

# Year's End Summary: the Hassle about the Gospel

Colleagues, First off two notices. If they were printed in the Classified Ads, they'd be under PERSONALS:

1. 1. On this very day, December 27, 2001, God willing, Marie and I will start driving from St. Louis to New Haven, Connecticut for a spring-semester stint at a new workplace. I'm to serve as Senior Mission Scholar at the Overseas Ministries Study Center across the street from the Divinity School of Yale University. From January 1, 2002 until the middle of May 2002, this will be our mailing address: Overseas Ministries Study Center, 490 Prospect Street, New Haven CT 06511. Our e-mail address remains unchanged.
2. 2. From the grapevine we've heard that one of our ThTh readers "is going to be the sacrificial lamb" in an upcoming purge at an LCMS school. So one of his buddies asks: "Would you mind putting his name out on the wires?" Be glad to, I told him. The name in question is one I won't name right here. For now he's NN. NN is a creme-de-la-creme law/promise theologian. After almost a decade of teaching in the LCMS system, NN has run afoul of the doctrinal censors. Why? For professing the sort of law/promise theology that you read in these postings, including last week's ThTh 184 from NN's teacher Bob Bertram. NN has great credentials. Ph.D. from U. of Chicago. Publications. Honors hither and yon. Recommendations from David Tracy, Brian A. Gerrish, Martin E. Marty, etc. And besides all that, i.e., best of all, he knows THE Gospel, and knows how to teach it. If I were still a hiring honcho in theol. education, he'd be my

first interview. To follow up write [skreegs@qwest.net](mailto:skreegs@qwest.net)

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## **Now to the Year's End Summary: The Hassle about the Gospel**

Seems to me that the Hassle about the Gospel has been the dominant thread in this year's postings. Frequent themes—homosexuality, historic episcopate, church building programs, mission theology, preaching, and those two months worth of repentance postings—were finally variations on “Just what is the Gospel, and what is it not.” It's all been about the farm-wagon wheel that I learned to use for imaging “good” theology, when I was a classroom theology prof like NN above. All the spokes of the Christian wheel must fit into the hub, aka the Gospel, must be socketed, grounded in that hub, or they don't belong in the Christian wheel. They are spokes from some other wheel—of which there are many. Many other wheels are rolling around and through Christian churches nowadays, Lutheran churches included.

A number of you ThTh readers I have disappointed by not responding to your own responses to me this past year. Sometimes I just get too many to cope with. I'm thinking right now of one very long and intense and thoughtful rejoinder from a dear Seminex student to the homosexual postings. He's a pastor “out west.” You heard me, brother S, “giving away the store” as I talked about that issue—and I never got back to you. What I thought I was doing was socketing that hot potato issue into the Gospel hub—just as we did in Seminex theology classes, and then reporting out to the readership what I saw when that happened. So if we were still together in the Seminex building on Grand Avenue, dear S., I'd ask you to show me how you socket homosexuality into the Gospel we both hold dear. And we'd check

our two versions out side-by-side for their gospel-groundings. Even though it seemed to you, as I recall, that I was concluding from my Gospel-hub that “anything goes,” we both know that’s not so.

But the “gospel-wheel” does mean that anything Gospel-socketed does indeed GO. Gospel-socketed stuff finally goes—better, comes—commended by the Lord of the Gospel himself. That’s a feisty claim. But it is finally the feistiness of any assertion that claims to be Christian. Luther and Erasmus argued (1525) whether assertions were the form of the Gospel. Luther said yes, Erasmus didn’t think so. The Gospel (and each spoke) does not come with question marks at the end of its sentences. Even though question marks often dominate in sermons I hear [Did you . . ? Have you . . ? Will you . . ?], the Gospel cannot be preached with interrogative sentences. It’s always assertions. Both in its claims about Christ and its crossing into our lives. Note the real absence of question marks in Jesus’ own sermons. See Mark’s summary of Jesus’ preaching: “The kairos is full. The Kingdom is here. Repent. Believe the Good News.” Nary a question mark. Just 4 indicative and imperative sentences.

Some of you I have doubtless disappointed when I DID respond. I’m thinking of the ThTh postings about bishops and again about church buildings and those many postings on repentance. Here too, the Gospel-socket test is the criterion. If it’s anchored in the hub, it’s of a piece with the truth of the Gospel. If not, don’t call it Christian.

My upcoming junket at the Overseas Ministries Study Center [OMSC] for the spring semester 2002 is to focus on mission theology (natch!) and on preaching the Gospel. That’s not two different themes, as y’all know. As I understand my assignment—all this from afar communicated mostly by the cyber-medium—my task is (1) “some lectures” but no semester-long

courses since OMSC doesn't do that, (2) doing my own research, and (3) being a "presence" in the community. I'll leave the third item to you for your envisioning.

On the second item I propose to keep pressing on the theme "Lutheran missiology – an oxymoron?" You know from past postings that I don't think it's oxymoronic. Yet just what that is, is conflicted everywhere – also within my own church, the ELCA. And my own reading so far of that conflict is that it is not a conflict about how to do mission, but about what Gospel, which Gospel, is at the center of mission. A few weeks ago I posted some thoughts on that in reporting on some discussions at the end of September with Mission execs from the ELCA. The responses some of you sent on that item are still in the hopper, for my own edification and for (I hope) future sharing with this readership.

The first item, "some lectures," at present includes one on "Making Sense of the Gospel in a Secular World" during the January intermester at OMSC when students from 30-plus seminaries show up for crash-course mission exposure. Later in the term I'm slotted for a whole week (8 sessions) on "In a World of Faiths, Why Jesus?" It's scheduled for April 15-19. If you've got nothing else to do after Easter, come on over and sign up. The OMSC address is above.

For the coming year you'll be hearing more frequently from ThTh co-editor Robin Morgan—or so we have it planned. Robin's been handling 3 (or is it even 4?) near full-time jobs for much of the year 2001. Why next year for her should be any different, I'm not sure. But she says so and also says she has ThTh stuff to put out on the [cyberspace] wire.

For example, you've never heard anything about Hildegard von Bingen from me—and probably never would. But you will from

Robin. And lots more. So stay tuned.

May the remainder of your Twelve Days be blessings for you and for others. And the same be true for all the days of two thousand two.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## Even So, Lord Jesus, Come Quickly

Colleagues, Last year's Christmas posting "Thoughts of a Manger" [ThTh 133] was the poem-prayer of my sister-in-law Linda Schroeder composed from the hospital bed where a hit-and-run driver had put her with a shattered leg and major internal injuries on Advent I. Now a year later Linda is still on crutches. The leg bones did not knit after eleven months of high-tech medical intervention. So a few weeks ago she had another surgery—artificial parts replacing the ones that did not heal. The prognosis is good, but patient waiting (ala the 2nd lesson for last Sunday, Advent III) is still part of her calling.

Analogous for this Christmas 2001 is today's text from Crossings-founder Bob Bertram. Bob was diagnosed in late summer with a brain tumor, glioblastoma by name. Chemo- and radiation-therapy interventions have had little effect in reducing the tumor. Words and prayers from the Christian koinonia—world-

wide—continue, says Bob, to generate daily miracles. Large chunks of that koinonia showed up in the flesh two weeks ago at the annual Advent Hymn Festival here in St. Louis, this year honoring Bob. The worship theme was pure Bertramiana: “He’s Coming! . . . And Aren’t You Glad?” And so were the parts—six readings from Bob’s theological works, each coupled with scriptural texts that gave the groundings.

In, with, and under these readings was the music: several choirs and music directors from area congregations, lots of unison singing. And then came the unprogrammed finale, Bob asking presiding pastor Ron Neustadt for space to say a few words before the benediction. It was *ex corde* and did get not recorded. Here’s the reconstruction we’ve made from several people’s memories—including Bob’s. *[A fuller treatment of this you-had-to-have-been-there moment comes in the Crossings Christmas newsletter in the mail this week.]*

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“For an old brain-damaged Christian, especially someone who has had to learn all over again tonight that Advent is adventure, for such a one, there is really only one thing left to say. And that is simply, Come, Lord Jesus. And when You do come this time, why not bring along the whole family, all the sisters and brothers? For surely this time when You come, there will be room enough in the inn – the inn of our hearts – considering all the unfinished business that is still left to be done in those hearts.

For instance, when You come, Lord Jesus, think of what all will be there of ours for You to deal with. There will be all the clutter of what we have left there of ours – our sin, our sickness, our anxieties, our self-absorption, our complaints. You are welcome to all of those things. You promised us that You would assume all this as Your own. They look much better on You

than they do on us.

We urge you, please to do just that. Make all that is ours Yours. And then what of all that is Yours, that You bring to our hearts? That, we urge you, dear Lord Christ, as you promised, to leave that for us to replace what You have taken away of ours. In place of our sin leave Your righteousness. In place of our anxiety and our joylessness, leave Your joy. In place of our dying, leave Your life and Your resurrection.

We know that it is not at all fair of us to ask for such an exchange. But how did we sing in the hymn a moment ago? "You make for us a great exchange." "You bear upon Yourself our frame, and in return, give us Your realm, Your glory and Your name." It is what Martin Luther called "the delightful exchange." The Old Testament prophet had said, we receive double for all our iniquities. Sisters and brothers, where can you find a better rate of exchange than that, double for all our iniquities? The great exchange.

And so when we say tonight, as we say in the program, "He's Coming . . . And Aren't You Glad?" Yes, we are glad, but we are glad not only for His coming as such, we are glad for His takings and His leavings. His taking what is ours and His leaving what is His, in its place. Speak of adventure! So meanwhile, Lord Jesus, fill our hearts with hope and with eagerness for Your coming, for Your takings and Your leavings. And make our hearts ready for Your coming and for the great exchange. Even so, Lord Jesus, come quickly. Lord Jesus, quickly come. This we ask in the name of the Great Exchanger, the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

Eyes not yet moist were brought to tears by the choral piece immediately following Bob's. It was Paul Manz's classic "E'en so, Lord Jesus, Quickly Come." Tears mingled with the delight of

that great exchange? Does that compute? For all of us present that evening, it did.

One departing worshipper commented: “It seemed to me that he gathered up all us strays, gathered us at the feet of the Heavenly Father and the Baby Jesus and said, ‘If I’m coming home, I’m bringing all these people with me.’”

Another whispered the words of Richard Baxter, 17th century English Puritan: “I preached as never sure to preach again, And as a dying man to dying men.” That may describe Bob the preacher, and thus our tears. For us receivers what he preached was delightful: “He’s Coming and Yes, we are glad.” Tears and delight, This Delight, they do compute.

For your 12 days of Christmas—also amid the tears—count it all joy.

Ed Schroeder

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## **Sermons Empty of Gospel : Part 3**

Colleagues,

For this week’s posting, ThTh 183, two additional responses to the topic. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder



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I. From Robert A. Kelly, Professor of Systematic Theology  
Waterloo Lutheran Seminary/Wilfrid Laurier University,  
Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

*I found the last two editions of ThTh very interesting, in part because this term our homiletics prof and I have been conducting an experiment in which we co-teach the senior preaching class. These are the students who are just back from internship and who will graduate in the Spring. Since we are being asked to evaluate this experiment for our colleagues, I have been doing some thinking what it means for a person labeled “systematician” to be teaching something labeled “homiletics.” I use the quote marks in part because I have always seen whatever teaching I have done – whether church history, ethics, or systematics – as contributing to the preaching of the students. That I have now become involved in a course specifically called “Congregational Preaching” just focuses the mandate, but doesn’t change it.*

*We began the course with several weeks on properly distinguishing Law and Gospel. My homiletics colleague is institutionally a Methodist, but down deep he has a Lutheran theological soul which insists that students must learn to distinguish Law and Gospel as part of learning to preach. We talked about CFW Walther [Ed: = the primal “church father” of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, who’s pastoral manual “The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel,” is a classic.] in class and we had the students turn in a short (1500 words) essay describing the heart of the Gospel. They all did really well. They actually remembered some of the stuff I tried to teach them about Law and Gospel in*

*first-year dogmatics. We felt really good.*

*The next assignment was to write and preach a funeral sermon. I was not quite sure why my colleague thought that would be a good thing to do next, but I went along. Then it was revealed to me: Out of eight funeral sermons, 7 1/2 of the deceased were saved by their works! The funeral sermons were horrible – not in form, but in completely missing the Gospel and replacing it with moralism (my word for wishy-washy Law). And this was the same group of students who just two weeks before had written beautiful essays on the Gospel and who seemed to have a strong sense of the proper distinction. Hand them a corpse to bury and they forgot everything they knew from courses and reverted to popular piety.*

*What this says to me about the topic of ThTH 181 and 182, sermons which are void of the Gospel, is that the problem is not so much that the preachers of such sermons have been mis-taught (I really can't think of any ELCA or ELCIC seminary where students are taught to confuse Law and Gospel) but that in the crunch of ministry we so often stop thinking and revert to popular piety: hard work and positive thinking. Sometimes we even avoid the hard work part but then convince ourselves that positive thinking is faith. We get discouraged at trying to overcome the deep well of moralism in most Christian communities and tell people what they [want] to hear – and in my experience, the figures which say that only 40% of our people understand the Gospel are about right.*

*What to do? I am fortunate in that the church which I attend has a preacher who spends a great deal of time making sure that her sermons distinguish Law and Gospel so that people can hear the Gospel clearly. Since*

September 11 (which also influences us here in Canada) she has been especially sharp – in part due to a decision she made to get back to the basic teachings of Jesus as a way of coming to grips with events.

As it happens, I am married to this particular preacher, so I have some sense of what she goes through every week in order to preach the Gospel clearly. I also know that she doesn't get a lot of feedback, except from the seminary profs in the congregation – and the fact that the copies of sermons which she prints out for the hard of hearing are now going out at a rate of about four times the number of hard of hearing in the congregation. Still, what she most often hears is that people wish that the church would be now what it was like in the 50s. And ever so often she is told that someone wishes she would be more forceful about what's wrong with "those people." I remember as a young preacher some years ago being told that the problem with my sermons was that I was not preaching enough Law. I went back and studied my sermons for the previous year and discovered that most of them were really quite legalistic – and someone wanted even MORE Law! What is a poor preacher to do? Most of us simply aren't stubborn enough to keep on preaching the Gospel no matter what. Most of us want to be accepted, liked, even popular. So we convince ourselves that we are doing the best we can and tell people what they want to hear.

Who's at fault? I would say that fault can be equally divided: The church at large, because we do not have "clear and unambiguous preaching of the Gospel" as our first criterion for endorsement; the seminaries because we are not fanatical enough about properly distinguishing Law and Gospel; preachers because we fall into the

*temptation of mouthing popular piety; congregations because we do not really want to hear the Gospel and so do not encourage our preachers to preach it. Note that in all cases the problem is "we," not "they."*

*Anyway, keep up the good work. ThTh continues to be an important stimulus for theological thought.*

*Bob Kelly*

## **II. From an ELCA pastor in Ohio**

*Thank you for the discussion of these past weeks on preaching without the gospel. This is something I have wrestled with in myself as an ELCA preacher and that I still wrestle with in my own preaching and in the study groups with my colleagues. It was about 4 years ago ( I have been ordained for 8 years) that I believe I truly began to understand preaching the necessity of Christ. I was a good student in Seminary, my peers commented on the power of my preaching, and I have taken seriously my call to ministry since I was about 14 years old. In other words, I've worked on my preaching. I had good preachers that taught me, but the framework for preaching the gospel didn't connect in my work in any kind of focused way. It wasn't until I started working with Sabbathology [Ed: = the lectionary text studies on the Crossings listserve] (upon the recommendation of my bishop) that I truly started preaching God's saving work through Christ.*

*Reflecting upon the comments of those responding to Jerry Burce's book, I find it really interesting that none of those listed suggested we call upon the power of God to reform God's preachers. The comments seemed all focused upon what we can do in our churches, congregations and synods, but none of the writers suggested that, through*

*prayer, we ask God to shape the preaching of the Gospel. Is this an assumption that we make that God will automatically shape the Gospel, or is the lack of calling for prayer another symptom of our lack of understanding of the necessity of Christ not only in our preaching, but in our everyday lives?*

*Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this dialog. I pray that God will continue to open all of us to the power of the cross, & we may be blessed with the faithful preaching of the good news.*

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## **Sermons Empty of Gospel: Part 2**

Colleagues,

Here are some responses to Dave Endorf's letter of last week (ThTh 181) about sermons with no gospel in them. Dave's letter, you may remember, was addressed to Jerry Burce, author of PROCLAIMING THE SCANDAL. We used Jerry's book in our course on preaching this fall at the Lutheran School of Theology here in St. Louis. On this St. Nicholas Day,

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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I. First Jerry Burce's own response: Dear Dave,

Thank you so much for taking the time to write. You ask the large question, "What do we do about sub-standard preaching?" My unhappy answer is, "I don't know yet." The problem is complicated. In the ELCA it starts with the fact that the standard you've been taught—and you spell it out so well: offering up the necessary Christ—has not been taught to all preachers. Too many of us operate with other standards. Too few were trained to insist with Paul on "knowing nothing among you except Christ and him crucified." Meanwhile that crucial discussion about what the Gospel really is, and isn't, has been more or less off the table from the ELCA's beginning. Those who cobbled it together chose to presume that we were all in agreement about this. In my very small opinion they presumed badly. As a result some cracks are beginning to show in the ELCA. I suspect they're about to widen. But I digress...

At a local level, the problem for astute listeners like yourself is that preachers, like everyone else, are the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve. We hate critique. We tend to be especially thin-skinned about our preaching. We also tend to be more successful than just about anyone else I know at dodging serious, thoughtful evaluation of the work we do. (The astute listener I'm married to has complained to me about this for years.) Not that we aren't being evaluated—of course we are. Constantly. It's just that most of what passes back and forth between folks around the coffee pot or in the parking lot never reaches our ears; and the little that does get back to us usually arrives months later than it should have. Lots of us, of course, are far too content with this. Lots of you—the listeners, I mean—are instinctively aware of how thin our

skins are, so you go out of your way to avoid scraping them. Among ourselves we may (or may not) work together on textual studies and sermon ideas; but I have yet to find a group of pastoral colleagues that is willing to put last week's sermon on the table for the others to gnaw on. Hence bad preachers stay bad, while decent preachers find little help at all in getting better. And folks who are stuck with poor preaching Sunday after Sunday remain precisely that—stuck, I mean.

I witnessed a version of this misery, by the way, when I visited some near and dear ones this past summer. Their names are not Fred and Dorothy, but that's what I'll call them. They are now retired from a career as overseas missionaries, and live somewhere in Wisconsin. They are steadfast members of the LCMS congregation that Fred was confirmed in, way back in the late '30's. The current pastor of that congregation is a wretched preacher. He simply hasn't got a clue. (That's first-hand testimony, by the way. On occasional visits over the years I've heard him try.) Fred is a first-rate theologian and a very good preacher who in his career taught good preachers by the score. Dorothy is a first-rate hearer of sermons who, like you, knows what standard to use in telling a good sermon from a bad one. Both of them sit there Sunday after Sunday and suffer. Then they grizzle, gently and sparingly, over the lunch table. They are much too loyal to go find another preacher in another church. But the structures for helping their current lousy preacher to get better are non-existent, and the dynamics at work in old Adam's thin skin are such they dare not approach the fellow themselves for fear that he will bleed, and not only bleed, but hemorrhage, and not only hemorrhage, but bloody up the congregation. So they opt for peace—and weekly suffering.

I suspect you can sympathize with their dilemma.

In the ELCA context, I wonder what would happen if able listeners like yourself would band together and start clamoring at the conference level for pastors to get their preaching act together. I wouldn't recommend this at the congregational level—it would get too instantly personal with your own pastor. Nor would I recommend starting at the synodical level. It would be too easy for somebody to keep you away from the microphone. But at the conference level—what if lay delegates were to sponsor and pass a resolution calling on all conference pastors to submit at least one sermon every quarter to a sermon review board comprising two or three of the conference's best preachers, two or three lay folks who know how to tell the difference, as Lutherans, between good and bad sermons, and maybe a bishop's assistant as well?

I also wonder what would happen if a newly elected bishop, making up his or her mind to serve strenuously and faithfully for a single term only, would make the calibre of preaching in the synod a top priority? He might then begin dropping in unannounced at church services to hear what was going on, and if necessary would rebuke it and would also insist that preachers who didn't measure up should sign up immediately for remedial classes, said classes to be offered by the bishop himself? This would presume, of course, that the bishop herself know how to preach.

Should you ever be moved to try these or other approaches to the problem, I'd be very glad indeed to hear of it. Thank you for your kind words. God bless and keep you in the courage and joy of the Gospel.



Faithfully yours,  
Jerry Burce

II. From Timothy HoyerDear Dave Endorf,

Two external problems beset us. One is "the agnostic assumption" (defined by Burce as "no single way of describing reality's unseen dimension."). The second is pastors not proclaiming the good news of Christ. Perhaps the second problem is a result of the first, for it is easier to speak on what is good and right (morality) than it is to proclaim that what is good and right is Christ.

The internal problem is our lack of faith in the goodness of who Jesus is and what he has done for us by his death and resurrection. Our shame is brought on by the agnostic assumption and by our neighbors' asserting that what we say of Christ is only one of many opinions of God. Worse, they aver that God, if there be one, merciful and good, will surely save them, connection to Christ or lack thereof notwithstanding (Burce, p. 19). We are made faithless and silent, and retreat to feeling good by morals. And preachers speak only of morals, which is but law.

The eternal problem, not strongly enough stated by Burce, is that not only are we alienated from God, not only is the agnostic assumption a sign of our alienation (No one can clearly know God. It's all opinion.), but that God has fierce horror against us, not just over our arrogance to presume God is an opinion (Burce p. 70, #5). (Burce, p. 71, #6, reads, "What then is the spiritual agnosticism of North America if not a present manifestation of the wrath of God?" However, that is to reduce the problem back to the external, to the agnostic assumption.) When our neighbor says that if there is a God, merciful and good,

that neighbor has not seen the wrath of God and has not heard what the law says about them. We make the law weak when we limit the law to comparing ourselves to others or to doing the best we can or thinking we are not the best but good enough. Weakened law hides God's condemnation of those not perfect in faith, not just in deeds. It is lack of faith, being against God, not knowing God, not trusting God, not honoring God, our very opinionating of God that is our damnation. It is this emphasis on lack of faith that preachers lack in their sermons. To not go this deep, to not go to God's holding us accountable for our loyalty to God, is what makes pastors' sermons empty.

The eternal solution is the cross of Jesus. There the wrath of God is blasted upon Jesus. Jesus was seen as another opinionator about who God is. His opinion challenged the opinion of the Jewish perception of God—which is also in many forms, all other ways of legalism, which includes “doing the best we can.” Burce states it this way, “When Jesus forgives us, he takes our sin into and upon himself. . . . Jesus the Christ, now identified with us, is himself driven by God into the pitch-black pits of anguished confusion and horrible not-knowing with respect to the Things of God. . . . That God raises Christ from the dead is therefore the promise that we too will be brought out of the pits into which God himself has driven us.” (p.72, #11) I think that God does not drive us only to the external problem of the agnostic assumption (not knowing with respect to the Things of God) but God ends our life and forbids that we [be] saved.

But God has raised Jesus from the dead. (We have witnesses.) God has declared that Jesus is a new way to trust God and to know God. It is the new way God deals with us. Jesus is God's new offer of a relationship with

God.

The internal solution is the offer of Christ to us, the goodness of which overwhelms us to trust that Jesus is God's good way of treating less-than-law-perfect humans. Of all the opinions about God this is the best offer. "There is no news fresher or better than this" (Burce, p. 71, # 7). Here pastors actually get to give Jesus to their hearers. They can do more than say that Jesus makes us right with God. They can go to the hearer and say to her, "Jesus makes you right with God." Right in the midst of the sermon the pastor can walk down the aisle to the hearers and declare, "You are good because of Christ."

The external solution does not get rid of the agnostic assumption that is all around us. It does get rid of it in the hearer who is told by the pastor, "You are right with God." Of course, the hearer can say it to other hearers at church or at home or with a close neighbor friend.

One way to get a pastor to talk about the message in a sermon is to give them a copy of the Crossing's Outline as in "Sabbatheology" whatever number it is, and ask the pastor, "I read this as a way to do sermons. What do you think of it? Read it over. Then I want to make an appointment to come and talk with you about it. I'm available on these days at these times. When would it be good for you?"

Have the Crossings outline as an adult Bible class topic.

Peace,  
Timothy Hoyer

III. From a California Deaconess Having read Jerry Burce's book when you suggested it a year ago, I really appreciated the

plan of your class. More people ought to read that book. The letter you printed hits every nail on the head concerning the lack of Christ and the Resurrection, and therefore, Gospel, in too many sermons. Your erudite and straightforward student states it in ways that I wish I would have stated the same things when some of us survivors (of weekly bread and water) discussed the same issues awhile back....without the pastor. I'm really looking forward to reading the comments from others.

IV. From Martha Neustadt As far as who holds pastors accountable for what they say, I don't know. I know that I have been church-hopping for over a year in hopes of finding a pastor who preaches the gospel combined with a congregation and staff that acknowledge I do exist even though I am neither a high school student nor a wife and mother (you'd be surprised how many places the first question I am asked – if they talk to me at all – is, “are you married?”, followed by a disappointing, “ohhh...” – heaven forbid a single 26 year old woman is in a church – and it's not even the Missouri Synod!). So, maybe the short answer to “what do people do” is “leave”. Of course, that gets you into the question of “do people really want to hear the gospel,” which would not be so apparent when you look at the churches which are preaching politics, at best, and are nonetheless filled to capacity every week. People seem to want to believe “I am saved, but he is not, because he is \_\_\_\_\_” fill in the blank with liberal, homosexual, poor, rich, whatever. Or maybe they don't want to be saved at all – the ones who are in church to preach an all-accepting way of life are just as non-gospel oriented, even though there results may be a little more fruitful for society.

Boy, I still don't have an answer for you yet, do I? I suppose when I finally get enough theology in me, I will

go and talk to the pastors, tell them their gospels are not, and see what they have to say. I think I know what it will be though – that the majority people don't want to hear that over and over again. People want to hear about morals and politics and how to live their lives and that they are good people, not that we are sinners and need Jesus. Pastors don't want to see their congregations be unhappy, so they give them what they want – usually in the name of the “great commissioning” (battle cry of the 21st century mega-church). Maybe I can recommend the pastors here can all get on your list serve? If they learn half as much as I have over the past year, it will certainly be a start ☐

Of course, if I think about it too much, I think that I have been ruined for the churches here. The influences on my theological studies have been so great – you, my dad, my Christian History prof at school, the great staff of Purdue's Christian Campus House – have all ruined me. I wish I was in St. Louis to take some of the LST classes. Teaching those may be your best path to seeing the gospel preached everywhere. It just may take a long time.

V. Another VoiceThTh 181 asked about responding to “Gospel-less preaching.” You could probably call it “un-Crossed preaching.” Thanks for asking.

I have been struggling with this for some time now. I attend a fine Lutheran Church in which the weekly proclamation is “Try Harder to believe in Jesus, Try Harder to trust, Try Harder to be good, etc”. And for a bonus, there are children's sermonettes which are notoriously legalistic, as they seem to be in most churches.

After bitching and moaning to various friends (But not to

the preacher. Woops!), I began to repent by seeing this theology as the subliminal message of my Lutheran upbringing, and the kingpin of my religious old self. Try harder! Much harder!

Then I started worshipping 75% of the time at two other churches – one Catholic and one Episcopal (still avoiding confrontation). On Reformation Sunday this year . . . I realized that our Lutheran preacher didn't have a clue to what he was doing. And I am sure he thinks of himself as "preaching the Gospel." So I am looking forward to some of the workable approaches that others may offer in response to your request for comments.

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## Sermons Empty of Gospel

Colleagues,

The Lutheran School of Theology here in St. Louis [LST-STL] offered a 10-week course this fall quarter titled: "Preaching the Gospel." Yours truly was the instructor. For 30 class hours fourteen of us wrestled with the topic, including such stuff as "how to tell when gospel is there and when it isn't." One of our mentoring texts was Jerry Burce's PROCLAIMING THE SCANDAL (reviewed exactly a year ago on Thanksgiving Day 2000 as ThTh #128). Besides that modern classic we also got hold of 4 of Jerry's sermons to see if he really practiced what he preached. Fundamental to our class-process for text study and sermon construction was the Crossings paradigm. We applied that to lectionary texts for 3 Sundays in October and November. We also read other preachers' sermons, and preached and critiqued our own,

including some addressing the cataclysm of Sept. 11, 2001. Fundamental to our definition of "Gospel-preaching" was the Reformation axiom "necessitating Christ." Thus, if Christ wasn't necessary in a given sermon, for getting the hearer to the goal the preacher proposed, that sermon failed the test for preaching the Gospel. Failures abounded—even from ELCA bishop types. Some sermons never mentioned Christ at all, let alone his cross and resurrection, let alone "needing" that crucified/risen Christ to get the hearers to the sermon's goal—either the goal of "Lord, increase our faith," or the goal of increased living that faith out in the world.

The class-members' own experience (only one of them was an ordained pastor) verified the "real absence" of Gospel in huge chunks of today's preaching. So we spent some time working on this side-agenda: What to do when you're in the pew, and the preacher isn't preaching the Gospel? Even worse, when it is apparent that the preacher doesn't even KNOW that he/she is not proclaiming the Gospel? The answers we came up with did not dispel all the gloom. A full-scale Reformation is needed, it seemed.

So what did the instructor then do? I gave a "final exam" (even though this was a non-credit course): write an e-letter to Jerry Burce, tell him your experience—in reading and discussing his book in our class and as a sermon-listener—and see what he says.

I've read the letters the students posted to Jerry. And now I'm going to post one of them to you and ask for your own "audience response."

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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November 15, 2001Hello Pastor Burce,

We wrapped up our class on preaching last night. Over the next few days, you should be receiving letters from members of the class.

As for my background, I am a 1976 graduate of Long Island Lutheran High School and a 1980 graduate of Valparaiso University. My degree is in civil engineering and I have been working for the electric company here in St. Louis since I graduated. I have taken a number of LST classes here in St. Louis. The classes have usually been very good. It's hard to have a bad class when there are so many interesting courses, great teachers, and hungry students. Maybe someday you will get a call to St. Louis and also consider teaching some of the LST classes.

My teacher (and one of your former teachers), Ed Schroeder, has given us this "final exam" in our class on "Preaching the Good News." Namely, we GET TO write you a letter. We used your book, "Proclaiming the Scandal" and a number of your sermons as material for about half of the ten-week class.

As far as I am concerned, your sermons passed the scrutiny of the class. I read your book about a year ago when Ed said some good things about it in one of his Thursday Theology emails. What I really liked about the book was that it was short. I liked the brevity because I don't really enjoy reading too much. But to be brief and to the point, that is a gift.

My brief overview of the book is as follows: The gift that pastors must share is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The world, the church, pastor's expectations, congregation's expectations, conflicting priorities, and ignorance can make this gift a challenge to share. Don't despair, there are many ways that the



*gospel is shared. None of the Gospel sharer's or their ways of sharing that Gospel are perfect, but we continue on in the best way that we can. We end our church service and we start our day going in peace and serving the Lord.*

*Now for some questions: How does one offer constructive criticism to a pastor who does not preach anything close to making Christ necessary? It is very easy to critique the sermon (and usually the sermonizer) during coffee hour after church. Should the culprit be invited to these critique/bitch sessions? How have you offered and been offered constructive criticism? Done correctly, pastor's jobs are probably hard enough already, but what can be done to hold pastors accountable for what they say on Sunday mornings? To various degrees, congregations have tried to hold pastors accountable for the hours outside of Sunday morning, but I'm not sure the same concern or efforts are applied to what a pastor is preaching.*

*Can part of the blame for sub-standard preaching be placed on the theological education system we currently have? I mentioned sub-standard, and I guess that implies that there is a standard. For now let's say that "standard" is preaching that makes Christ necessary and offers this Christ to those who need this Word. What can be done to educate pastors and congregations regarding what they might be missing? It's like they are surviving on bread and water. It will keep them alive and well, but they don't know about the banquet of wine, cheese, fruit, and meat that they are missing. Yes, they will drink water and eat bread as they go in peace and serve the Lord. I fumble about trying to serve also, but I feel fortunate to be able to grab a hunk of cheese and an occasional grape off the banquet table. Your book along with teachers we have here at LST-STL help open up that table to a doubtful, fearful, servant such as me.*

*Sincerely,  
Dave Endorf*

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# **Responses to ThTh #179 “Repentance and Apocalypse Now”**

Colleagues,

Three items of thankfulness on this USA Thanksgiving Day.

1. Money matters. [That's a subject and a verb.] Our Crossings Community thanks go to those of you who sent gifts when I mentioned our need a few weeks ago. There are still 99% of you on the listserve who haven't (yet). These postings are free, as you know. Transmission of them isn't. Additional thanks-givings welcome at: The Crossings Community, PO Box 7011, St. Louis, MO 63006-7011, USA.
2. A new book—maybe just the thing for you for Christmas. Marie and Ed Schroeder have just been “published together.” Well, sortuv. We've got 4 pages in CHRIST FOR ALL PEOPLE. CELEBRATING A WORLD OF CHRISTIAN ART. “From Brazil to Botswana, from Norway to Nepal, contemporary artists join the great masters to shed light on the Jesus story in breathtaking new ways.” It is a stunning production—ecumenically, globally, with top-quality print reproductions of the art works. The editor, Ron O'Grady of New Zealand, is one of the founders of the Asian Christian

Art Association. This volume is one of many projects of the ACAA with its long record of publishing books, conducting art exhibitions, sponsoring young artists and promoting Christian art. Its headquarters are in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Schroeder involvement was modest: Marie has two photos in the volume and each of us provided a meditation for one of the artworks. Available in the USA via Orbis Books. For more info see their webpage. For orders call 1-800-258-5838. It's hardcover, 159 pp. US\$30. Also available elsewhere in the world via co-publishers Pace Publishing, Auckland, New Zealand; Novalis, Toronto, Canada; WCC Publications, Geneva, Switzerland.

3. My own thanks for the folks who sent words of thanks in response to last week's ThTh 179. I append a few of them below.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## **Responses to Thursday Theology #179 "Repentance and Apocalypse Now"**

- I. It is interesting: now, two months after 9-11, people in our congregation are starting to resonate with repentance as a response to the terrorist attacks. I preached repentance on 9/16 and people came back the next week. I'll be preaching it again this week with Luke's gospel and the destruction of the temple – trade center/pentagon. I've been teaching a course using the Crossways Bible Time line. Since it presents a wide variety of events in scripture the participants always

bring up 9-11. I see it as a wonderful opportunity to remind people of what God's ultimate will is for us: "Return to the Lord your God..."

Just to let you know who I am. I am an ELCA pastor serving a small, rural congregation. I heard about Sabbatheology and Thursday Theology from my wife who heard about it from David Truemper at Valparaiso University.

Thanks for your thoughts.

1. Bravo. Esp. your update of Amos 3:3-6, wherewith the home run got hit.
2. You drove me to my favorite Reformed guy, Newbiggin, whose stuff rings with new clarity in the wake of 9/11. From his little TRUTH TO TELL, chapter 3 ("Speaking the Truth to Caesar"): "The ideology which the Barmen Declaration sought to unmask and to reject was the ideology of nation and race and blood. The ideology which we [truth-telling 1990's folks] have to recognize, unmask, and reject is an ideology of freedom, a false and idolatrous conception of freedom which equates it with the freedom of each individual to do as he or she wishes." What do your quibblers #3 not get?
3. Newbiggin somewhere tells a marvelous story--wish I could quickly put my finger on it--that he uses to describe what repentance is fundamentally about. Seems that in his days as Church of South India bishop, he was paying a visit to a village with a one-way street. The locals had organized a procession to meet him, the idea being that as he drew near the village they would parade the length of the street to meet him. Problem is, the path he was taking to the village brought him to the same end of the street where the processors had gathered.

Discovering this, and recognizing the imminence of embarrassment all around, he and his entourage backtracked a little, trudged around the edge of the village and then renewed their approach from the opposite direction. This, he said, is what repentance is about: a 180 degree turn—like the younger brother turning homeward from the pig sty of the far country; unlike the older brother who remains standing in the field with his back toward the house where the party's breaking out.

4. I very much appreciated your observation about the NT's flat "repent," minus an "of".

5. Keep it coming.

III. Ed, It is refreshing to watch your discoveries as first, the events of contemporary history, and now, the reactions of your readers to your reading of contemporary history, push you deeper into the sources. Your apologia gets richer and richer (I just finished reading ThTh-179). I recall your first "reading" of the September 11 "tea leaves" to be meek and a bit tentative. But at each re-crossing of the events of our day with the sources in the OT/NT and in the church fathers, you grow more forceful. I am reminded of the days in the early 1970's as the attacks against the St. Louis [Missouri Synod seminary] faculty grew stronger, the theology of those under attack grew sharper and more focused on the Gospel. Culminating at one point in "Faithful to our Calling, Faithful to our God". And I recall Doc Caemmerer's comment in those days, that his own personal question mark about his Lord's promise that to follow Him would entail suffering, was finally erased when Doc himself came under intense fire for living what he had preached for so many years.

I'm sure that it is interesting (maybe painful) for you to

see the critiques that come now from inside the church against your reflections. It is clear to me that although you may not have a vision from heaven to promote your analysis of Sept. 11, you certainly have a long-standing call to speak News that is even better than we expect, after we have finally seen that our problem is even worse than we dared to dream. Your ThTh is very meaningful for me. Thanks for engaging in the fracas (again),

IV. My god, you hit the nail on the head again. Repentance is a turning to the Lord because turning anywhere else is idolatrous. The church has been so lax in preaching a repentance for the forgiveness of sins the last 20-30 years that sin was so down-played that glory theology became the internal religious philosophy of the decades. And so it does seem a correct observational analysis that the what-should-we-do mentality misses the whole point of it. So Elert was correct in that ethics needs to begin in the garden/fall of humanity model with God (the critic?) announcing to Adam , "Where are you?" as the beginning point to where we address ethics. The Pelagian what-should-we-do mentality does not begin at the right place. In fact, the fault (sin) may lie in that humans seek a relationship with dos and donts rather than the primary relationship with God (either faced with God the critic in my old Adam or reaching out in pure trust to Jesus, the new Adam, a new self opened to Jesus' forgiveness in his resurrection). Just wanted to share some thoughts. I'm with you on this...go for it.

V. Ed, Just made a quick run through your latest epistle; need to read it at a slower pace, in my daily walk; good stuff, you bet. At any rate, you are not talking to the choir, you got a fighting fish by the tail, and therefore you have to keep on reeling in. Aka-repentance. Read the

letters to the editor and you read about “nuke the enemy.” Spend just one hour, like I did, at the Peace Park in Hiroshima, where living and dying were one, and where 120,000—they say, 200,000—were “french fried” in an instant, and one thinks differently. Therefore, keep on keeping on, and faith, of course, attracts real fire, when you get into the fat.

VI. I have been wrestling with your comments for the past 9 weeks, as I have been struggling to sort out much of the theology I’ve been hearing since 9-11. Most of the comments from colleagues and others have been swirling with both hubris and partisanship, and it has been difficult for me to find clarity. My own hubris and partisanship was also getting in the way of understanding where God’s saving act in Christ Jesus speaks to us in these days. Thank you for this last Thursday Theology. The Summa [final paragraph of ThTh 179] finally started to break through with a clear sense of the cross. The part about national Pelagianism also started to make sense, and it ties into a religious Pelagianism I’ve seen in myself and colleagues as we struggle to believe the “right” thing. Don’t get me wrong, I am not a relativist, but I have found myself these 9 weeks struggling to justify my existence by having the right theology.

I have found myself very frustrated with the Thursday Theology pieces the past 9 weeks, to the point of not wanting to read anymore. However, even when I disagreed, I appreciated the quality of your argument so much that I could not disregard it. Thank you for continuing this dialog. I plan to continue to read your reflections with fear and trembling, as well as gratitude and peace.

Thank you for the hard word.

VII. Anyway, I want to thank you for your last two ThTh’s,

especially for unveiling the “Pelagian” fallacy in the question of repenting “from what,” which is nothing but an avoidance tactic for doing true repentance: repentance as “denying yourself.” For one can always work on changing/veiling the fruit, and quibble about “making satisfactions,” but we cannot change the “self” as known by God—and that is the focus of repentance, the self before God. Again, many thanks.

VIII. Thanks for your drumbeat. I’m not getting bored or frustrated, but fed. As you say, “Repent” in the old book, which the new one tries to translate with “metanoia,” does indeed mean turn around. Come back! Come home! Quit looking for home ever further into the darkness that can never give you arms to hold you or hands into which to rest your life at the end of your day of crossbearing (Lk 23:46). As for Luke 23 and the crucified King, that’s become one of my most cherished images of the church: Some crucified folks hanging there asking, “Now what? What’s next?” while much of the world stands by laughing at this foolishness, this sorry gallows humor.

We say we are crucified with Christ by baptism into his death, so that’s us hanging there, too, having got what we deserve. We look like a sick comedy sketch to the world that watches this bizarre scene. Crucified folks have no future, right?

So it seems.

Hang in there, Ed. I’m off next week to [famous Lutheran venue] to lead an Advent retreat. You’ve helped prepare me. We’ll work at repentance, at listening to the voice that calls us home. God’s peace.



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# Repentance and Apocalypse Now

Colleagues, September 11 fallout came closer to our home this week when one of our kids, the family breadwinner, e-mailed us: "Most all of the staff at [one of the foremost academic publishing houses] was notified today—out of a clear blue sky—that we're being laid off at the end of November. Company sales have gone into the tank since 9.11. A skeletal crew will stay and try to hold the fort."

Loss of livelihood is not loss of life, but it IS Apocalypse Now when it happens to you. And speaking of apocalypse, the Gospel for this coming Sunday is the apocalypse chapter from Luke. I'm slotted to be guest preacher at local congregation. Jesus' words, as Luke records them, sound like they came from today's newspaper. Christ the King Sunday comes next with Luke's Good Friday dialogue—Jesus and his two co-crucified—as the "Good News" for the day. Which it really is as Jesus creates Paradise on-the-spot in the very midst of the Apocalypse Now for all three. Though it is there for both of the bad guys, one gets it, the other doesn't. How come? In a word: repentance. Read the text. "We deserve the divine come-uppance we're getting." The other guy didn't think so. And if that's not enough, the next Sunday, Advent I, we start the new church year with more of the same, Matthew's apocalypse chapter 24. Seems we can't get away from the theme of God, the world's critic, and God's call to turn around.

So if, as some of you have told me, you're getting tired of this repentance drumbeat in ThTh, better stay away from church for the next three Sundays. And most of the Sundays thereafter too. When Luther hyped repentance—every day, he said—in the first of

his 95 theses, he was not saying something new. He was just doing his job as a Biblical investigative reporter.

A decade or so ago Francis Coppola labelled his Vietnam war film "Apocalypse Now." Movie critics, as I recall, did give attention to the title he chose, but Christian theologians generally passed it by. One exception was in a Crossing course of that era. No surprise, it was a course on the book of Revelation. Coppola's film was required viewing. Then came the assignment to "cross" the theology of the Biblical book with this slice-of-life Americana.

The motif of apocalypse, not only in the Biblical book but also "Now," is that God is on the bench and we worldlings are in the dock. Yes, all hell is breaking loose—as in next Sunday's Gospel and the one for Advent I—but the focus in Christian apocalyptic is not the cosmic devastation. It's "da Judge." And Christian apocalyptic tells how to cope with that cosmic judge. Answer: the blood of The Lamb, aka Mi-cha-el (Rev.12), whose Hebrew name parses "the-one-who-is-like-God."

Since my first foray into the repentance topic nine weeks ago, a number of you readers have needled me with additional rejoinders, besides telling me that you're getting tired of my one-string banjo. So I'll address them in this posting. Here's four of them:

1. I'm getting tired of your repentance drumbeat. And Luther's 1529 precedent wears thin.
2. Ed, why so little Gospel coming from you in these repentance postings?
3. Repentance, yes, but what are we supposed to repent "of," and what would it look like, if we did do it?
4. "I hear you mixing your political opinions with your theological analysis of what is going on post 9-11. I

suppose you could be really cynical about our somewhat “cautious” pursuit of this War and Bush’s refusal to give in to the idiots who just want to drop an A bomb on Kabul and see it as some sort of sinister plot. But I think the guy really wants to be ‘responsible’ and not be some trigger-happy patriot who will destroy any one who gets in our way. . . . Today’s edition [#178] sounds like a pacifist, antiwar rag.”

#### 1. To #1

Amos is becoming my favorite prophet. He’s a farm-boy. Protests that he never was a prophet, nor a prophet’s kid, a PK. Yet the Lord led him to see something—an Aha!—and then commanded him to tell the folks what he saw. I’ve had no such special vision, no voice from the Lord saying: Go and tell. What I’ve seen was mentioned in earlier postings. I hold the Bible up alongside the TV screen, or Luther’s Treatise on War Against the Turks alongside the daily newspaper—and last week, a discovery for me, Augustine alongside the reality of the American empire. Then I’ve “merely” told you what I see. Sure, lots of folks may not see it that way. But was it ever different when someone proposed to cross the Word of God with the world we live in, and be specific about it? As C.S.Lewis said somewhere, anyone making Christian claim in the public arena is either telling the truth or is a “poached egg.” Hearers come to one or the other evaluation, and act accordingly. One of you cited John the Baptizer’s name-tag—in Latin yet—“vox clamantis in deserto,” and saw a parallel to recent ThTh postings. I don’t propose to be such a voice crying in the wilderness, nor have I heard any voice coming from above. Yet John’s call to repentance is either the Word of God or he too is a poached egg. That includes his jarring metaphor about God’s ax being laid to the roots—about which more below.

Taking note of Luther and Augustine was not intended to bring in the heavies to make my case. Rather, I reported them to you as eye-openers for me. From Luther, the Aha! was that God can and does use villains as the rod of his anger in giving justice to unjust nations. From Augustine, the Aha! was about empires never ever being just since they must—by definition—impose their hybris upon another people. Whereupon the God of history finally executes divine justice and the empire crumbles. Seems to me that for Christians the only argument contra Luther's analysis would be that our nation's track record is immune to the divine critic and thus no enemy of ours can simultaneously be the rod of God's anger against us. Contra Augustine would be that America is really not an empire and thus his caveat is irrelevant.

My proposal in recent postings has been that their analysis is also true for us: God is the enemy, the critic our nation is confronting. To ignore that is to counter-sign our own death warrant. If that constitutes a one-string banjo, then so be it. It could also be a poached egg.

2. Why so little Gospel in recent postings on repentance? One of the recent posts presented Jesus' two different calls to repentance: his condemning call to repentance and his saving call to repentance. The condemning one went to the self-righteous crowd, who saw no need of repentance. Jesus himself put no Gospel into that call in any of the NT texts. The opposite was the case with his saving call. There he spoke big Gospel, but it went to a different audience—the folks who 'fessed up that they were sinners "in fact," which then rendered them sinners "in truth." The Rich Man/Lazarus parable also has "so little Gospel"

for the rich man in torment, and for this skimpiness Jesus himself gives the reason: "If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets (God the critic), neither will they be convinced by Someone rising from the dead (Gospel)." So the witness of the Resurrected One is not offered to them. That's grim. Just as it was grim for the other thief on the cross, the guy who never even got the offer of paradise from the One in the middle. For Christians already plugged into the Gospel, there is additional impetus toward repentance, of course, even joy at going the repentance-route to make the sweet-swap. But how could anyone swap his sin for Christ's righteousness, if he acknowledges no sin and thus has "no need for repentance"? So what's to sweet-swap?

3. Repentance, yes, but what are we supposed to repent "of," and what would it look like, if we did do it? From this question, asked by several of you, I learned one very surprising thing. Namely this: in most all of the NT references to either the verb or noun of repentance, there is no "of" anything. The verb and the noun just stand there naked. In the last NT book, Revelation, there are a couple "repent of" texts and in Paul I found just one. But all the rest of the NT references follow the pattern of Jesus' opening sermon in Mark's gospel: "Repent (period. No "of what?") and believe the Good News." So did the folks who heard the naked verb know what Jesus was talking about? It would seem so. When you zero in on the root meaning of repentance—not a feeling sorry, but a change at the core—Then the simple imperative says: "You're on a dead end track. Turn around." Does that need an "of what" to make sense?

Seems to me when folks ask: "Repent of what?" they chronically are asking a Pelagian question. Pelagius was an early Christian theologian who maintained that rigorous

Christian behavior was the key to Christian righteousness. The core of the faith was ethics. So when people ask “repent-of-what?” aren’t they asking: what is the bad habit, bad behavior from which I’m to turn away? That’s my experience. To cope with this mis-focused repentance, the standard Crossings paradigm for text study is helpful. Take the image that Jesus uses of a tree and its fruit—good trees/fruit and bad trees/fruit. “Repent of what?” questions are chronically asking about the fruit. And that should come as no surprise since Pelagianism, said the Reformers, is the original sin of the human race. [They labelled it “*opinio legis*,” the inborn notion that doing something good makes me good.] Pelagianism persists, call it the Old Adam in Christians too. It is this Old Adam who asks the “of what” when he hears the word repent: what do you want me to “do” that’s different? But Biblical repentance calls for a “root” job, it’s not a fruit-job. Remember where the ax was laid in the repentance call of John the Baptizer. God’s repentance call says: your God-connection, your God-disconnection, is what we’re talking about. Whom you are fearing, loving and trusting? It’s your heart, not your actions, your rootage is the operating table of repentance. Repent of what? is always asking about behavior. New Testament “*metanoia*” (the repentance term in Greek) does not focus on ethics. It says: turn your head around. In today’s lingo: Get your head screwed on right. When those NT repentance calls come without any “of what?” it must be that faith/unfaith is the agenda. Could even be that when Jesus links “Repent and believe the Good News” in one sentence, everyone in the audience heard: “turn away from the gospel you’re currently trusting and trust this New and Good one.” He doesn’t put any “of what” into the sentence. Their name is legion.

When Luther proposed vicarious repentance, a few Christians doing it for the sake of the many who would not, and then even expected that it would “work,” he was simply being Christian. The one who finally runs history is not the King of Assyria, nor Suleiman, nor Osama, nor the US president nor our military muscle. It’s God. “The Bible tells me so,” he could have said. With that God you can communicate. When God is mad, the communication that works is: Repent and believe the Good News. That message comes from One for whom God has special affection. And the masses of the unrepentant, says the Bible, could all benefit from that. Remember Abraham and his conversation with God over Sodom. Says God, after Abraham whittles him down to rock bottom: “For the sake of only ten righteous—aka repentant—ones in Sodom I will not destroy it.” What can Christians “do” in the face of today’s apocalypse now? There’s one answer. Which brings us to politics.

4. Finally the needle that I’m just ragging on George Bush. Don’t think so, I’m talking about the nation’s need to repent. And that applies even to a non-chosen nation. Here Amos is a precedent. In his first two chapters he spells out God’s coming judgment on six (yes, six) non-chosen nations in the Middle East. Every one of them is guilty of the injustice/hybris that Augustine cites as Rome’s deficit. And God is their enemy. And then Amos moves to the now-separated 2 nations of Judah and Israel. Their justice record is just as awful as the first six nations, so their fate is the same, as God says (20 times!) “I will do such and so to give them their just deserts.” God can deliver such justice to the unjust nations either in a great cataclysm [“Prepare to meet your God.” 4:12] or parcel it out in little pieces of “one damn thing after

another.” [6:19f.] Were Amos on the American scene this week, we would probably hear his grim commentary: “Does a plane fall apart in the sky, unless the Lord has done it?” [3:3-6] Poached egg? If you are linking the Word of God to your own world, how do you avoid politics, at least the politics of God in action in our world? President Bush’s address to the UN this past weekend sounded an awful lot like Amos. He too was doing a “theology of world history.” Here’s how our local newspaper recorded one segment of it:

*“This threat cannot be ignored,” said Bush, clenching his fist. “This threat cannot be appeased. Civilization itself, the civilization we share, is threatened. History will record our response, and judge or justify every nation in this hall.”*

Augustine and Luther’s addendum would have reminded him that the threat is coming from God as well as from the human enemies we confront. And that divine threat can indeed be ignored—as happens all over, and is happening across the planet today, when humans do not repent—but the consequences are disastrous. But Bush is right in that this threat—especially with the addendum “from God”—cannot be appeased. Yet the divine threat can be defused with repentance and then “sweet-swapped” with a crucified Messiah. Bush’s last sentence also needed only the divine addendum: “[The God of] history will record our response, and judge or justify every nation in this hall.” Even without mentioning God and just settling for “history” as the final evaluator, Bush was into deep theology, but sadly not ‘deep enough.” Clearly not as deep as Lincoln went when he called the nation to come to terms with God the critic. Even deeper is the Biblical claim that the God of history not only WILL judge/justify nations in the future, but is busy doing so RIGHT NOW for the response



“nations” have made in past history. That’s what Luther and Augustine call us to see when anyone affirms that “every nation is judged or justified.” Not merely tomorrow, but today. What apparently makes it difficult for Bush—and the non-silent majority he speaks for—to see God as our critic is the Manichaen dualism in, with, and under his theology of history. “In this world there are good causes and bad causes,” he told the UN, and there was no doubt about who was on the side of the good. So how could history, even more the God of history, be against us?

**Summa:** we do need to get God “for” us. But it’s not going to be done by national Pelagianism. We have another word on how to get God to be “for” us. And when God IS for us who can be against us? Segue into Romans 8 and Paul’s Gospel proposed there vis-a-vis every Apocalypse Now.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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**Repentance is not  
Popular—Neither in our Nation,  
nor in our Church**

Colleagues,

First off this announcement from the Crossings office:  
This year's St. Louis Advent Hymn Festival will be held Friday evening, December 7. Time: 7:30 pm. Place: Atonement Lutheran Church in Florissant, Missouri. The festival theme is "He Comes!...And Aren't You Glad?" It will be in honor of Dr. Robert W. Bertram with Petter Nettle and Dawn Riske Hoy, organists. There will be a dinner beginning at 5:30 pm (\$7.00 per person, please RSVP 314-576-0567), and a reception following the service. Everyone is invited.

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## **Repentance is not Popular—Neither in Nation, nor in Church.**

That may not be so surprising for the nation. But that it's hard to find/hear repentance-talk or repentance-act among Christians, that is strange. Really strange. Amongst folks who live by the forgiveness of sins, admitting our sin is par for the course. It's step one in rendering us candidates for the forgiveness. Like saying I'm hungry, when you haven't eaten for hours—or, as with many in our world, for days. Throughout scripture there is joy accompanying repentance—just in case we needed an additional lure for doing it. In the penitential Psalms (e.g., 51) the person praying expects "joy and gladness" to come from the process. "Restore to me the joy of your salvation" is the flip-side of "Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight."

So count it all joy. And therefore, like eating, doing so daily. The first of Luther's 95 theses, hyped just a few days ago at Reformation Remembrance Day, claims this to be the original plan: "When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said 'Repent,' he called for the entire life of believers to be one of penitence." That's not self-flagellation. Or masochism. Repentance is a turning—turning around—away from something toward something

else. Finally a turning AWAY from death TOWARD life.

This coming Sunday is exactly two months since September 11, 2001. ThTh 170 posted that week recalled Luther's 1529 call for repentance in a world-political situation similar to our own. The need that he saw for repentance, you may recall, was that God was one of the two enemies confronting the Holy Roman (aka Christian) Empire of Europe. And God was mad! Therefore the prayer of repentance was the only strategic response that would work vis-a-vis this enemy. Without it, Europe "didn't have a prayer." Question: Do we?

Repentance has not been significant in the public conversation in the USA, nor in the USA churches, nor in "my" church, the ELCA. But shouldn't Christians—Lutherans especially—be about that business? Even if Luther hadn't promoted repentance for such a time as this, doesn't the Bible? St. Augustine is another ancient worthy who thought so, as you'll see below. And then there's always Jesus: "If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets," he says in Luke 16, "neither will they be convinced by Someone risen from the dead." Isn't that a "woe" from Jesus [also a "whoa!"] addressed to us? How can it not be?

I didn't expect the ThTh postings—six in a row (#170-175)—to make a dent in the public square. [Oh, me of little faith!] Even with that fantastic precedent that someone passed on to me, and I to you, about Lincoln's unapologetic call to our nation for "Godly repentance" during the American Civil War. Nor with my two letters to the US president. But I did think churchly voices—even if they'd never heard of ThTh—would do so. Perhaps simply from reading the Bible and holding it alongside the TV screen. *[Footnote: Karl Barth once said that his paradigm for preaching in the village of Safenwil (I think it was) Switzerland, his first pastoral assignment, was to go into the pulpit with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the*

*other. And then just tell the folks what he saw when he read them together.]*

I was disappointed with the November 2001 issue of the ELCA church magazine, THE LUTHERAN. Nearly half of its print pages are devoted to the Apocalypse Now of September 11, and never once does the word repentance appear (I read the texts very closely) anywhere on those pages. I mentioned that to a colleague, and he told me that the topic was indeed present in the articles, but much more “subtly” than I (with my sledge hammer approach?) wanted to see. To which I can only say: The penitential Psalms are not subtle.

Another disappointment came yesterday in a general letter to “Sisters and Brothers in Christ” from one of our ELCA seminaries. With a page and a half devoted to seminary education “after September 11,” the “re-” word was not to be found. Real absence instead of real presence. And that in a letter calling for “Lutheran public voices who will take up responsibly and response-fully the task of stating clearly what God is up to in this hurting world.”

If the worldlings themselves won’t take up that topic, we churchy folks are surely called to do so, right? So “what is God up to in this hurting world?” That is the question. Would that our new ELCA bishop Hanson would lead us into open and public conversation on that very topic. Starting tomorrow when he meets for the first time with the 40-plus members of the ELCA Church Council. “Stating clearly what God is up to in this hurting world” is surely on their agenda.

And now to Augustine.

In his “City of God” Augustine is addressing the charge that Christians are responsible for Rome’s defeat at the hands of Alaric (410). Why the Christians? Because their “new” faith led

the Roman populace away from Rome's classical gods, which then triggered the decline and fall of the empire.

Not so, says Augustine. Rome went down the drain because of its own injustice. And God doesn't tolerate injustice forever. He is indeed longsuffering—even for the empire's 1000 years (you know God's idiosyncratic calendar)—but he does “count trespasses.” When the trespasser refuses to turn around, God finally visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the current population of the empire. Empires are in a bind, he says, for by definition they cannot “turn around” and still be an empire. Why not? Because injustice is built into the very structure of an empire. For an empire to repent would mean to cease to be an empire.

How so? Empires are one people subjugating one or more other peoples. And that can never be done without injustice to the peoples under the thumb (or military boot) of the conquering ones in charge. So Rome may have called its imperial management of other peoples “pax romana,” but the pacified peoples themselves didn't experience it that way. Just look at the NT gospels for evidence of what one conquered people thought about Rome's control of their lives.

So it was not the Christians who brought about Rome's downfall, he claims. It was God, the ultimate critic, finally giving the empire its just deserts. “And what I say of this [Roman] people and of this republic I must be understood to think and say of the Athenians or any Greek state, of the Egyptians, or of the early Assyrian Babylon, and of every other nation great or small.... [They] are void of true justice.”

Were Augustine alive today, he'd have many more empires to add to that list. Just in the 20th century we've seen the demise of many more empires: Russian, British, Japanese, Hitler's “Third empire, [aka Reich]” which lasted only 12 yrs! Every colonial

power by Augustine's definition is an empire, one people subjugating another people. In this first year of the third millennium there's only one empire left. And more than just one voice from the outside finds this one to be an oppressor, despite the "pax americana" we bring to the world. Why should this one be an exception to the rule, namely, to God's rule about empires, God's final rule "over" empires?

I don't think Luther mentions Augustine in his treatise "On War Against the Turk" of 1529. I'll have to read it again. But he could have done so, for he's in Augustine's ballpark with his claim that the Divine Critic is confronting the "Holy" Roman Empire outside the gates of Vienna.

Forty-nine years ago—1952-3—Dick Baepler and I were exchange students in Germany. We were half way through our 5-year program at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis and got scholarships to do our third year overseas. In that year Stalin died, Eisenhower was elected US president, and armistice came in the Korean War. While Dick and I rejoiced at Eisenhower's achievement in Korea, our German fellow students, all with bomb-etched memories of World War II, marvelled at our euphoria. They thought it naive. Why? "Don't you realize," they said, "that this is the first war in your nation's history that you didn't win?" We'd never thought of it. It was the "vision thing."

Thirty years later we Americans not only did NOT win the Vietnam war, but we were trounced, by a people with a puny fraction of our resources. We have no obvious victories either in some of our other wars—on poverty, on drugs, on crime. How many wars do we have to lose before we get the message? Expressed biblically, before we repent?

Is God now upping the ante? After defeat in Vietnam the world's last empire is now pounding an even more infinitesimally-

resourced Asian nation, basically, as one of you said, “making small rocks out of big rocks.” Yes, there are military targets being hit. Yes, there is also collateral damage in the process—dead civilians and swarms of refugees. And we are striving mightily to keep those numbers to a minimum, we’re told. Yet it can’t be helped in view of our overall objectives to bring about the new international “pax” of a terrorless world. Doesn’t this sound like the ideology of empire that Augustine tells us God will not tolerate? In the imperial politics of the deity God counts trespasses—in Augustine’s words, injustice. Every one of those collateral corpses is being tabulated, most likely also the military ones. So who—who all—is in trouble?

We brushed off our defeat in Vietnam. Tragic, we said, especially for our own soldiers who died there and also for the ones who survived, but finally no big deal. Suppose Afghanistan, or whoever our mysterious enemies are, suppose they beat us. then what? “God bless America” is heard and seen everywhere in public today. You literally cannot escape it. The theological question is: whence comes the chutzpah that expects God to make an exception for our empire and bless it?

And achieving a “terror-free” world? Who is kidding whom? Look up in a Biblical concordance (sometime soon) the terms terror and terrify and see who The Subject is of many of those references. To cope with terror, to finally undo it, you have to cope with God. And therewith we’re back to repentance—not breast-beating but turning away from one path and into an opposite one. I suppose that can happen two ways. Either you get the alternate vision first and then turn around. Or you turn around (are forced to turn around) and your vision is necessarily focused elsewhere.

It’s hard to imagine how the USA on its own volition could turn

away from being its imperial self. But it may not be totally hopeless. Even if God applies a two-by-four. With the recent empires mentioned above that crumbled, the individual peoples DID survive—though many of their number, millions often, did not. Vicarious repentance on the part of American Christians—from a few for the many, from a remnant for the multitudes—could maximize the number of survivors. The joy of such repentance could also have a ripple effect. We have it on good authority.

In that very Peace & Joy!  
Ed Schroeder

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## **The Conflict on Mission Theology in the ELCA**

Colleagues, Last week's posting, my proposal for a Lutheran mission theology, drew only two responses from you listserve receivers. Apparently my linking Luther's law/promise hermeneutic to missiology came as no surprise—maybe even “ho-hum”—to you long-time and long-suffering ThTh receivers. But that wasn't the case when I presented it live to the original audience in September. There it drew fire.

In last week's ThTh 176 I told you the context: a missiology conference in Chicago, called by Richard Bliese. In attendance were ELCA mission and evangelism execs along with ELCA theology professors—19 of us. Assignment: each of us to bring to the gathering a one-pager of what we thought Lutheran missiology was, so we might shop-talk Lutheran mission theology and



evangelism strategy. Bliese asked me to expand mine (“up to 4 pages”) as the first item on the agenda. That was the text posted last week as ThTh 176.

The first response at the conference came from a seminary president: “Very interesting. Yes, very very interesting.” After that faint praise came not-so-faint damns—three in a row—from ELCA honchos of the Division for Global Mission [DGM]. For them it was not interesting at all, but vexing. As I reconstruct their vexations from my scribbled notes, they went something like this:

- A. You parse God’s work of law and God’s work of gospel under the rubrics of “care (=law) and redemption (=gospel).” To talk about “care” under the rubric of God’s law and “redemption” under gospel is not right. “Care” belongs under gospel.
- B. Redemption as you, Ed, present it is an “individualized act, not world-wide.” The real nemeses in the world are sin/death/the devil. Your individualized redemption doesn’t get to these evil powers in the world. The Gospel of redemption as you present it doesn’t transform the world.
- C. Your presentation centers on “getting me saved,” and not—as mission should—on transforming all creation. God’s mission in the world is to transform creation for the sake of life.
- D. You stay too narrowly in the second article of the creed. God the creator of life is the central metaphor for mission. Life is God’s highest value.

I responded to these criticisms in the give-and-take that followed, but I didn’t do well. I was engaging in ad hocery—claim vs. counter-claim. I couldn’t put my finger on what the central issue was.

One of the readings sent to us prior to the conference was GLOBAL MISSION IN THE 21ST CENTURY [GM21], the "Vision Statement" of the DGM. I had prepared my presentation before I read GM21 since I wanted to get my thoughts about it down on paper before I started arguing with it. I knew from past exposure that law-promise theology was not a high priority in the DGM, and sure enough when I did then read GM21 I scribbled the margins full as I went through its 40 pages. But here too my marginal scribbles (and screams) were ad hoc pot shots.

1. Clarity didn't come until the first session of the second day of the conference. One of the DGM execs walked us through GM21, and one of his colleagues later in the day finally put THE ISSUE into words: "The reign of God is God's mission to the world. It is the transformation of creation for the sake of life. [For us Lutherans the question is:] how do we exploit this understanding without getting bogged down in sorting out the Two Kingdoms notion."
2. For me that was an Aha! The penny dropped. The ice broke. I had been arguing for the exact opposite thesis: "Concerning God's Reign in the world—how do we exploit this understanding without getting bogged down BY NOT sorting out the Two Kingdoms notion." That's law and promise, God's left hand and God's right hand, care and redemption. To avoid "sorting them out" is catastrophe. But that Aha! didn't come until we were about to adjourn, so I rewrote my own one-pager and sent it to Bliese. After these two paragraphs above, it went as follows:
3. "Bogged down" is a good metaphor. Which option—to sort out, or not to sort out, the Two Kingdom notion—bogs us down in mission as we try to see and hear both what the Bible says, and what's going on in God's world? That is THE question.

4. My 4-page opening presentation (law/promise—and its derivative, God's left-and-right-hand regimes) was offered as a hermeneutical proposal (NOT a doctrinal one), a proposed set of lenses for reading the Bible and the world for mission. It is the Reformers replacement for the nature/grace hermeneutic of scholastic theology. And the word "distinction" between law and gospel is key. "Distinction" is not separation, but distinguishing in order to reconnect things rightly. The law/promise distinction "saves" the Biblical data and the world's data, said the reformers. In the hermeneutics of scholasticism, they said: Both God's law, and God's promise, got lost. So does the work of God's left hand and God's right hand.
5. Hermeneutics and soteriology go together. During the "Wars of Missouri" in the past century—it really was a hermeneutical war—we learned how true the axiom is: "Biblical hermeneutics is at no point separable from Biblical soteriology" (R. Bertram). Applied to the "vision" document of the DGM: GM21's calls us to an alternate hermeneutics. That also has soteriological consequences. Said bluntly: Both God's law & God's promise (i.e., the gospel) suffer loss in GM21.
6. GM21 "opts for LIFE as the central metaphor " for salvation. It's a "paradigm shift," we heard. Indeed. One shift is that its soteriology comes out "law-shy." God, our critic, pretty well disappears when GM21 articulates its Trinitarian salvation: God "transforming creation for the sake of life." Question: Does salvation—under any Biblical metaphor—ever occur if God, the world's critic, is ignored? Not only St Paul, but also St John and the synoptics say No.
7. Parallel shift (on the promise side) is that the Reformation drumbeat for "necessitating Christ" suffers.

"Theology of the cross" in GM21 designates the shape (humble, vulnerable, suffering) of God's work, but not the content. Nowhere does GM21 offer Christ's cross as a "new thing" that "God was [doing] in Christ," namely, "reconciling the world to himself," and doing so in clear contrast to God's "normal" way of dealing with us, viz., "counting our trespasses against us."

8. GM21's crispest statement about the cross comes on p.8. "Jesus' ministry is a radical struggle for life. This puts him in continual conflict with those who would limit and destroy life. Jesus ultimately expresses God's vulnerable love for all humanity in his willingness to die in this struggle. Finally, he is put to an unjust, humiliating and yet redemptive death on a cross." [The "redemptive" aspect of the cross surfaces at Easter.] "The resurrection of Jesus is God's re-affirmation of life and a sign of hope in a world marked by sin and death. It declares that God's salvation, the restoration of life for all people and all creation, is rooted in God's compassionate and vulnerable love embodied in Jesus' ministry and death."
9. "Expresses" and "reaffirmation" are significant terms in the paragraph above. Question: If Jesus had never shown up, would God's project "to transform creation for the sake of life," have gotten derailed? In GM21's soteriology, it seems to me, the answer is: not necessarily. Christ "expresses" God's vulnerable love, and Easter "reaffirms" it, but there is no "necessitating Christ" for that love to be there at all, and for sinners to have access to it. Same question, different angle: apart from the cross, does God, or doesn't God, "count trespasses?" If God does, then the cross is a cosmic shift in God's dealing with sinners, not simply an expression of what God has always been doing.
10. GM21 openly calls us to move beyond the hermeneutics, the

paradigm, of 16th century Lutheranism. Why? It had defects then, we learn, and even some of its good aspects are not relevant today. To move us forward, GM21 surprisingly proposes an even more ancient paradigm, the hermeneutics of medieval scholasticism, reading the Word and the world under the rubrics of Nature and Grace. In GM21 “nature” is “creation” still tragically deficient of “life in its fullness,” and “grace” is God—and God’s people wherever they may be—“transforming creation for the sake of life.” That’s the scholastic axiom: God’s grace perfects nature, does not diminish it. The Lutheran Reformers found that medieval paradigm defective, so defective that they replaced it with another one, which they claimed was the hermeneutic the Bible itself commended—law and promise. Yet GM21 opts for the scholastic one and commends it Lutherans today. Why?

11. Yogi Berra could say: “When you come to a fork in the road, take it.” On this issue his advice won’t work. We won’t get to the same place either way. It’s one or the other. Is this theological nit-picking? No. It’s all about mission—God’s salvation of the world and our participation in it.

Peace & Joy!  
Ed Schroeder

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# Lutheran Theology for Mission

Colleagues,  
Three items.

1. The Crossings bank balance is getting low. You know what to do. The address is: The Crossings Community, P.O.Box 7011. St. Louis MO 63006. USA.
2. During the past month I've attended two conferences out of town. One was in Minnesota on the topic: "Thinking Theologically about Sexuality." My presentations there are posted on the web-page of the SW Minnesota Synod of the ELCA. If you are interested in the texts, go to <http://home.rconnect.com/~swmnelca/ehs.htm>
3. At the other conference Richard Bliese, missiology prof at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, gathered ELCA mission and evangelism execs and seminary teachers—19 of us—to shop-talk about Lutheran mission theology and evangelism strategy. My input was the text you find appended below. I've edited the original text a tad. We met just 10 days after the nightmare of September 11, 2001.

Peace & Joy!  
Ed Schroeder

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## Lutheran Missiology – An Oxymoron?

## Maybe Not – Especially, Not Now.

### WHERE ARE WE?

1. If 9-11-2001 was the “End of away of life Day” [*Martin Marty’s term*] in the USA, then the context for Christian mission in our own land has changed.
2. But America’s civil religion has not changed. Tuesday brought no end of away of life to our civil religion. On the contrary. The “other” gospel of Americanism, so far, dominates public theological rhetoric. From Christian voices too. God-talk, yes, but the god-talk of “Rotary Club religion,” as Dick Lyon calls it. Its gospel proclaims: The USA is God’s choice. Its anthem: God Bless America [GBA].
3. For us at this consultation—ten days after 9.11—this is OUR mission field. These fields are “white unto harvest”—also within America’s Christian churches, especially within them. There too “other” gospels abound, and especially in these past days, the bland/blind gospel of GBA.
4. The Time Magazine special, in the main article, starts out something like this: “If you want to bring dishonor to a major power, you would want to attack their cathedrals.” Perceptive. Yet even with two cathedrals to the honor of America—money and the military [M&M]—in ruins, there’s scant Christian witness, Christian mission, to bring the Word of God to us in this apocalyptic context.
5. This M&M gospel of America is not confined to our shores. We know that. This M&M gospel has its own massive mission program. Like the old Sherwin-Williams paint logo, it covers the earth. So Christian mission vis-a-vis this “other gospel” here at home has links globally to Christian mission elsewhere.
6. Jesus’ first words in Mark’s Gospel (1:15) are a mission

text for such a time as this: “The make-or-break moment [*the Greek word is “kairos”*] is here. King God is at the gates. Repent and believe the Good News.”

7. Christian mission to America, surely after 9-11-2001 (before too, of course) is a double mission call. It is a mission call to “repent” and also to “believe the Good News.” [*If the sequence of the two imperatives Jesus uses here has a familiar ring for Lutheran ears—first listen hard to God our critic, then listen hard and trust God’s Good News—don’t be surprised. That’s where Luther got it.*]
  8. Where does the first of that double mission imperative get any serious attention in today’s missiological world? I’m an amateur among the missiologists, but I’ve been around, and I’ve not seen it get any serious billing anywhere. So we might be starting from our own ground zero when we ask: How to move into Christian mission focused also on repentance—even first of all on repentance? That is the question, isn’t it, for mission strategy, mission theology, after last week Tuesday? Christian mission to America is first of all a call to repentance. It probably always has been. How directly have we ever addressed that? And even when we do, how do you do that? How to promote the penultimate mission “repent” so that it opens people to the ultimate mission goal “believe the Good News”? That is the question.
  9. The addressee for such mission is not initially the “others” in our six-billion world, nor the millions of Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists now in our land (though they might well need it just like the rest of us). The addressees we know the best are the mostly church-going folks of our American context—including our born-again national president—who are hooked on the Gospel of God-Bless-America, an “other” Gospel for sure.
- USING REFORMATION HERMENEUTICS IN TODAY’S MISSION CONVERSATION**



10. One part of our mission calling is “deconstructing” the theology of the Gospel of GBA. Back to the 16th century. The Reformers identified the false gospel dominant in their culture as semi-pelagianism: We do our part and God gives his grace and salvation happens. That is not without analogy to the “other” gospel fundamental to GBA religion in our land. But before going into that, let’s take a look at the way the Reformers pursued their mission in articulating Mark 1:15 for their day. From them we can find help for our own.
11. Fundamental to Reformation enterprise was the Reformers’ own new hermeneutics. A new way of reading the Bible, and subsequently of reading the world, especially, the religious world of the late Holy Roman Empire. So it is not Reformation doctrine or theology, but Reformation hermeneutics that I want to highlight.
12. When someone once asked Luther where his new hermeneutic came from, he told about an “Aha!” that came when for the umpteenth time he was reading Romans 1:16/17. “Up till that time in my lectures on the Bible I knew I had my finger on something important, but I was not clear about just what it was. When reading those Romans texts again, something happened. Romans 1:17 says: ‘The one who is righteous by faith shall live.’ Romans 1:16 says: ‘The Gospel is God’s own righteousness. It is revealed through faith.’ I connected the two: God’s own righteousness [=the *‘abstract’ righteousness in God himself*] and the *‘concrete’* righteousness of people who trust the Gospel to see that they were the same thing. That discovery was my Aha. Before it happened I had never made any distinction between the righteousness of the law and the righteousness of the gospel. I considered Moses (the law) and Christ (the gospel) to be of the same. The only difference, I thought, was that Moses was farther back in history and

not so complete, while Christ was closer to us in time and 100% complete, but the substance of both was the same. But when I discovered the distinction [*Latin: discrimen*] that the law is one thing, and the Gospel is something else—that was my breakthrough! [*Da riss ich herdurch.*]” [*Original in WA TR V. 5518. English text above is my translation.*]

13. I’m proposing that ML’s breakthrough was not primarily doctrinal, but hermeneutical. It was a new pair of glasses for reading the Bible, very different from the standard medieval hermeneutic he’d been using before.
14. The reigning theological hermeneutic of medieval theology was not the distinction between God’s law and God’s gospel. It was rather the distinction between nature and grace. The axiom was “*gratia non tollit naturam, sed perfecit.*” [*Grace does not remove (or abolish) nature, but brings it to perfection.*] The reformers replaced that axiom for reading the Bible, and then for doing theology, with a law and Gospel—aka law and promise—paradigm. They eventually claimed that it had much better Biblical warrant than nature/grace did. Even more, that it was the Bible’s own hermeneutic. That had to have consequences when they talked about mission—despite Gustav Warneck’s claim (and Carl Braaten’s curious agreement with him) that mission was the “great omission” of the Lutheran Reformation.
15. I’m largely ignorant of whether (any? many?) Lutheran mission theologians have taken this Reformation “new hermeneutic” as the linchpin for doing mission work, or missiological work. Seems to me that Phillip Huber’s 1992 essay “Recapturing Luther’s Mission Theology” does just that. There may be more, many more.
16. From my own exposure of 20-plus years in the American Society of Missiology and its international counterpart,

the International Association for Mission Studies, it seems to me that the nature/grace paradigm still dominates in ecumenical mission theology. Not only among Roman Catholics (where you'd not be surprised to find it), but also among non-Romans. The fundamental differences between nature/grace missiologists across the ecumenical spectrum surface when they discuss how much turf to grant to "nature," and subsequently how much is needed from "grace" to get that nature perfected.

17. But the Reformers had an alternate paradigm. My own teensy-weensy pursuit of that paradigm in Luther's own mission theology has led to two brief articles. One on Luther's sermons on the Great Commission (Mark's version thereof), the other on his surprising conclusion about world religions in his explanation of the Apostles Creed in the Large Catechism. [*Crossings web page [www.crossings.org](http://www.crossings.org) ThTh#119 for the first; and the journal of the Lutheran Society for Missiology, "Missio Apostolica," 7:1 (May 1999) for the second.*]
18. I want to illustrate this Lutheran law/promise hermeneutic in considering two popular themes in today's world-wide missiology. One is the term "Missio Dei" [God's Mission]. The other is the "Gospel and Culture" program.
19. Missio Dei is a term widely used, and universally approved, across the ecumenical spectrum from Anabaptists to Roman Catholics. But from hobnobbing among the missiologists for a couple of decades I've learned that after a bit of consensus conversation on Missio Dei, differences appear, usually congruent to the theological traditions the conversationalists come from. In discussing Missio Dei the Lutheran law/promise axiom asks: which one of God's two "missions" in the world are we discussing? I discussed, no, debated, this recently with a Lutheran missions pro. I went to St. Paul, I imagine, because I'd

just been reading the opening chapters of II Corinthians for my own devotions. In the classic chapter 3 Paul uses interchangeably the Greek terms “*diatheke*” [*regularly translated “covenant”*] and “*diakonia*” [*“dispensation” in the RSV, “ministry” in the NRSV*]. Paul’s main point, however, when using either term, is that God’s got TWO covenants operating in our one world, or again, that God’s got TWO dispensations/ministries in force in our one world. Since the term “mission” is hard to find in English Bible translations—e.g., never ever present in the KJV—I propose these two Greek terms for NT mission-talk.

But then we’ve got to parse the singular term “*Missio Dei*” into a plural, into its two scriptural-texted realities, and ask: What is God doing in the one “mission,” and what in the other “mission,” and then where/how do human agents (missionaries? missionaries?) get into the operations? You can’t simply say: *Missio Dei* is all just one ball of wax with two major components, perhaps, social ministry and Gospel-proclamation. Not if Paul has his way. For the dynamic duo that Paul is talking about cannot be yin-yanged together. They are NOT two sides of the same coin. They are antitheses. When one prevails, the other is silenced. One is a “mission that kills.” The other mission “gives life.” And both of them, says Paul, are God’s missions—one God’s “mission of condemnation,” the other God’s “mission of righteousness.”

So it seems to me that despite its wide-spread popularity in current mission rhetoric, “*Missio Dei*” needs some work. And yes, that will get us tangled into a similar debate that surfaced at the time of the Reformation. Is God’s operation, the *Missio Dei*, in the world fundamentally univocal? Namely, that wherever God’s mission is in action, that mission is fundamentally God adding “grace”

to “nature” in order to bring not-yet-perfected nature to its intended fullness? So said the Roman critics of the Augsburg Confession.

Or is God’s operation in the world a doublet? Is God ambidextrous, with two hands on two different missions? That’s what the Augsburg Confessors heard not only Paul saying, but the whole of the scriptures. Luther’s Table-talk comment above claims that what God is doing in Moses is one thing, and what God is doing in Christ is something else. “My breakthrough!”

This “doublet” hermeneutic of the Augsburg Confessors was not only their lens for reading the Bible, it was also their lens for reading the world, better, for reading what God is doing in the world. In short, for God’s two missions in the world. Many of you will already have sniffed “two kingdom” theology coming through these paragraphs above. And even though “two kingdoms” gets a bad rap from some folks, some Lutherans included—and it has suffered debilitating permutations—the Reformers found it in the Bible and found it fundamental there. They didn’t invent it. If God really does have two missions going in our one world, don’t we have to work that out in our missiology? I think so. Granted I haven’t done it in these paragraphs. My point is that this is what Lutherans ought to be inserting in today’s ecumenical mission dialogue. Isn’t that the same doublet expressed in Jesus’ double imperative: Repent and trust the Good News? I think so.

20. Using law/promise graph-paper when considering “Gospel and Culture.” Cultus is the root term in culture, and we should not ignore that. Thus we always need to ask what is the “other” Gospel, the other worship, the other cult,

already operating in any given culture. [*E.g., the GBA gospel in American culture.*] The Gospel's new wine anticipates finding cultural wineskins on hand already containing other wines. No wonder Jesus called for "new skins" for his "new wine." Pouring the Gospel's new wine into a culture's old wine skins does not come on high recommendation. In our own USA, where the GBA Gospel now overwhelms us, the old wineskins and old wine of our cultural religion triumph. The new wine that Christians have sought to pour into those old skins goes into the sand. The repentance piece of the double mission imperative is a call to abandon the old wineskins and the wine in them. To "trust the Good News" is to grasp the new skins and savor the new wine.

Crossings colleague Bob Bertram once wrote a missiological piece specifying the TWO gaps that needed bridging in Christian mission. One he called the "horizontal gap"—getting the Good News from its originating place to a new destination where it hasn't been before. Nowadays that's called the culture-gap, I sense. Plenty of work needed on that agenda, no question. But then Bob saw a second gap, beyond the "gospel and culture" gap.

That other one Bob called the "vertical gap." This gap, he said, yawns when the horizontal culture gap has finally been bridged. The vertical gap is the gap of sheer unbelief, which finds God's Gospel simply unbelievable. Its news is too good to be true—or too scandalous—or too demeaning—or too "whatever"—to the ears and hearts of folks who think they have managed well enough with the "other gospels" they already have. Bob calls this "the perennial and universal gap of an unbelief which is scandalized by the gospel. That credibility gap, even more oppressively than the horizontal gap of historical [and

cultural] distance, afflicts Christ's mission wherever and whenever it touches the world."

Bob then walks the reader through the Lutheran paradigm for bridging that vertical gap and he concludes with this: "The upshot is that unbelief, the unbelief of the vertical gap, is taken with full seriousness. [*Call it repentance.*] For after all, it really is incredible—indeed it is humanly impossible to believe—that the itinerant, first-century rabbi would 'need' to go to such lengths [*sc. cross and resurrection*] to achieve the merciful mission of God toward us. But once that is believed, as again and again it is, the believer can assimilate also the law [*sc. God's other "mission" in 2 Cor. 3 & passim*], can take its criticism, and can even profit from it, advancing its commendable good work in society. Still 'law' is always only proximate to Scripture's distinctive 'promise.' And only the promise, finally, is the solvent of the world's hard unbelief.

'Promissio' [promise] is the secret of 'missio' [mission]. For the mission's Sender was Himself the keeping of the promise. And the mission's gaps, across which we move with our theological doings, are ultimately spanned by that same promise—of Himself by the Spirit through the Word."

21. Summa. Mark 1:15 urges a two-stage mission agenda for the world. Among us mission types we need a "Repentance and Culture" task force to work alongside the "Gospel and Culture" task force. That would be one way, I suggest, to bring a Lutheran hermeneutic into today's ecumenical mission enterprise. For USA Christians, the Pogo-ism is true: the mission field is us.[Originally presented September 21, 2001]