, and move with the process towards biblical reconciliation.

The Victims: Furthermore, the TRC could only listen to a limited number of people. Only those who had experienced “gross violation of human rights”, could tell their stories – and only a small number from all the submissions received could be accommodated. The result is that many others and thousands more who had “only” suffered the unbearable humiliation of discrimination all their lives, did not have the opportunity to tell their stories. In their innards the debilitating pain still lies like a heavy stone.

The Soldiers: On the whole, those involved in “The Struggle”, whichever side they were on, believed that the enemy understood only the language of violence. They also believed that any deed, however immoral, was ratified by the fact that it was being done for the “greater good.” Inevitably this attitude blunted their moral conscience. For this reason those guilty of “gross human rights violations” were also invited to tell all they had done, and could apply for amnesty. I will come back to this later.

The Backlash: In contrast to the relief and joy at the miraculously peaceful political changeover in 1994, and the real willingness at the time to work for a New South Africa, there is currently an enormous backlash in the white community. This was brought about by uncertainty and fear of what the future might bring, bitterness about higher taxes, severance packages, growing unemployment, the escalation of violent crime and especially the perception that, in spite of the constitution, their rights are not, and will not, be respected.

WAYS FORWARD

This analysis is not complete at all, but it is enough to convince us that there are, even today, very few people in South

Africa who are without any pain, guilt, fear or bitterness of some kind in relation to the past and/or the present political and social system. To this day many old divisions remain, and new ones have come into being. This being the case, how can we move forward?

We Need a Forum: We need a space where people can meet each other across all divides. By “space” I do not only mean a geographical place, but a spiritual and psychological space, a place for “process,” a safe-house. At the same time I am also talking about a venue, perhaps one in each area, where people from different churches, language and race groups could meet. We do need a place in which we can physically come into each other’s presence, for only then can we truly listen to each other. It is in listening to each other that forgiveness, reconciliation and healing begin to happen.

We Need to Remember: Listening to each other’s stories signifies the willingness to remember. Not only must we listen to “the other’s” story, but we should also be willing to accept the truth others tell us about ourselves. Since none of us really knows what we did, and are doing, to each other, it is essential that we hear this from outside. That opens a door in us to accept the realities of the past and to appropriate the memories of “the other.” In this way our histories can become one. Concrete Christian reconciliation takes place where, through repentance and forgiveness, we have developed these common memories. The whole process sets us free to start writing the story of our common future – together. Without doubt it will be an extremely painful and frustratingly slow process. We can only stay part of this process if we remain completely dependent on God’s Spirit. He alone can give us the patient tenacity to stay involved even if our perseverance may have to stretch over generations. The future of our nation depends on our commitment to this process. It is not one option among many. As Christians

we have no other option.

THE OBSTACLE OF AMNESIA

Many of us, however, prefer to forget. There are those of us who believe talking about old wounds will lead to renewed bitterness and retribution. "Blocking out the past" becomes our way of handling the situation. However, sweeping injustice under the carpet gives it a chance to hatch a demon that, one day, when you least expect it, will come at you screaming for revenge. My late husband used to say, "you cannot heal a festering wound by putting sticking plaster [adhesive bandage] on it." It has to be opened, cleaned and drained before it can heal.

In the same way genuine Christian healing and peace can only be achieved when old wounds are opened and cleaned. There is no shortcut. Forgetting without forgiveness does not lead to peace – at the most it can lead to a truce. In order to reach Christian peace, forgiveness is needed. Jesus says his peace is not the same as the peace the world can give (John 14:27). His peace is built on pardon and reconciliation, and reconciliation in the evangelical sense is not built on forgetting, but on remembering. If you forget the past it means you are strangling the truth. It means that as Christians we are forgetting God's revelation, Israel's temple worship and the Good News of the cross. By forgetting you are actually declaring that even the vicarious death of Jesus was in vain.

THE MEMORIES OF PAUL

The apostle Paul talks about the past time and again. He was reconciled with God. All the same, he never forgot how he had persecuted the followers of Jesus (Phil.3:6; 1 Tim.1:13). Neither did he forget how he had been flogged by the Jews (2 Cor 11:23-25). He was both perpetrator and victim.

In Christian reconciliation we always have two parties – the

perpetrator who remembers his guilt and therefore repents, and the victim who remembers his suffering, but in spite of this, forgives. It is important to note the great difference between remembering the past without reconciliation, and remembering the past with reconciliation. Without reconciliation, remembering will always be painful, but after reconciliation both victim and perpetrator can remember without pain. Paul shows us that this is true. Both his tale as victim and the one about his violent deeds are told without pain.

In 1 Tim.1:12-17 Paul explains to Timothy how reconciled memories are memories of the grace that God has bestowed on you, and how reconciled remembrance changes pain into joy. He says (v.13-14) "Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy ... The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." Can't you just feel the joy bubbling from these words? In his letter to the Ephesians (2:11-22), Paul encourages the believers to remember how others, in earlier times, had looked down upon them, and how, when they were reconciled with God, they became accepted and became witnesses to the miracle of the dividing wall tumbling down.

Could there be more convincing examples of how reconciliation makes it absolutely imperative for us never to forget – examples which also demonstrate the width and the depth of God's mercy, and his forgiveness and acceptance of both perpetrators and victims? These passages eloquently portray how the whole quality of remembrance is changed by reconciliation.

WHAT OF THE CHURCH?

Some Christians and a number of denominations feel that they have already done all they could possibly do. We are all grateful for that which has been done, but has the bulk of the iceberg been even touched? What is the Church doing to help in

the healing process? Has it set up initiatives to help grass-roots people from diverse backgrounds to start accepting each other and understanding the background from which each person comes? Is there a program to help people accept "the other," to repent of their wrongdoings, to forgive each other, to do restitution? Have our churches changed the way in which clergy are trained?

It is my opinion – and I am not alone in this – that it is the responsibility of the church to urgently do something constructive, realistic and down to earth in order to meet these pressing needs. (For constructive suggestions, see pages 150-155 in *Confession & Reconciliation: A Challenge to the Churches in South Africa*, Ed. C.W. du Toit, 1998, Research Institute for Theology and Religion, UNISA, Pretoria.)

THE CHURCH AS A PLACE OF AMNESTY

Without reconciliation, remembering will always be painful ...God, in his mercy, created a safe haven for us. It is a place filled with so much compassion and acceptance that we feel safe going in there with our sins, our sorrows and our guilt. Hebrews 4 invites us to approach our sympathetic High Priest with confidence. I John 3 tells us that our hearts condemn us, but that God is greater than our hearts, and Math.11:28 says "Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." The Church should also be such a safe place, so full of love and compassion and humility, so that people will come in and feel free to confess their sins to God and to each other. Perpetrators who confessed at the TRC still had to apply for amnesty. In the Church however, we can be given complete pardon.

For the Perpetrator: There is a perception amongst many that society is more concerned with the rights and the rehabilitation of violent criminals than for the healing of the victims. I do not believe that there are many who have these priorities.

Nevertheless, I do believe that criminals, like everybody else, also have their own stories which would make others understand better how they had become what and who they are. If that happened it would not mean at all that their deeds were condoned – only that we understood better, and realized that Christ also died for them, as he did for you and me. Humanly speaking it is impossible to forgive violent criminals.

Nonetheless, our Lord expects us to do so. He wants those who have wronged us personally, or our community, to have that same confidence we are offered in Hebrews 4 – to approach their sympathetic High Priest and to come into the safe haven of the Church to confess their sin. For them it becomes extremely difficult and perplexing at this stage since, suddenly, those who have suffered through their heinous deeds have now become that haven. Repenting makes one intensely vulnerable. You have to tell those who suffered because of you, that you have lived a lie. You have to tell them: “You were not safe with me, but now I am asking you, be my safe haven!”

Many of us shrink from the mere thought of facing those we have abused. For this reason we prefer to try and forget, and to still the voice of our conscience. It is normal to fear rejection. The Gospel goes against our normal reactions of self-preservation – although we then lack the wisdom to know that this is the only way we can be “preserved”. It tells us: “Lay down your life. Take the risk. Open your heart to your brother, your sister.” That, however, is not the natural thing to do. That is why we have to be “born again”. Without being “born from above” it will remain impossible.

For the Victim: What the Gospel expects from the victims is, humanly speaking, completely out of the question. Yet, victims have to have mercy on those who come to them completely defenceless, wanting to lay down their burdens; not because

repenting makes them so special, but solely because the victims themselves have been shown compassion by their Father. The victims never stand outside the truth and reconciliation process. In truth they are the centre of the process. If they don't forgive, then reconciliation becomes impossible. We merely have to remember the parable of the unmerciful servant to know that God punishes the unforgiving. Jesus tells how the heartless servant was thrown into jail, and then he continues: "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

CONCLUSION:

Miroslav Volf calls these safe-houses, these havens of mercy, "communities of embrace." He says: "The only way to peace is through embrace – that is, after the parties have forgiven and repented, for without forgiveness and repentance embrace is a masquerade... How do we overcome our slippage into exclusion? We need the Spirit who 'issues from the essential inward community of the triune God, in all the richness of its relationships,' who lures people into fellowship with the triune God and opens them up for one another and for the whole creation of God.

The Spirit of embrace creates communities of embrace – places where the power of the Exclusion System has been broken and from where the divine energies of embrace can flow, forging rich identities that include the other." The responsibility of the Church in South Africa today is to make this true! Let us pray for and work for an ongoing miracle – why should miracles be limited to 1994?

Readers' Feedback: "How does Jesus on the cross make a difference?"

Colleagues,

Here are some recent responses that have come back to us at this Crossings cyber-port. Robin and I think you would appreciate them.

Peace & Joy!

Ed

1. [Lutheran pastor "M" in Western Australia]

Just a little thankyou from remote rural Western Australia. Mission Exec "S" from New South Wales put us onto the Crossings method over here in the West a few years ago at Pastor's Inservice, and I have found it very helpful in thinking about texts and preparing for preaching. I also do a little bit on our local Christian community radio station (Hope FM, here in Esperance, W.A.) so maybe a couple of hundred people get a 120 second analysis of the gospel text at 7.45 am on Tuesdays. Half way through I always ask, "How does Jesus on the cross make a difference?" and then go on to answer that. Good discipline trying to put it into a breakfast radio timeslot, and answering that key question. God bless.

2. [EHS forwarded these words to the NSW pastor mentioned. He then sent this back to us:]

It's pleasing to know that Pastor M regularly shares his Crossing of the Sunday text with people via radio. Last

week I taught another small class of four persons the method over five days. So let's hope there's good fruit from that planting. Joy and peace in Christ.

3. [From Pastor "B" in the upper Midwest]

I want you to know how much I appreciate your ThTh 74: "Measuring sermons to see if they're Gospel." I remember when I was on sabbatical a few years back in Pittsburgh. I made a point of visiting a different ELCA congregation each week with a checklist (arguably, a kind of pharisaic thing to do). At the top of my list were: 1) did the sermon I heard pass the double-dipstick test [= merits and benefits of Christ hyped and the people offered the promise inherent there]; and 2) was communion celebrated. Not a sermon I heard passed the double-dipstick test. Only one of twelve of them even named the "Name." Again, at the risk of sounding like a Pharisee, I find the quality of preaching in our church to be simply deplorable. I've stopped attending district meetings because the sermons I hear at them only make me angry. I am being persuaded that in addition to not being taught critical thinking skills, our sem grads aren't taught what the Gospel is. It is heart-breaking.

Maybe your item, if read widely enough, will help. I'm going to make sure my assistant reads it. She, too, is (alas) a recent grad of one of our ELCA seminaries.

4. [From "S," a prof at one of those seminaries. I'll summarize his longish message.]

Responding to ThTh74 his main point was that EHS was way, way too affirmative about the Lutheran-Roman Catholic consensus document, "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" [JDDJ] though he trusted that I was not naive about it. He saw JDDJ as a sellout by the Lutherans,

a cave-in to RC notions of "fides caritate formata," namely, that faith when furnished with works of love does indeed justify sinners, but not faith alone. That even the justification-by-faith [JBF] presented in JDDJ was flabby, and that there was no real justification-by-faith-ALONE at all in JDDJ. He also thought that when it came to JBF as CRITERION for all doctrine, there was serious fudging going on. He also copied to me the statement of the 251 German theologians—a number of them friends of mine, others whom I know and still others I don't—all of whom think JDDJ is bad news.

5. [Thereupon EHS sent him this]

Instead of saying "That's what JDDJ says," I should have said: "That's what JDDJ (surely) wants to say—and here's a suggestion for how it might say that even more clearly." Of course, JDDJ is not what you or I wish "they" would have said. But the days are gone when one guy (e.g., Melancthon) will author an ecumenical document. That doesn't mean you or I can't write a "declaration" of our own. But if you cherish the word "joint" in the title—and I do—then there'll likely be disagreement among co-confessors [you and me] on just how cheered or saddened we should be by what "they" finally hammered out. Any document by committee will never look like a "full glass" for everybody. But even for those who see it unfilled, there are two ways to read the data—half full, half empty. I can argue that the JDDJ glass is half full. So I see the job of us confessors today to keep on trucking to get it fuller.

E.g., that happened a bit today at the every Friday brownbag noon hour at St. Louis University, where some of us Lutheran types talk shop with a few Jesuits of SLU and some Dominicans of Aquinas Institute. Even if JDDJ is at best only "one talent" and not 5 or 10 as last Sunday's

Gospel signalled, the dominical admonition is not to “bury it,” but to “go for it” and see what we can make happen with the one talent we’ve been given.

Remember, I’m just back from 13 straight weeks with fundie conservative (American style) evangelicals—the whole shebang of my Bali congregation. If you think JDDJ is too skimpy to capitalize upon, you should’ve seen the glasses that the Lord set before me for my pastoral work down there—some half empty, some upside down, some full of gosh-awful alien liquors. Enough for now. About those 251 German theologians—well, some other time.

6. [Whereupon he sends me this:]

“Half full, or half empty?”

Well, of course, but so is the Koran half-full and thus can be jointly confessed quatenus. So one party can choose to have it one way and the other can choose to have it the other way. Everything becomes a matter of power regarding who can turn the wax nose. Under these conditions you’d be hard pressed to identify anything as another gospel. Wait til more time goes by and the Jesus Seminar makes its inroad on the ecumenical managers (some slopes are slippery and just on the other side of the justification slope is Jesus (see SA II,I).”Burying or appropriating the ‘one talent’ that JDDJ at best may be.” That’s, of course, great evangelical strategy (Paul in Acts 17) but we’re talking about teaching and confessing here, not missiology which is rooted in the former. Why make a big deal about variata of various sorts. The major hermeneutical heart of JDDJ is just some variata. The “Joint” is fine but the first “D” stands for “Deconstruction” which is done with the JBF “talent.”

7. [Whereupon EHS sent Prof “S” the jeremiad from Pastor

"B"—item 3 above—along with these reflections.]

To debate about how bad JDDJ really is seems to me less important than what Pastor B points to. Is the defective JDDJ or even a correctly improved one really gonna make ANY difference for what this jeremiad bemoans? I think not. What gets preached in the parishes (also in Luther's day) is not shaped by what they did at Augsburg 1530 or 1999. That's just a fact of life. What counts "for the free course of the Gospel being preached to the joy and edification of Christ's people" is not JDDJ documents—or even the original Augsburg Confession—but that people learn what really IS Gospel and what really ISN'T. That comes—if and when it comes at all to supplant the false gospels that abound in people's hearts—from the face-to-face stuff (or cyber-interface) that you & I do when we are NOT writing confessional statements for folks to sign, but rapping with our colleagues and students and holding their feet to the fire. The fire here being not a document but the Good News itself spoken so that they can hear it and cross it over to their own lives. I can't escape the conclusion that the folks who don't preach the gospel are folks who don't know the gospel. If they did, as someone once said, they could not help but preach it when they got a chance. Maybe the Jesus Seminar is a threat to THE Gospel. But even if large numbers of our clergy and laity were to go for it, it wouldn't make the bad Gospel that Pastor B complains about much worse. So also "nailing" JDDJ for its fallacies is irrelevant for what really gets preached in the ELCA, I think. It's not JDDJ that is at the jugular, but what's getting taught—or not taught—at the seminaries these pastors come from. That must be at least one source for the lethal false gospels coming from the mouths of our preachers regardless of what was publicly praised at Augsburg on Oct. 31, 1999. Fiddling

with JDDJ is at the very least Neronic (maybe even moronic) whilst the ELCA city burns.

8. [From second career seminary student "S."]

Re Thth 74. Though the context of your give and take with the ELCA pastor was regarding sermons, I suspect your remarks are on target for other areas as well. I also suspect that the widespread allergy to the Reformation "dipstick" you mentioned is coincident with the widespread popularity (explicit or implicit, conscious or sub-conscious) of Theology of Glory, the growing popularity of non-Jesus-only theocentric views of religious pluralism, just to name a few. I'm even starting to wonder if there isn't a coincident allergy to the concept of original sin. Could all these tendencies be working together to try to thwart the proclamation of the only Gospel truly worth proclaiming?

9. [From a retired LCMS pastor.]

Thanks for the "Measuring Sermons" document. I wonder why I find it so reassuring and affirming of 48 years of my own preaching? I like your response in the measuring sermon document: 'Where there is no promissio at all present, we must add the promise," etc. It's truly great to live in the promise.

10. [From an ELCA pastor in the state of Washington]

Thanks for ThTh74. Something that often happens in so-called Christian preaching is that we treat the methods of Biblical Exegesis that we learned in the seminary as the final step in preparation for sermons. What I remember from my exegesis classes is that we often isolated texts and did all of the "critical" studies of them, tearing them apart, but then failing to put the jigsaw puzzle back together again. And then we forgot to put this put-together-puzzle back into the bigger puzzle called the Holy Scriptures. As much as I enjoy exegesis . . . and the

application of the historical-critical method, we forget the context. Often our context is too narrow. Melancthon was correct in supplying the promise, because we are not supposed to interpret texts in a vacuum. We have to take into account the “whole” of Scripture. Preaching a law text without the promise is ignoring the context of the whole of Scripture. Each individual text links to the whole of Scripture. And the main purpose of the Scriptures is to point to Jesus Christ, the good news of salvation. Thanks again. Keep feeding us with your ThTh. I read it off Lutherlink.

11. [From an Anglican rector in BC, Canada]

I found your litmus test for sermons, THTh 74, excellent. I should enlarge it and tack it up in my study. Three different sermons each Sunday is a bit much, and I find I am tempted to apply the gospel superficially, accept it as read, etc. for fear of using it to manipulate certain behaviour (“Jesus did this for you, so you better...”). Peccavi. But what would a Lutheran expect from an Anglican?

Measuring sermons to see if they're Gospel

Colleagues,

Thanks for the good words from many of you following Robin's report (ThTh 73) that I was both hospitalized and having a birthday in the same week. That's a new form of “simul / et” for this Lutheran. Now continuing the antibiotic therapy here at home, I'm getting better and so I'm back to the computer for

this ThTh 74.

Big news on the ecumenical scene during these days has been the Lutheran/Catholic ceremonies ratifying The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification [JDDJ] in Augsburg, Germany on Sunday Oct. 31. We had a parallel “them and us” service of holy hoopla at the RC Cathedral here in town last Sunday afternoon, Nov. 7. I got out of the hospital just in time to hobble over there to witness it all.

It occurred to me during those days in the hospital that JDDJ, now a common yardstick twixt both of our communions, is also one that “they” could use in measuring us. And that led to this: suppose we Lutherans started to use that JDDJ criterion, now so ecumenically public, to check out our own congruence to the theology once confessed at Augsburg in 1530. And that led me to realize that a conversation I’d been having with an ELCA pastor this year was doing just that. It’s all been by snail- and e-mail since we’ve not had a chance for face-to-face. It started when I was in the congregation where he was the preacher. Thereafter I dropped him a note.

I. “You may not have noticed. In the sermon you preached to us last week THE NAME did not get mentioned until the closing vatum of the sermon’s final sentence. More accurate would be to say: my ears didn’t hear it get mentioned until that concluding commendation. That was not the case with the text from St. Paul which we studied earlier at our meeting: ten times he ‘drops the name’—noun or pronoun—in just eleven verses. Preaching the Gospel implies such name-dropping, doesn’t it, not for reasons of etiquette, but for reasons of hooking up to the power of God for salvation. Can you preach a Christian sermon with just God-talk, but no Christ-talk? I’ve heard folks maintain that, but I disagree.”

II. Later in the exchange, getting feistier, I said:

1. Granted you had an OT text for the sermon, where THE NAME wasn't mentioned. Yet grounding a sermon on the name and power of God, of Yahweh, qualifies it to be good enough for the synagogue, but not yet Christian proclamation, I'd say.
2. Back in Seminex days we discovered in the Augsburg Confession & Apology the Reformers' 'dipstick' for testing all theology—sermons included. That dipstick has two sides. One, does the sample being checked 'necessitate Christ?' Two: does it offer people the promise that God wants them to have and that faith can receive?
3. Necessitating Christ entails more than just name-dropping, of course. The dipstick checks whether Christ is necessary for carrying out what the sermon proposes. Or could the hearers carry through on the faith or action a sermon was urging, even if Calvary and Easter and Pentecost had never happened?
4. So student sermons, essays in systematics, et al. were given the "dipstick test." Stuff that did not pass the dipstick test was returned for repairs. I heard your sermon needing repairs. You don't. That's what I suggest we ought to talk about.

III. That elicited these words from the preacher in a July letter waiting for us when we got back from Bali a few days ago: "Briefly, in preaching I am concerned about two things: about a careful understanding of the text, using our best historical critical resources to evoke its particular meaning for us; and that the text be preached in the context of our confession of the Holy Trinity. Yes, we are always grounded in our Baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but sometimes a specific text will call forth an emphasis on the Spirit or the

Father. But no one Person of the Trinity will make sense without the other. (Here I follow Bill Lazareth.) It is in the rich wholeness of the interaction of baptismal identity, gathered community of human creatures, preached Word, and Spirit working that we live life more fully in the Risen Christ."

IV. And that prompted this long piece which I sent off earlier this week. I've just come back from three months of pastoring. That meant preaching for 13 Sundays in a row and doing Bible study with my members each Friday evening. So preaching the Gospel and studying Biblical texts is not just an academic item for me.

Lutherans are talking about JDDJ and Augsburg 1999 these days. That teases me into teasing you with Augsburg theology of 1530f. to nudge you into taking another look at what your paragraph says. Such peskiness on my part probably doesn't surprise you, even though you may now and then wish that I would just go away. But you did in this July letter (still) designate me a "valued colleague"—so here goes.

1. You and I may not be talking about the same issue. From your paragraph above I could deduce that you hear me beating the drum for getting Jesus (or his honorific title "Christ") mentioned in every sermon. And since I didn't hear either of those vocables mentioned in that sermon, you thought that I was griping about this "real absence." Is that what you hear me saying?
2. You then, by contrast to that, want to make sure that Christian sermons are Trinitarian, with no person of the deity getting all the attention to the detriment of the others. Thus, for you, if a given preaching text focuses on the first or third persons

in the triune coalition, a sermon is sufficiently Christian to let that name/person be the God-referent throughout the homily. Not mentioning the second person in the divine partnership does not detract from the OK-ness of a sermon as Christian proclamation.

3. You may also be signalling your displeasure with "Jesus only!" preaching where a Christo-monism seems to be the deity invoked. Perhaps that is your point when you say "Here I follow Bill Lazareth," but I'm not sure what your reference to Lazareth implies.
4. My concern in our discussion is not to hype "Jesus only" homilies. I've heard (suffered under) such preaching where Jesus got all the kudos, but the message was flatout legalism. So "Jesus only-ism" guarantees nothing. Nor am I saying that "just mentioning the name Jesus (or his title)" is the test for genuine Gospel proclamation. Name-dropping also guarantees nothing. To insist on that could amount to a legalism of another sort.
5. What I suspect we may disagree on is just what fundamentally-essentially-constitutes preaching the Gospel. What is the dipstick, the objective criterion, to poke into a sermon to determine whether it's the Christian Gospel or not? When is a sermon proclaiming THE Gospel, and when is it not? It could also be that we're not on the same wavelength about whether THE GOSPEL has to be there as grounding for any sermon that claims to be Christian. I want to say yes to that. But then I'd have to spell out what I mean by the gospel.
6. For a definition of "gospel," what I learned in Erlangen [summer semester 1953!], continues to be compelling. Here's what Elert taught us: according

to NT usage of the term the gospel is both "Bericht und Anrede," a report and a message personally addressed to us. The Gospel is indicative and hortatory language. As indicative speech the gospel reports about Jesus in such a way that the word of God is perceptible in him. And that word is God's "word of reconciliation" (2Cor 5:13). As hortatory speech the gospel applies the Christ-report to the audience. To the reportorial element is added the appeal to the hearers: "we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." (2Cor 5:20).

7. Your paragraph above points to 3 concerns for preaching. Your concern (A), that texts be exegeted as you describe with the goal of "evoking its particular meaning for us," is one I, of course, share. Ditto for (B) "preaching in the context of our confession of the Holy Trinity." Ditto for (C) "no one Person of the Trinity will make sense without the other two."
8. My point in all this, as I've said, centers on the word Gospel—or to use Melanchthon's preferred term at Augsburg, "promissio." Our call as preachers is to preach the Gospel, the Gospel that is God's promise. The three rubrics mentioned in #7 above do not (yet) touch that topic. Nor do those 3 rubrics, when fulfilled, guarantee that the outcome will be the Good News. Those three checkpoints will also let a legalist sermon pass through the sieve, a sermon hyping an "other" gospel.
9. Specifically with reference to (A)—exegeting Biblical texts—Melanchthon at Augsburg in 1530f. is driven (almost) to despair in Apology IV about the "wrong" way the scholastics/confutators do their exegesis. But it's not their grammatical-historical

methods he doesn't like. It's the theological lenses they use while doing textual exegesis that he complains about. In text after text they do "evoke its particular meaning for us," but, he moans, there is no Gospel that comes out at the end. His own analysis is that they "add" *opinio legis* to what the text actually says. This "lawish opinion"—that the law could save sinners, "if only they would ..."—is etched onto the scholastics' reading glasses, and distorts their exegesis and their preaching therefrom. In Apol. IV Melanchthon consciously applies a "Gospel" dipstick to their exegesis. That dipstick [mentioned above in this ThTh text] for measuring their exegesis is two-sided: Christological & pastoral. Umpteen times in Apol. IV he concludes: they waste the merits and benefits of Christ and (consequently) they have no comfort [no Good News] for sinners who are listening to their preaching.

10. Their exegesis is otherwise "orthodox" according to the ancient church's two great dogmas—Trinitarian in its God-talk and Nicene-Chalcedonian in its Christology, but Good News it is not. The message they come up with is not the Gospel, the Good News that is the mark of apostolicity. It is not "Christum treiben."
11. The Lutheran take on the Trinity, as I read the confessions, especially the stuff in the Large Catechism on the creed, goes like this: Christian concern for the dogma of the Trinity is not to do God-talk that is "true." Instead the Reformers are pushing this sort of Trinity: to talk about the true God in such a way that it comes out as Good News for sinners. The dogma of the Holy Trinity proposes

“God-talk that is Good News.” That’s what the hassle on the Trinitarian dogma in the early church was all about, according to the Reformers. Arius’ heresy was not simply that he got the God-facts wrong when he was reading the Bible. His Trinity was not “good” enough, not “new” enough, to be adequate “for us and for our salvation,” to use the lingo of the Nicene Creed. Arius’ Trinity was not “good enough” Good News, and so gets rejected at Nicea. The Nicene creed proposes a “better” Trinity, one that is good enough and new enough “for us and for our salvation.”

12. I now recur to your items (B) & (C) above “that the text be preached in the context of our confession of the Holy Trinity,” and that “no one Person of the Trinity will make sense without the other two.” Don’t you too think that Augsburg constrains us to do more than see to it that no person of the divine triad gets short shrift? Aren’t we confessionally committed to proclaiming Trinitarian theology as the Good News about God for sinners? Thus the Gospel-dipstick—what is Good News, what is not—becomes the criterion for whether our Trinitarian preaching is Christian God-talk, whether it is THE Gospel, or no Gospel at all, or an other Gospel.
13. Melanchthon in the Apology had to respond to the needling of his critics that many Biblical texts—when exegeted with the best scholarly tools of their day, and now ours today as well—simply don’t mention Jesus Christ at all, and that even more texts had no “promissio” in them. So what does he say to such “Just preach the text” proposals? He says thus: when exegeting a text (= preaching a sermon on a text) where there is no promissio at all

present, we “must add the promise.” Why? Answer: the double dipstick. Add the promise to promise-empty texts so that a) the merits and benefits of Christ be not wasted, and b) sinners receive the promise that the Triune God wants them to hear. Almost as an aside he can also say: Add the promise so that the sermon comes out as Christian proclamation—and not Jewish or “sophist.”

14. The hassle in the JDDJ discussions about “justification as THE criterion” for doctrine is but a variation on this, I would suggest. In AC and Apol IV “justification by faith alone” [JBFA] is offered as a synonym for both of the terms, Gospel and promise. The Gospel is a promise. Promises call for the promise-receiver to trust them. The faith that justifies is always a “faith trusting God’s promise,” which is synonymous with “faith in Christ the Promissor.”
15. JBFA is not the one BIG doctrine we Lutherans insist on. Rather it is the criterion for all teaching and preaching. That’s what JDDJ says. JBFA urges preachers to “present your message in such a way that what you seek to elicit will be to get your hearers to trust God’s promise.” Can anyone articulate that promise and commend it to sinners as trustworthy, without naming the Promissor, the Name that saves? I can’t. And even if we could, why would we want to? Just to give the other Trinitarian members “equal time?” Would they be pleased with that? Not according to the NT texts that I can think of at the moment.
16. Not mentioning that Name at all fails the JBFA criterion test. Since no one gets to the Father [=gets justified] except by him, as John’s Gospel

affirms, proclamation that bypasses explicit use of the Crucified and Risen One will get no one to the Father. It's not Gospel. That is the case no matter how many time the Father's name is otherwise invoked in a sermon.

17. And the same is true of the Holy Spirit—especially in John's Gospel where Jesus so explicitly ties the Holy Spirit to himself. That is one aspect of what is "good and new" in John's words about the Holy Spirit, the Spirit's own constant Christ-connection, the Spirit's own "Christum treiben." Paul in his theology does the same. The consequence for Christian proclamation is that any proclamation of the Holy Spirit that bypasses the One to whom the Spirit testifies is promoting some other spirit, not the Holy Spirit. We need to remember that the root Hebrew meaning of holy is "different." The big difference about the Spirit interior to the Trinity is that this Spirit's holiness engages in "holy-ing" sinners by connecting them to Jesus the Christ.
18. In this sense, all preaching normed by JBFA gets done a) "in the context of our confession of the Holy Trinity" b) using, not wasting, the merits and benefits of Christ, and c) offering sinners the Good news they need—all of which, says Paul in Phil. 2, glorifies God the Father.
19. A sermon about God and God's ancient people [like yours from an OT text], when it is Christian kerygma, necessitates a third party—not just a name dropped, but as a resource used. In the rhetoric of Apol. IV: it necessitates Christ. I can't see any other option for Augsburg Confessors—in 1530 or in 1999. Can you?

Pax et Gaudium!

Being Like God's Widow: Reflections on Freedom and the Stewardship of Money

Dear Folks, Our Thursday Theology this week comes from Steve Kuhl, newly elected president of Crossings, Inc. and pastor of Mt. Olive Lutheran Church in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin.

FYI – Ed and Marie are back in St. Louis as of last Wednesday, but Ed is in the hospital as of yesterday. He has cellulitis and is on IV antibiotics to get rid of the infection. He's probably going to be there at least a week. Since Saturday (Nov 6) is his birthday you might think about dropping him a happy birthday/get well e-mail. I know he'd appreciate it.

*Peace and Joy,
Robin*

This fall, we at Mount Olive, like so many congregations, will have our annual stewardship emphasis. While it is true that “stewardship” is not simply a matter of giving to the church or to charities but the practice of being responsible, wise managers of all that God has given us nevertheless, when we speak of “stewardship” here we do mean to emphasize our unique

Christian responsibility for being what Paul calls “stewards of God’s mysteries” (1 Cor. 4:1), that mind-boggling gift of salvation won for us by Christ on the cross. As recipients of that mysterious gift, we who receive it by faith are also the ones called and dignified by God to be its stewards, to oversee its distribution throughout the whole world. And that stewardship does include the giving of ourselves, our time, and our possessions: everything else that we have also received as a gift from God’s gracious hand.

Stewardship, therefore, is always a matter of making God-pleasing choices and decisions in light of priorities and pressures that surround us. These choices are never easy, and that goes doubly so for Christians, since we have more to manage: not only the “care,” but also the “redemption” of all that God has made. Just look at the difficult choice we have. What is more important for the well-being of the world than “redemption” and the spread of the gospel? Still, God has entrusted to us not only the gospel, but a “whole life” to “care for”: all those people and things that pertain to the first article of the Creed, like family and neighbors, work and government. They, too, have need of our selves, our time, and our possessions. So, how do we decide how much of our time, talent, and money for this and how much for that? What kind of stewardship is God-pleasing?

In one sense, the answer is not all that profound. We must painstakingly look at our incomes and our out-goes, set priorities, and prayerfully decide how we will make do with what we have. Undoubtedly, no matter how large or small our purses, we will have to make sacrifices cut here, skimp there, make do somewhere else because the pressures to have this or to do that are unrelenting. There is no easy answer to managing all the responsibilities that accrue to us in life. At root, it takes repentance and faith; it takes crucifying our old selfish self by mounting the cross of Christ in faith. For in the process of making stewardship decisions we will inevitably see that we have

made poor decisions in the past, decisions that enslave and limit us in the present.

Still, we Christians can make our soul-searching stewardship decisions in freedom not financial freedom, but Christian freedom, the freedom that comes through faith in Christ. No matter how great or small our ability to contribute of our time, talent and possessions to the care and redemption of all that God has made, because of faith in Christ we can be assured that that quantity in itself has no bearing on our standing before God. Because God's gift in Christ is free-for-the-believing, so our giving in response to him is the freedom of faith. While that freedom will not reduce our need to cut back, to skimp, to make do, to repent actually, it is likely to heighten that need what it does mean is that with God, the One who counts ultimately, we can always "make ends meet," because God has already made-ends-meet in Christ. Now isn't that freeing?

Note this one biblical example of stewardship and Christian Freedom. (Lk 21:1-4) One day while Jesus was standing outside the temple he noticed all the rich people placing large sums of money into the treasury. Pretty soon a widow also came and placed two mites (two pennies) into the collection. Jesus, St. Luke tells us, could not resist comment: "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she has to live on." (Lk 21:4). Giving out of her poverty sacrifice! Jesus was impressed. But by what all was he impressed? Not the amount given, though it was her all. What was impressive was the freedom out of which she was able to give. . . "out of her poverty." Why. . . she was living as free as the proverbial "birds of the air" (Mt 6:26) that Jesus marveled at in his Sermon on the Mount.

From whence does such freedom come? Throughout Lukes gospel we

see that Jesus identifies the source of such freedom as faith (Lk 5:20; 7:9, 50; 8:48; 17:19; 18:42). Not just any faith, especially, not faith in abundance, but faith in God and his Christ, the One who first was free enough to sacrifice all for us. Because this faith alone receives everything all things from God, this faith alone sets us free to give our all in return. For faith is our all, the giving of our whole self.

Now, when you think of it, doesn't that widow look a lot like us: skimping, cutting back, making do, even repenting. And what's all more, she does it all on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ, who gave his all her, for us? Perhaps not a single person would have traded places with that widow that day. But having heard our Lord's comment, don't you find it rather dignifying – indeed, freeing – being like God's widow? As you contemplate your stewardship decision for giving this year, do it in perfect freedom, do it in faith, do it with your eyes fixed on him who died and rose for you. And let me hazard a prediction. You just might find it enjoyable, too.

Live free, believe.

Some Reflections on the Theology of Bishop I Wayan Mastra

When Wayan Mastra, long-term bishop in the GKPB [Protestant Christian Church of Bali], confesses his faith, that confession is clear, crisp and Christocentric. His favorite way is to echo

the words from Johns Gospel, Jesus own claim, I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me.

When Mastra articulates his theology—in his English-language essays that he gave me to read, including his doctoral dissertation from the early 70s at Aquinas Institute in Dubuque IA—that theology also is clear and crisp, but finding its center is more difficult. Its not that Jesus claim is denied, but it is more difficult to see that Christo-centricity functioning as the center. He takes pains to keep his theology Biblically based. Even with his drumbeat for Balinese local theology, contextualized into Balinese culture—the Gospel planted in Balinese soil producing a Mango Tree Church—Mastra does not try to borrow from the Hindu theology at the center of that culture. That Hinduism he knows well. It was the family faith of Mastras childhood home. Not until he was an adult did he move to the Christ-confession mentioned above. As a Christ-confessor he wants to ground his theology, all of it, in the Bible.

So all of the major pieces of his theology have Biblical passages as their foundation. But that is precisely where the question arises about the center. What is it that holds these diverse passages from Old and New Testaments together? What keeps them from being a random selection, Mastras personal random selection, based on some interior antenna that picks up just these Biblical signals for concentrated listening, and bypasses others? He wants to commend them to his people and to us his readers, so there must be more than just his personal preference at work.

It cannot simply be they are in the Bible. For there are many big themes in the Bible which do not appear in Mastras theology in any foundational way—Pauls drumbeat for justification by faith alone, or Johns fundamental claim that Christs Cross is the trademark of Christs glory, and thus also of our own, to

name just two.

The best I've come up with for understanding his theology is Mastra's own Mango Tree image. Ulrich Beyer suggests in his 1998 book, *Bali – Morgen der Welt*, that Mastra has a Mango Tree theology. But with that Beyer only points to the inculturation aspect, Mastra's insistence that the Gospel be planted in Balinese soil. I want to expand the image to suggest two things:

1. that Mastra uses a Mango Tree hermeneutic
2. that the theology he formulates is not merely planted in Balinese soil, but is itself a basket of mangoes.

This is my attempted analysis that I presented to him before we left Bali:

Brother Wayan,

Your theology resembles a basket of mangoes picked from the tree that is the Bible. The common element in all of them is that they come from the Biblical tree. But these are not just ordinary mangoes. As you frequently remind us, pointing to the end of the Book of Revelation at the very end of the New Testament, these fruits and even the leaves from this Biblical mango tree are for the feeding of people and the healing of the nations. It is not clear just how you go about picking the mangoes, deciding which ones are ripe for you to take. But once they are picked from the tree—or from the ground where they have fallen and you find them—each piece has its own completeness. You put them in your basket. They do touch each other, but they have no necessary connection with the fruit they are touching. Nor do they have any connection with the tree any more—although that is where they come from. They come from the Word of God, as Christians of all ages and cultures have said, and that is important.

You then take these mangoes and digest them by feeding them

into the Balinese world. Call it contextualization, call it inculturation. You yourself are a major representative of that world, a major spokesman for what it really is. So when you feed these Biblical mangoes into your own life experience, your own thinking, your own Balinese Weltanschauung, the process of feeding and digesting takes place. What comes from the process, the end product, is therefore a genuinely Mango Tree Christian Theology.

Here are some examples—and some observations:

1. One of your prize mangoes is Gods promise to Abraham in Genesis 12. The key term you find there is Blessing. As you often do, you find three elements in that text, perhaps echoing the three-ness of so many elements of your Balinese heritage. The three are:

1. Land,
2. descendents,
3. and a great name.

You move directly to Bali with those three items and see them fulfilled in:

- a. economic success (the land promise),
- b. the calling Christians have for Bali (descendents),
- c. and knowledge, prestige, competence for Balinese people through education (the great name).

Observation: the first time this text of Gods promise is mentioned in the New Testament, I think, comes in the book of Acts at the end of the third chapter. There Peter, making his second sermon in Jerusalem after the coming of the Holy Spirit, preaches about the Abrahamic promise. He claims that God fulfilled that promise When God raised up his servant Jesus, and sent him to you [people of Israel] to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways.

Seems to me that here Peter is claiming that the non-blessedness of the Israelites (and people throughout the world, the Balinese too) is their God-problem, their wicked ways. To stay opposed to what God intends, even when it comes from Gods chosen people, puts you into unblessedness, even under a curse. And whats needed to get to blessedness is to have this God-problem healed. That healing came, Christians claim, and continues to come, when Christ brings Gods mercy to people addicted to wicked ways. Isnt that the constant pattern of all NT usages of OT passages? The apostles do not take an OT passage straight across to the local situation, but first connect it to Christs cross and resurrection, and then on the rebound, you might say, they link it to local people in their local cultures. Thats true for both the Gospel indicatives of NT proclamation, and the Gospel imperatives for NT ethics.

Israelites, todays Jews, might be able to take Abraham 12 straight across to their situation today, but we Christians cannot, can we? We have no claim, no access, no right, to those promises on our own, since we are not blood-line descendents of Abraham. The only way we can get in on the Blessing of Abraham, as Paul says (Gal. 3), is via Christ. Christ redeemed us from curse of the law [the dilemma of all sinners] when on the cross he became a curse for us. Then first do we get access to the Abrahamic promise: in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to [us] Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Granted, that is a detour from what I hear you proposing, namely, that we go straight across from Genesis 12 to Balinese culture and history. But apart from Christ, who is our bridge to Genesis 12, the blessing to Abraham does

not include any of us outsiders.

2. *It seems to me that the other precious texts (fruits) which you find on the Biblical mango tree need to be digested in the same way. They need to be connected to Christs work of Good Friday and Easter first of all, and then on the rebound they become distinctively Christian good news—for Balinese people and for all of us. Im thinking of your favored mango-fruit texts, the ones that Beyer discusses in some detail in his book on pp.71-80, his section 7.2 Wayan Mastras Theologie. Those texts are Luke 2:52, John 15:16 and Matthew 5:3.*

As Beyer summarizes your application of these texts, the same pattern appears. We are taken straight from the text to the Bali situation. The Christo-centric focus—so central in your confessed faith—is hard to fine, if not simply absent as you digest these mangoes and feed them to your readers. My point is that in keeping with your faith-confession all these texts need to be paraded in front of Christs cross and resurrection and be digested there in order to become Good News food to nourish Balinese people—and finally all of us.

3. *Beyer does some evaluation of your hermeneutic in his book, but he does not discuss the need for a Christo-centric hermeneutic to accompany your clear, crisp Christo-centric confession of faith. There is always a correlation between ones confession of faith and how one interprets the Bible. That has been true throughout the history of the church. It was also true in the era of the Protestant Reformation. With the new (or rediscovered) understanding of justification by faith, there came a new hermeneutic, that the Reformers developed for how to read the Bible. My comments above are recommending that you reorganize your hermeneutic to make it conform more to*

your confession of faith.

- 4. It is on this point that I wish we had had time to discuss your fascination with Karl Rahners theology, spelled out in detail in your doctoral dissertation. Hendrik Kraemer or Rahner are not the only alternatives available for a Christian theology of missions. I know that you know that. Yet at the time of your dissertation in the early 70s you see the two of them as the only serious choices. And since you find Kraemer to be deficient, you choose Rahner.*
- 5. My argument with Rahner is not focused on the anonymous Christian idea he proposes, an idea that has gotten lots of support and lots of criticism. Instead it is Rahners Biblical hermeneutic, his way of interpreting the Bible that underlies his theology, that is the point I think no Protestant theologian should pick from his theological tree. Rahner does not depart from the medieval scholastic hermeneutic of doing theology in terms of nature and grace. When the Protestant Reformers protested against scholastic theology, they protested both against the semi-Pelagianism of scholastic nature/grace theology and the Biblical hermeneutic that went along with it.*
- 6. I dont have time here to develop that and still get this finished to hand to you this evening. But that Reformation hermeneutic and its theology may even be coming into your family via another route. Im thinking of your son Agus at Valparaiso University. Valpo is a consciously Lutheran university, and in the required theology courses that Agus will have during his time there, hell be exposed to the Reformation hermeneutics Im talking about. If it should happen that he learns Reformation theology—and likes it—you may hear more of it when he comes home.*

7. It could even be that Agus will have as one of his assigned readings an essay I published when I was a member of the theology faculty at Valpo about the same time that you were in Dubuque. Its title: *Is there a Lutheran [i.e., Reformation Protestant] hermeneutic?* I gave the answer yes, and then tried to show what it was, how it worked and what the results were when Bible interpreters consciously used it.
8. If you and I do have any continuing exchange after our departure tomorrow, I would like that. And if you ever get to the USA—to visit Agus or for some other purpose—I'll try to get to wherever you are so we might continue the conversation. One idea I'm bouncing around in my mind is to stick with your image of Mango tree theology, and then apply the Reformation hermeneutic to that theology and see what comes out at the end. I would consider this to be a continuation of what I said at the beginning of this essay: to re-word your Mango tree theology into the same clear crisp Christo-centricity that your faith-confession proclaims.

Thank you for inviting us to Bali.

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Dhyana Pura Hotel, Seminyak
September 28, 1999