

National Repentance #6: Proclaiming Repentance in the Public Square

Colleagues,

I received the text below from Steve Kuhl, an ELCA pastor in Wisconsin, on Tuesday. Right now in Mid-USA it's Wednesday morning. But this is so good that I can't wait another 24 hours before posting it to you. For one thing there's Steve's remarkable "parrasia" [=the NT Greek term for the chutzpah of faith-grounded public speech "that conceals nothing and passes over nothing" (Danker)]. And even more his law-and-promise theology and his ingenious crossing of that theology to the USA today. You get the picture. It's so good that I can't wait for Thursday to roll around. So here it comes. Besides, you receivers are a worldwide audience and it IS already Thursday (just barely) amongst the kiwis in New Zealand. Peace and Joy!

Ed

[Dear Ed. For your info: This address was given at the "United We Stand" Rally in Mukwonago, Wisconsin on Sunday, October 14, 2001. While there is no official count of those who attended, the Mukwonago Chief, our local newspaper, said "there were a lot of people there." (I'd guess 500 or more.) Other speakers and activities included Margret Farrell (Lt. Gov. of Wisconsin), Scott Jenson (Speaker of the Wisconsin House of Representatives), Stephen Nass (State Representative), Jim Wagner (Village President), VFW and Legion, and Boy Scout posts, various-aged groups of school children leading the rally in the "Pledge," the National Anthem, "America The Beautiful," a prayer by Rev. Wendy Meyer (Big Bend Baptist Church), "Amazing Grace"

sung by Rev. Anne Holmes (Mukwonago Unitarian Universalist Church), and a special recognition of all civil servants (firefighters, police, military veterans, and paramedics).]

UNITED WE KNEEL

Fellow Americans, dear neighbors, and people of good will, While the news media and our government have been focusing our nation on a “secular” response to the events of September 11 (a response which includes the military buildup, coalition building, humanitarian assistance, homeland security, economic bailouts, and the like) we, the church, have been focusing the nation on a “spiritual response.” Both responses are important. Both responses are inseparably intertwined. Both responses relate to the complexity of the times. And both responses call for great sacrifice on the part of the nation. But they are sacrifices of a very different kind. Whereas the secular response focuses on our “strengths” (militarily, economically, even morally) over against the human enemies we face, that they may not defeat us on account of our strength; the spiritual response of the church focuses on our “weakness” before God, that God may not defeat us on account of our weakness. And don’t be fooled. This spiritual response is not easy for us to make. Indeed, making an adequate spiritual response to God is much harder than making an adequate secular response to our human foes and our physical needs. That’s because an adequate spiritual response calls us to examine our way of life, to question our stewardship of the many blessings God has given us, and to acknowledge our less-than-neighborly concern for the weaker members of the global community. In a word, the kind of spiritual response that September 11 calls for is “repentance.”

Now don't get me wrong. To emphasize repentance is not to say that "providing comfort" to sufferers is not also an important part of our spiritual response to September 11. It is! The deeper truth, however, is that "repentance" and "providing comfort" go together. Why else do we say "I'm sorry" when someone tells us of their suffering, as though we are somehow implicated in their suffering? It's because repentance makes "providing comfort" all the more real. Repentance connects people in their common weakness. Therefore, helping a person or group or nation or world to respond to life's circumstance repentantly is the most basic spiritual task.

The Hebraic, Islamic, and Christian prophets all make clear that repentance is a universal need of all humanity—as universal as our secular need for food, clothing, shelter, and, as we Americans would add, human rights. That's because of the universal reality of sin, a malady that overshadows the whole human family regardless of race, color, creed, or national origin. No amount of homeland security can prevent it from entering our borders and terrorizing our lives. Ironically, as the Scripture itself makes clear, repentance seems hardest for those people who are most aware of—and most proud of—their strengths. For some reason (and that reason is endemic to sin, our tendency to think more highly of ourselves than we should) the strong in the world tend to use their strengths to hide the truth of their weakness. It is easy for the strong to sing "God bless America" and to thank God for their strengths. But is that really an adequate spiritual response to life, especially when life is experiencing crisis? Is it a deep enough and honest enough response? We know Jesus' story of the two men who went into the temple to pray. One prayed "Thank you, God, for making me good, not like that guy over there. God bless me." That other guy prayed simply, "Lord be merciful to me, a sinner." He repented. Then Jesus asked, "Who do you think went

away justified before God?" Whose spiritual response do you think is adequate to the whole truth? The answer is no secret: It's the one who repented.

The spiritual danger for the strong and the good is that they too often use their blessings to avoid dealing with their weaknesses. They may praise God with their lips, but without repentance, without dealing with their weaknesses before God, they actually dishonor God, remain in their weakness, and go away unjustified. That's why for the prophets and the psalmists, the first words they enjoin us to say are not words like "God bless America" but "Lord have mercy on us all." (Ps. 51:1) In like manner, not "United we stand" but "United we kneel," humbly before our God, would be a much more appropriate slogan for a prayer vigil like this. For only a "broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart" (Ps 51:17), as the psalmist says, is the kind of spirit that avails before God, that God weeps for, that God has mercy upon. That's because God is a God eager to forgive; a God desirous to "create in us a clean heart" and "to put a new and right spirit within us." (Ps. 51:10) Of course, true, deep repentance is possible only through faith in a God who forgives. For me as a Christian, that God is known only in Jesus Christ, crucified and raised.

This spiritual, penitential response to God is not anti-patriotic. On the contrary, it is the only truly patriotic thing that can be done spiritually. For note! The goal of repentance is nothing less than that of "saving the nation" from a danger that is even larger than the human enemies we face: God's very own judgment on our sins and on our prideful use—and selfish misuse—of our blessings. Nor does repentance undermine or undercut the other kinds of secular responses that may need to be made in the days ahead, including the military, economic, humanitarian, and homeland security responses that may also be needed. But repentance does put them in a new

light.

Sadly, we may need more military strikes, but never in self-justification for our national goals, but always in sorrow for our past failures, for our present weakness, and for our culpability with regard to suffering around the world and at home. Most definitely, we will need to give humanitarian aid. For we cannot expect to save our way of life at the expense of the life of foreigners without facing the wrath of God. Repentance also gives us a new view of world events. We tend to think that God uses the righteous to overcome the wicked, as the movies depict, and we tend to think the world is easily labeled into that which is good and that which is evil. But, as the prophets point out, that is not necessarily so. The God who rules the world this side of paradise is always left with "using one scoundrel to punish another," as Martin Luther used to say. Oftentimes in the heat of the moment, God is not interested in the blame game, of arguing the finer points of who is better than whom. That's not because God is indifferent to evil, but because God prefers that everyone repent. (Repentance is more important to God than whether we win or lose a military campaign, though we may rightly pray for victory.) But what is certain is this: each scoundrel who has their day of boasting will also have their day of weeping. The only question is "When?"

But repentance can also bring forth new possibilities. And that characteristic of repentance is the most basic reason for hope today. God is on record throughout Holy Scripture as a God who repents of his judgments upon people who turn to the Lord with repentant hearts. Remember the story of Jonah, for example. Remember it not for the miracle of the big fish, but for the miracle of repentance. Remember how God told Jonah that he was going to destroy the great city of Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian Empire (the enemy who defeated the people of

Israel) unless Nineveh repented. Remember how Jonah, an Israelite, did not want to bring the message of repentance to the king of Assyria because he wanted God to destroy Nineveh. Remember how God forced Jonah to preach repentance in the streets of the city anyway. Remember how the king heeded the advice of the reluctant, haphazard preaching of Jonah and surprisingly issued a public decree that everyone repent on behalf of the nation. Remember how God spared the nation of Assyria from their destruction because of their repentance. Remember how Jonah pouted under the fig tree, because God was merciful to Nineveh, his enemy.

In the Book of Jonah a miracle happened: the reluctant preaching of repentance by a hateful Jonah led to a sincere response of repentance by his Assyrian enemy. What I'm about to say next might sound sacrilegious at first. But bear with me, please, for I think what I am about to say fits like hand in glove with the message of Jonah—and the Bible's wild imagination about repentance. What if we thought about our enemy, Osama Bin Laden, who wants us dead, the way the king of Assyria thought about his enemy, Jonah, who also wanted him dead? Osama Bin Laden our Jonah? Sounds crazy, I know—as crazy as Jesus saying to the terrorized people of his day, that they will have no sign of what to do spiritually except for the sign of Jonah, an obscure hint from God, like a thorn in the flesh, suggesting their need for repentance. (Luke 11:30) But wouldn't it be ironic if the reluctant preaching of Osama Bin Laden about our need to repent . . . and you know as well as me that, like Jonah, in his heart of hearts Bin Laden doesn't really want us to repent before God. Quite the opposite, he wants to poison our relation to God. . . But what if his accusations of our sinfulness (whether documentable or not) was actually met by us with sincere repentance before God? What if we got God's hint and discerned the sign of Jonah in the person of Bin

Laden? Why we'd take the most powerful weapon in his terrorist arsenal right out of his hands: the rightful judgment of God upon our sins. But we are more fortunate than Nineveh. We have not only a reluctant Jonah preaching the message of repentance grudgingly. We have something "greater than Jonah." (Luke 11:32) We have a church (which is called to be the presence of Christ in our midst) that loves the nation so much that it will not shrink from its patriotic duty to proclaim the message of repentance to the people of the United States in such a way that gives the hope of God's forgiveness to all. That's why, tonight, "united we kneel" before God in humble repentance.

Just so you do not think that all that I am saying is too biblical to make any practical sense in the American context, allow me an example where it was actually applied here in these United States—and applied precisely at that point in our national history when we were the least united. Abraham Lincoln was then the first Republican president to ever hold that office. The nation was torn in two by a bloody Civil War. What was a president to do? The date was March 30, 1863. A resolution came across the president's desk (from the senate) asking the president to proclaim a "national fast day," a day of "national prayer and humility," a day of national repentance. Yes. Amidst all the military, economic, and humanitarian planning that needed to be done, here, leaders of good will saw repentance as a national priority. What is striking in the proclamation is the starkness with which they interpret the national calamity as God's punishment on the nation. Let me read the heart of the proclamation.

"And whereas it is the duty of nations as well as of men, to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgressions, in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon; and to recognize the sublime truth announced in the

Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations only are blessed whose God is Lord.

“And, in so much as we know that, by his divine law, nations like individuals are subjected to punishments and chastisements in this world, may we not justly fear that the awful calamity of civil war, which now desolates the land, may be but a punishment, inflicted upon us, for our presumptuous sins, to the needful end of our national reform of the whole People?”

*With Lincoln-and those who took this proclamation seriously-
“may we not justly fear” now, as they did then, that the ruins we witness today in our country be understood as God’s call for us to repent, a call issued not primarily to some “immoral fringe” of society, as some of our religious leaders have suggested, but to “the whole People,” as Lincoln suggested? Such repentance does not excuse the wrong of others. But it does humbly acknowledge our wrongs in a way that only we can do, with a hope for renewal that only God can give.*

So “united we kneel.” That is the only appropriate spiritual response we can make. Don’t begrudge the church if, instead of waving the flag, we choose to make the sign of the cross. For in the cross of Christ, weakness is turned into strength, and the grace of forgiveness becomes the power for repentance. Lord, have mercy on us all, as we respond faithfully, humbly, repentantly to the challenges of our time.

Thank you for your patience.

*Steven C. Kuhl
Mukwonago, Wisconsin
October 14, 2001*

National Repentance #5. (I wish it were the last one.)

Colleagues,

It's been a month. Also a month since ThTh touched the repentance word for the USA. You've seen some of the ping-pong that's elicited. Not yet passed on to you is dissent from some of our own "brightest and best" from the days of Seminex, and later, Crossings. You can understand why. To wit:

1. "I agree with those who think you sound too much like a Falwell of the left."
2. "How sure are you that the liberal Democratic platform is the only one that can square with belonging to the promising tradition?"
3. "Interpreting particular contemporary events as signs from God strikes me as audacious, and superfluous."
4. "I believe my 'left-hand' judgments proceed as surely from love of others and thirst for (civil) righteousness as you think yours do, even though they come out very different."
5. "Do you preach repentance at funerals, Ed, in the decisive way you are now preaching it to a nation?"

Seems to me that—

1. The only thing "leftist" about ThTh 170 and 172, was my proposal to view Sept 11 and the days following as coming from the left-hand of God. God saying: Read my lips. Especially the message from the left-side of my mouth.

2. The “lib.Dem. platform” and its Repub. alternate are two foxes apparently running in opposite directions. But their tails are tied together. Neither shows any signals of comprehending even God’s own leftist action, let alone anything about the promise resting in God’s other hand.*[One critic in last week’s ThTh 173 asked if I’d have called for repentance had Clinton been president. What that critic didn’t notice is that I did NOT call for Pres. Bush to repent. Rather I urged him to call the nation, usn’s, to repent, since God has put him in that “bully pulpit.” For the record: In recent USA presidential elections I’ve voted for 3rd party candidates.]*
3. As Amos protests, “I’m not a prophet, but the Lord showed me . . .” I’ve had no vision. I just happened to have a Bible in hand when the TV was turned on. Once more, thought clearly not a prophet, I take some comfort in the fact that the real prophets were also charged with audacity and superfluity.
4. The issue is not at all who has any claim to “love of others and thirst for civil righteousness.” It’s about the Word of God. Does God say such and so, or not? What do the following texts mean for us in the USA? Look ‘em up. Deut.32:39. Ezekiel 3:18. Amos 3:1-8: 4:6ff. Isaiah 5:24-30; 10:5-12; 30:12-14. And it’s not just the Hebrew scriptures. Read the words of Jesus cited in the next line.
5. Preach repentance at funerals? Jesus did. Luke 13:1-5.

Summa: Granted, I might be wrong. But Jesus, we trust, was not. At stake is hearing the Word of God. For personal devotions these days, I’m praying the Seven Penitential Psalms: 6, 22, 32, 38, 51, 102 and 130. When the words “I” and “me” surface, I add on “we” and “us.” They fit.

Some have chided me “where’s the Gospel, Ed, in what you’re

saying?" ThTh #170, the first in this series, acknowledged that in its concluding sentences: "This is not Gospel. It is a call to repentance. But without saying yes to this we never get to the Gospel. Better said, the Gospel never gets to us."

The RSL Gospel appointed for Sept.30 (Luke 16:19-31) concluded the same way, didn't it, with "Abraham" too affirming the sequence, namely, the sequence of our "hearing." In Hades [too late!] the Rich Man learned: "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced by SOMEONE [aka the Crucified One] rising from the dead." No surprise, the same Jesus who tells the Rich Man/Lazarus parable initiates his ministry—according to St. Mark—proposing the same sequence, "The crunch moment is now. King God is at the door. Therefore repent and trust the Good News." (Mk 1:15)

Leonhard Goppelt, my New Testament teacher of 50 yrs ago, showed students that Jesus gave two different calls for repentance in the Gospels. One was a "condemning" call to repentance, the other a "saving" call to repentance. The Pharisees & scribes, the "good guys," got the first one. The down-and-outers got the second one. It's not that the down-and-outers were really "good guys" below the surface. No, both groups were sinners. But with a twist. The former were sinners "in fact," but not "in truth." They denied it. "We have no need of repentance." The latter were sinners "in fact AND in truth." No denial about their "fact." "God, be merciful to me a sinner."

Both were called to "turn around," one to turn around from denied sinfulness, the other from despairing sinfulness. The call to sinners-in-denial was not, is not, Good News (See Jesus's acid words, his last words to them, in the entire chapter of Matthew 23). The call to the others was indeed Gospel. "Come unto me" Jesus never mixed them up, said Goppelt, but "properly distinguished." [That has a familiar

ring!] Which group comes closest to us in the USA TODAY? Well, then

AND NOW A VOICE FROM THE PAST – 10-PLUS YEARS AGO

Ten years ago—in the EASTER 1991 issue of the CROSSINGS newsletter (#21)—Bob Bertram had a short piece titled “SS is for Suleiman and Saddam.” Bob linked Luther’s treatise of 1529 “War against the Turk” to our [USA] need for national repentance vis-a-vis Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War. Yes, it was the EASTER issue! Bob’s drumbeat for repentance a decade ago is even more compelling now. For many of you, and for me too, Bob’s a “church father.” Read on.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

SS is for Suleiman and Saddam

Both of them, Suleiman the Magnificent and Saddam Hussein, have prompted Christians to be just dying for a change. I mean, these two dictators have prompted Christians to repent, Easter style. No thanks to these tyrants themselves but to the God who has used them against us, there have been believers who have gotten the message, have capitalized on the crisis by just dying for a change – repenting – and so have parlayed the threat into a victory.

First, Suleiman the Magnificent. Back in the days of the Reformation, Suleiman and his invincible Muslim armies – European Christians called them “the Turks” – had been encroaching upon Christian Europe from the southeast, leaving a

hideous trail of atrocities, and were now threatening the very gates of Vienna. Martin Luther incurred bitter criticism when he declared that God was "visiting our sin upon us by means of this scourge," even though Luther eventually agreed that Christendom had no choice but to defend itself against the approaching menace. In fact, Luther went his critics one better. He proposed a practical strategy for defeating Suleiman: repent. Christendom, Luther pointed out, currently had TWO enemies, of whom Suleiman was but one, the other, the more daunting enemy being God. If the truly brave Christians would repent, even if they were only a tiny remnant, all of Europe might yet be spared. For then there would be no longer God, but merely Suleiman to contend with. Suleiman, by the way, suddenly had to drop everything and return to pressing business at home.

For us today Suleiman's tyrannical equivalent is Saddam Hussein. But who's afraid of Saddam anymore? Haven't we won the war? So what's to repent? Ah, yes, comes the reminder, but have we won the peace? Are the Iraqis at peace? The Kuwaitis? The Palestinians? The Israelis? Are we? All around us, now that the bills are coming due, the bills also for unfinished war back home, people are seeing signs of "Saddam's revenge," if out of the ashes. Then does that mean we never should have entered the war? Not necessarily. It seems that finally we had no choice. Then was THAT the judgment upon us: the only way left for doing right was to do evil, irreparable harm, even to our own children? Or if we do think (as many of us did at first) that we should have gone more slowly, would even that have exempted us from repenting? Maybe Saddam's worst revenge is that by being so obviously in need of repentance himself he has successfully blinded us to our own need of it, still.

What is wrong with this kind of talk is not that it is untrue but that it is only half true. The other half of it is that repentance, while it is something we've got to do, is far better

than that: it is also something we GET to do, thanks to the risen Lord. Repentance never did mean being afraid of Saddam, anymore than it meant being afraid of the tempest or of the multitude. That is the old way of fearing. The new fearing means God-fearing, fearing the only One the loss of whose grace would be the loss of everything. But to fear THAT One already implies how amazing we know that grace to be. What is more, in that case fearing is only the beginning. It is just dying for a CHANGE. And the change is resurrection with Christ, starting here and now. There actually are such liberated God-fearers among us, Marys and Magdalenes and Salomes and Simons, who brave that new kind of fearing and that kind of Eastering. What they dare to do is not just "Pray for Peace" but "Repent for Peace," Christ being risen. Imagine the consequences for Europe, also for the Middle East, even for the Middle West. Imagine the laughter!

P.S. Just received from one of you after this ThTh 174 was put together:

["Terrorism and Repentance: The Response of Faith"](#)

BreakPoint with Charles Colson

Commentary #010927 – 9/27/2001

I think he's got it. GO and see.

For a Nation to Repent

(Continued) #4

Colleagues,

I've been out of town for most of the week since the last posting. Four of the past 7 days were spent in Minnesota with 250 church-workers (most of them pastors) at the Fall Theological Conference of the Southwest Minnesota Synod of the ELCA. The topic was "Thinking Theologically about Sexuality." You know what the actual topic was. There were two presentors, each of us giving two 50-minute presentations and then each responding to the other's essay. The other speaker was a Lutheran seminary prof, good friend, presenting the "traditional" view, which he affirms. Because of past ThTh postings on this topic I was invited to be the dissenter. We were both mandated to ground our positions in the theology of Reformation Lutheranism. We both sought to do so, but it came out different. I hope to tell you about it in more detail soon in these postings. Returning home yesterday evening I met the mini-deluge of responses from you readers about the notion of God calling the USA to repentance. Including this one: "Ed, I simply note that in your most recent posting of points of view received [ThTh #171], you left my comments out and I never heard from you. Peace! [Name] "

To that colleague I regret to say (what I say to all): There are too many responses coming these days for me to fulfill either of these two requests. Therefore more than one of you will be able to say the same thing: "you left my comments out and I never heard from you." I regret that, but I see no other option. Today again I select a few—both negative and affirmative—and pass them on to you.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

1. Ed, Thought you might enjoy this – fits in with what ThTh 172 was about, I think! [Luth pastor]These words were issued by the President, in an official proclamation responding to cataclysmic events affecting the nation. “We Americans,” the President said, “have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us!”

Was it George W. Bush who issued that proclamation? No. It was Abraham Lincoln, in his “Proclamation Appointing a National Fast Day,” March 30, 1863.

His words are just as timely today.

You can read the full text of Lincoln’s proclamation, which resulted in a “day for National prayer and humiliation,”

at:<http://showcase.netins.net/web/creative/lincoln/speeches/fast.htm>

2. Thanks so much for your repentance messages. Right on target for all of us and the texts for this Sunday just amplify. Difficult for me to preach such truth in a place like [name] where I am serving as interim, but I am trying. Peace and Joy [Luth. pastor]

3. Blessings abound on this courageous, profound message of repentance. I have been inspired by these Scriptural words. Peace and Joy, even now. [Retired Luth. University prof]
4. Well done! If only 'Dubya' would read and take heed to your prophetic words and chosen hymns.. After receiving your scholarly study, one can only exclaim—"That'll preach!" [Luth. pastor]
5. You have now proven to me that you are no longer worth reading – your ego – your theology that ignores the scriptures and your self indulgent pride are more than I can take. [Luth pastor]
6. Would you be writing such a letter to the President if he were a Democrat? Your letter strikes me as nothing but a partisan attack against an official of the "wrong" party. Did you write such a letter to Bill Clinton after the mass murders at the embassies in Tanzania and Sudan? If you recall, Bill Clinton and his administration are the ones who lashed out with poorly thought out vengeance and retaliatory military strikes in the face of terrorist-perpetrated mass murder. I recall that you came to Clinton's defense, even in the face of his adulterous affair. [Ed. As far as I can recall, not true. In private conversation at that time I referred to him as a lecherous (bleep).] (Unlike the prophet John the Baptist who took Herod to task for marrying his brothers wife.) It appears that you select your prophetic statements carefully to be addressed only to those of the "wrong" political party. The Bush administration has been using an enormous amount of restraint against vengeance and retaliation. The Bush administration has even had the guts to change the name of the operation instead of insisting on the "infinite justice" misnomer. The Bush administration has spoken strongly against people who want to blame the mass murders

on all Arabs or all Muslims. The Bush administration's response, all things considered, has been thoughtful, restrained, well-conceived.

You certainly are correct about Christians' need to repent in the face of calamity. Our Eucharist services on Sept. 16 were services of repentance. The church's role is to call people to repent, as you say Luther said it, as well as to support the fight to protect others from being mass-murdered. We ought to expect the church to call us to repentance. The President is not the church.

In order for your argument to be consistent, you must exhort Jewish people to repent in the face of the Holocaust. That has an odd ring to it, doesn't it? There's a fine line between calling for repentance and blaming the victim. Will you also write a letter to the leaders of Israel, requesting that they call for their repentance in the face of the Holocaust?

Finally, I see little difference between yours and Jerry Falwell's position. You both agree that the mass murders were God's justice being meted out against sinners. The only difference is who you perceive the sinners to be. You say that the sinners are the conservatives, big business, military, etc. Falwell says that the sinners are the liberals, gays, feminists, abortionists, etc. Neither of your politically partisan, non-nuanced approaches convince me. Both positions strike me as avoiding naming the thing for what it is – evil. Mass murder is evil. In the story you quote about the tower of Siloam, the point was not who the sinners were, the point was to repent, that is, to turn to God instead of turning to the victims and listing their sins, blaming them for being part of the “big business” world or the “military establishment.”

Compassion and aid for the victims' families. Personal repentance. Prayer for terrorists, that God change their hearts. Support for the prevention of this happening again – even the use of some force as the lesser of two evils. Support for our leaders in the midst of this excruciatingly difficult time. This is and will continue to be my approach. You simply have not convinced me that it is time to attack our President and to blame him for not calling the nation to repent. [Luth. pastor]

7. I find your insistence that the events of 9/11 are God-led to be offensive. You offer the evidence of comparison to past events citing both scripture and history. Yet, you do not substantiate the charge that this is God's action now. It sounds more like Ed's left wing political ideas speaking than God to me. I also find your insistence that human repentance is a precondition to the Gospel is terrible theology. How can we by our good works of repentance become worthy of the Gospel? Have we done repentance good enough now. Your response does not sound Gospel centered at all.

On the other hand, to say that other people hate us because of the way we treat them and the implication is therefore, that we earned and deserved this. To say, if only we had been better people then we could have earned our way out of this, is also works righteousness. This too is terrible theology.

I do believe that this is a repentance moment, but it makes a huge difference in the way we repent if God is against us (your position) or if God is for us (the Gospel position). Your position has no hope because we all sin and fall short of the glory of God. We will never be able to repent good enough. The Gospel precedes repentance on our part and makes repentance possible. We repent not so

that the Kingdom of God can come, but rather we repent because the kingdom of God has come in Jesus Christ.

This is such simple theology I don't understand why you can't see the implications of your position. Perhaps this is a reaction of fear, wanting something absolute other than the Gospel. God's peace. [Luth. pastor]

8. Ed, When I received this attached email "Where is God?" [Ed: Theme of which is that God was everywhere in the rescue operations, but not at all in the destruction], I thought of you and our exchange of emails and the flood of responses you have received in the last two weeks re: your theologizing about 9-11. But the email on "Where is God?" (which ironically must be really getting around because in the last two days I have had some of my members refer to it) is a classic example of the kind of "theology of glory" that is around these days. It seems that so many feel they have to "defend God" when these horrors happen. Not only does this stuff have no way to comprehend any notions of the wrath of God, they also don't have use for the cross. They categorically say that God was not involved in the WTC disaster. But what kind of a God is this who seems to let things get out of control or is absent from the falling, deadly debris? Perhaps a better way to answer the question about where is God without scaring them off with the deepest level ... of the deus absconditus [Ed:"hidden god" Luther's label for God the killer, as in Psalm 90] is "cross talk." God was there in the disaster, right there in the midst of the crumbling rubble, getting crushed and dying "with" those people who lost their lives. Isn't that what the cross is all about? God joining us in the midst of the worst sort of bloodletting to not only suffer with us but finally also to offer us hope of life beyond . . . precisely because

the crucified one lives! I gave this answer to some pious ladies in my Bible class this morning who had also quoted this email (thinking it was the Gospel!) and surprisingly they liked my "rewording" of the 9-11 tragedy with the cross of Christ better!!!! The Gospel does enable us to more honestly deal with the harsh realities of suffering without always having to rationalize them or explain them away. [Luth. pastor]

9. Yes, I'm afraid the fear of the "R" Word, etc. is all around us. I actually heard a neighboring ELCA pastor's sermon from 9/16 (tape-delayed by a week for the radio) that said he could not believe the the victims on the disasters on 9/11 could possibly be "collateral damage" for God's judgment on our nation. Actually what he said seemed much closer to "this tragic event is NOT because of God's judgment upon this people" because "God doesn't operate that way." I sort of wanted to agree with him except I thought about Pilate & the Siloam tower too; and Job's children, and the Pharoah's armies, and the women and children inside of Jericho, and the "innocent ones" of Jerusalem who didn't survive to follow Jehoiachin to Babylon or Jeremiah to Egypt.

Keep at it, Ed! We all need to hear it: "unless you repent you will all likewise perish."

Luther keeps me going in times like this and sets the tone of judgment/grace:

*Even as we live each day,
Death our life embraces.
Who is there to bring us help,
Rich forgiving graces?
You only Lord, you only!... (LBW #350)*

Add my Kyrieleis to yours too!! [Luth. pastor]

10. The response [of some of your critics] is typical of those who hear you talk about God using the horrible events of history to work his terror. [Those who] want to be "good" (like God is always "good") have a terrible time truly appreciating the wrath of God and the deus absconditus. They hear you "talking politics" and being unpatriotic by daring to raise the stakes and propose that God might be using the terrorists of 9-11 to drive us all to our knees. A suggestion: maybe you need to go out of your way to show that the repentance you are calling for and the kind of theological question you are raising involves a whole lot more than just you making political judgments about America's bad behavior in international and foreign affairs. I think you would say that any experience of "negation" could be God's wrath and that repenting and clinging to Christ is the only way to be sure that we can face God's wrath and live through it. I know [some pastors who] do not even have stuff like this on their theological road map. Another interesting spin on all this. Could it be that America is the equivalent of the ancient Cyrus of Persia and that God might be using America to combat terrorism in the same way that he used Cyrus to destroy evil Babylon which enabled Israel to return to Jerusalem??? Cyrus may have been no more "godly" than the super power America, but the prophets still saw Cyrus and the Persians as God's tool for good.

This whole business of making judgments about relative right and wrong, goodness and evil, especially on the world stage of international affairs is so ambiguous and so multifaceted that maybe some of your (and mine) rather black and white judgments about America bringing this upon herself may not be so black and white. But I am still with

you on repentance all the way. Such repentance is required not because it means that you and I and have got the real, only and true understanding as to what God was doing on 9-11 but rather in the face of such massive suffering and death Christ is our only hope. Isn't this all about magnifying Christ and his work? Isn't Christ the only place where God has definitively revealed what he is up to in this world? And isn't repentance our clearing the deck of any blind spots, idolatries or self justifications that prevent us from clinging to him and only him?

Actually I think [some of your critics] are the ones who are substituting their political judgments for the ultimate truth of God . . . Christ crucified and risen. Their peace and certainty come from knowing beyond a doubt that God was NOT using the terrorists and that we are unambiguously a force for good in this world. Talk about dangerously trying to figure out the hidden God!

I hope this doesn't sound too muddled. One thing I do know from almost 25 years in the ministry now. Faithfully proclaiming repentance and faith, faithfully preaching law and Gospel, drives everyone nuts. One minute we sound like a liberal democrat and the next minute like a conservative republican. That makes me feel somewhat vindicated. God's Word must never be co-opted by some political ideology either of the left or right. [Luth. pastor]

11. Finally, a few words from the pastor's reflections in The Olive Leaf, the monthly newsletter of Mount Olive Lutheran Church in Mukwonago, WI: At this time of national strife, turn to God on behalf of our nation, as part of our nation, and repent. For the boldness of Christ was that he regarded our sins as his. Our boldness is that we regard our nation's sins, as well as the sins of the whole world,

as our own, and then, by faith, give them to Christ to bear and to forgive. Who knows? Perhaps God will be merciful, on account of Christ and our humble prayers, and grant us new possibilities. We can certainly hope. God's peace be with you in these troublesome times. Pastor

Reformation Resources: Law/Promise Hermeneutics & the Godly Secularity of Sex

Edward H. Schroeder

[Presentation at the SW Minnesota Synod – ELCA Fall Theology Conference, Sept. 30 – Oct. 3, 2001]

1. Intro: Two background issues, deep background issues, are in the current discussion among Christians about homosexuality: How to read the Bible? Where does sex fit in God's creation? They come up in all parts of the current debate, for they are always behind the scenes. For both of these the Lutheran Reformation had some very specific things to say. I shall try to show what the Reformation answers are to these two questions, and then use those Reformation answers—as graph-paper, you might say—to do my scribblings, my sketches, to draw some pictures about the hot-potato stuff we are discussing at this gathering.

I. Law-Promise Lenses for Reading the Bible

2. A former student recently wrote to tell me about the discussion at her (Methodist) congregation on homosexuality. She said: "We have identified the main problem. It's how we regard and interpret the Bible." Wow! I thought. How fortunate to have gotten to the jugular so soon. Seems to me that she couldn't have been more on target.

3. I grew up in an LCMS rural congregation in Illinois with Biblicism as the way to read the Bible. That may also be true for many of you. I didn't know the word Biblicism, but thought we were simply doing what Bible-believers all do. We acknowledge the Bible as the inspired Word of God. We take the word of God for what it says—passage after passage—and then seek to be faithful by believing what God told us to believe there, and doing what God told us to do.

4. Later on I learned that Biblicism and legalism often go hand-in-glove. And legalism was a no-no, a wrong way of salvation. So was Biblicism also a bad way to read the Bible? Probably. If so, what was a better way? The connection between those two "-isms" (Biblic- and legal-) get expressed in Bob Bertram's axiom: "Biblical hermeneutics is at no point separate from Biblical soteriology." In nickel words: "How you read the Bible is always linked to how you think people get saved."

5. In the Reformation Era the two were linked as well in the conflict of that time: in the hermeneutics and soteriology of scholasticism and the hermeneutics and soteriology proposed by the Reformers. The Reformers saw a precedent in the NT itself. The conflict between Jesus and the Judaism of his age, wasn't that a tangle between two conflicting ways of reading the Hebrew scriptures—and two different proposals for God's salvation? Both sides often said so. Ditto for the 16th century Reformation: two

different ways of reading the Bible (both OT and NT) and two conflicting notions about the salvation of sinners.

6. Back to Biblicism. Biblicism's way of reading the Bible is also technically called "revelationist." The Bible reveals the will of God. That will of God is fundamentally informational. It informs us readers of things, very important things, that we would not know apart from this revelation—what God wants us to believe (faith life), how God wants us to behave (moral life), to worship, etc. From that notion of the Bible comes a parallel notion of salvation. Salvation = following the will of God by believing what God wants us to believe, behaving as God instructs us to behave, etc. Unbelievers ignore what God reveals for us to believe. Immoral people ignore God's mandates for how we are to behave. And where does Jesus fit in? The Gospel of Jesus is one more thing, yes, the most important thing, revealed by God. And, of course, it is at the top of the list of what you "ought to believe." When you believe it you are righteous; when you don't you aren't. And the same applies to God's moral revelation. When you behave as God tells you to behave, you are moral. When you don't, you are immoral.

7. One reason I know this hermeneutics/soteriology well is that it describes the faith-life of my childhood nurtured by my parochial school education. It was subsequently the focal point for the *Kirchenkampf* in the Missouri Synod Lutheran church thirty years ago. I know. I was in it. I've got scars. And I now know that a proper label for this hermeneutics/soteriology is "legalist Biblicism." It is not THE Gospel, not the Gospel's way to read the Bible. As Paul designates it in Galatians, it is an "other" Gospel. It was not until I learned, really learned, what the Lutheran Reformation was all about, that I saw the difference between THE Gospel and this other Gospel that I knew so well.

8. So what is the Lutheran Reformation's alternative for how to read the Bible? In one of his Table Talk comments [WA TR V 5518] Luther tells how he got his "new" hermeneutics. His concluding line is striking: "When I discovered that the law of Moses is one thing and the Gospel of Christ is something else, '*da riss ich herdurch*' [that was my breakthrough]." Both for understanding salvation, but right along with it for a Gospel-grounded way to read the Bible.

9. Christians on either side of the homosexuality issue use the Bible, but all too often are using the same hermeneutic and very similar notions of salvation: Biblicist hermeneutics and legalist salvation. Both sides—the pro and the con—often concur that salvation is fundamentally linked to doing the right thing, and sin linked to doing the wrong thing. The "libs" find ways of reading Bible passages that prove "it's okay," and the conservatives do likewise to prove that it's not okay. But in both instances "doing the right thing" is the measure of what's faithful and what's not. The common view of the Bible is: The Bible tells us what to believe and how to behave.

10. My point here is that this kind of Bible-reading can be heard coming from both sides in this debate. Both are reading the Bible as a law-book of what's Okay and not Okay. No Christ-component factors in to make any serious difference in how they read the Bible. It's my opinion that the original hassle between Jesus and his critics was fundamentally the same: Two very different ways "to regard and interpret the Bible." And the difference was not because one side in the argument had better scholarship, knew more Hebrew, etc. than the other. It was two different soteriologies, two different answers to how God saves folks.

11. Okay, using the resources of the Reformation "breakthrough"
[A] How does God save folks?

[B] How does that give us a hermeneutics?

[C] What help does that give us for “those” passages?

12. [A] How God saves. Sinners are saved when they get Christ-connected. Call it faith. Faith in Christ is the new criterion for what’s righteous and what’s sinful. Faith in Christ is the new criterion for everything that can be called “Christian,” behavior and morals included. It is even the criterion for what sin is: “Sin is that they do not believe in me,” says Jesus in John’s Gospel (16:9). For Paul it is: “whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (Rom.14:23). [Imagine for a moment that this is the concept of sin Jesus was using when in John’s Gospel (8:11) he told the woman: “Go and sin no more.” Did she, could she, now trusting Christ’s word “Neither do I condemn you,” have gone back to the same job the next day? Dostoevsky teases us with that prospect in the person of Sonja, a Christ-trusting prostitute, in his classic novel **Crime and Punishment**.]

13. [B-1] Reading the Bible with this soteriology (=how people get saved) is at the very heart of the Augsburg Confession (June 25, 1530), the Magna Carta of the Lutheran Reformation. Philip Melanchthon spells it out in Apology article IV of that document. Summarized, it is a law/promise hermeneutic. Like this: Scripture’s law serves as God’s diagnostic agent–diagnosis of our malady, not prescription for our healing. God’s Law is X-ray, not ethics. The healing for patients diagnosed by the Law is in God’s promise, the Christ-quotient of both the OT and the NT. The law’s purpose (Paul said it first–after he received his “new” hermeneutics beginning at Damascus) is to “push sinners to Christ.”

14. [B-2] Once Christ-connected they come into the force-field of his “new commandment,” and it really is new, not a refurbished “old” commandment, not “Moses rehabilitated.” Christ supersedes Moses–not only for salvation, but also for ethics. In

Paul's language the touchstone for this new commandment is the "mind of Christ" and "being led by, walking by, his Holy Spirit." More than once Paul makes it "perfectly clear" that this is a new "law-free" way of life. Especially in Galatians, e.g., (5:18) "But if you are led by the Spirit you are not under law."

15. [B-3] What then do Christians do with all those imperatives –do this/don't do that– both in the OT and the NT? First of all, this new hermeneutic relativizes them. Even though they come from God, they are not automatically universal. Luther often called OT laws the *Juden-Sachsenspiegel*, the civil law code of the Hebrew theocracy analogous to the civil law code of Saxony. Different peoples have different civil codes, though the same God is active in all of them. The larger picture behind this notion of Luther is the "old creation/new creation" distinction arising from the law/promise hermeneutic.

16. [B-4] God manages the old creation by law, the new creation by promise—in Biblical imagery, God's Left Hand and Right Hand, respectively. In the old creation, God's law functions (so said the reformers) as the "law of recompense" (giving people their just deserts, call it justice) and the "law of preservation" (preventing the fallen creation from going directly to total chaos). With the promise God is out to redeem that old creation. Christians are God's agents for both jobs. "We dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that you [God] have made," as we say in one of the offertory collects. Caring for the old creation is the "preservation and just recompense" agenda and witnessing to the Gospel is the redemption agenda.

17. [C-1] Human sexuality is clearly a component of the old creation, God's left hand work in the world. Do's and don't's about sexuality are over there. That's why the Reformers removed marriage from the list of sacraments. Its home is "over there,"

not in the “new deal” that Christ has brought. They “secularized” sex. Luther would often use the word “secular” (*weltlich*) for the old creation, not meaning “god-less” (as today’s meaning often signals), but God’s work in the “old seculum,” the “old age,” now being replaced by Christ’s “new age/new creation.” So whatever “those passages” in the OT might have meant in the ancient Hebrew theocracy, they are first of all “left-hand” kingdom regulations. They do not automatically have anything to say to folks who are “in Christ,” any more than the laws of 16th-century Saxony obligate us wherever we are today—unless we live in Saxony! And there is always this additional item: it is not easy to decipher what “those passages” really meant in the Semitic world of 3,000 years ago.

18. [C-2] What about the NT passages, esp., the “pretty clear” words of Paul in the NT? Once more, what Paul actually had in mind with those two Greek terms is not easy to determine. But even if they were “perfectly clear” and meant what the word homosexual means in our language, then what? In keeping with Reformation hermeneutics, then this: Christians today need to read them with the “new hermeneutic” that comes from Christ. That includes—at the center—the new definition of “sin and righteousness” and above all the “new ethics/new morality” coming from the “Lordship of Christ and the leadership of the Holy Spirit” in any particular believer.

19. [C-3] The Lutheran Reformers practiced this very hermeneutic on the “rules-and- regulations” passages in the NT. “Thus even the apostles ordained many things that were changed by time, and they did not set them down as though they could not be changed.” “The apostles did not wish to burden consciences In connection with the [apostles’] decree[s] one must consider what the perpetual aim of the Gospel is” [Aug.Conf./ Apology Art. 28]. So, even if Paul’s words are “perfectly clear” (which Luther Seminary prof David Fredrickson says is “not so”) it

might have been valid then in terms of the aim of the Gospel, but not valid now because of “many things that were changed by time.” Re: things “changed by time,” see the following section on Reformation theology of creation.

20 [C-4] It is also possible that Paul could have been mistaken that a Christ-trusting practicing homosexual was an impossibility. His own words about women are conflictive. Could his words about *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* be the same? And once more even if Paul is not “mistaken” here, we today “must consider what the perpetual aim of the Gospel is” as we carry out our Christian callings. “The apostles did not wish to burden consciences. They did not set them [the rules] down as though they could not be changed.” Christians today must “do theology” at the venues where God has placed us.

II. The Godly Secularity of Sex: “Secular,” but that doesn’t mean “God-less.”

21. When the Lutheran Reformers said “No” to marriage as one of the Christian sacraments, they were giving sex and marriage “back to the world” where God had put it in the first place. That’s what they claimed to be doing. They claimed that it was the Gospel itself, the Good News about Christ, that compelled them to do this. What God was doing “in Christ” was something else than what God was doing in creation generally. Sex and marriage belonged in the “creation generally” category.

22. It’s not only sex and marriage that belong to God’s “creation generally.” Also there “out in the world” is all the other stuff of daily human life: child-birthing and child-rearing, families, eating and drinking (digestion too!), politics, economics, housing, education, health care, daily work, and so forth. All of that is great and godly stuff, but it’s not Gospel, say the Lutheran confessors. And the first

thing that says is: this is not the church's turf.

23. In their day that was called "secularizing" marriage along with these other slices of life. Nowadays in our language "secular" is almost a synonym for godless, but not so in Reformation times. The "secular" world is God's world, God's "first creation." It's distinct and different from God's "new" creation in Christ. But in no way is it godless. God is very much present and active here in the "first" creation, personally "walking in the garden" as Genesis 3 puts it.

24. To discuss things "secularly," the Reformers insisted, means doing theology on these topics in a particular way. Straight Bible-quotes won't do. What we need is not commands from God about how to behave, but pictures/images/insight on what God's up to in the old creation. That's not just the creation as portrayed in Genesis, but what God's up to in the creation we live in. What is God up to with us who are his creatures right now?

25. From reading the Bible in this "secular" fashion, the Reformers saw God carrying out a "law of preservation" and a "law of recompense." Preservation was God's organizing things so that life—human and all other things living—doesn't die out, but keeps on going. Recompense was God's organizing things so that rightful actions (the preservation agenda) got rewarded and wrongful actions (destruction) got their come-uppance to make them stop. God structures things so that creation gets cared for. Caring for creation does not yet redeem it. But in view of sin's impact if creation isn't cared for, there won't be anything left to redeem.

26. Another thing they learned is that "creation generally" changes as time goes by. Sex and marriage practices, for example, undergo change as history moves on. God's own hand is

in the mix of this movement. In Biblical times there's concubinage, polygamy, monogamy, and we find no criticism that only one was right and the others wrong. Rather, said the Reformers, God carried out preservation and recompense in all three formats. All of them "worked" to carry out God's agenda in the first creation.

27. The same, they saw, was true with governmental systems, economic systems, family and clan systems, all the systems of the "natural" world. They are historical. That means they change. If one or the other model was criticized as "not good," it was because the people involved—or maybe the system itself—didn't carry out God's double agenda, both preservation and recompense.

28. From this vantage point they had quite a bit to say about marriage, especially in the face of monasticism that was hyped as superior to marriage. They said very little about sex, and practically zero about homosexuality. The last item was not a hot topic, although the Reformers comment occasionally on homosexual activity in monastic life. The subject was basically "underground." But times change. God's own hand is in these changes too. One change here is for sure: God has put homosexuality on the "secular" screen in front of us today. So how might we take the Reformers' angle about things "secular" and carry forward their good work?

III. It's the Creator's Ordainings, not the "Orders of Creation."

29. One component of the secular perspective that has come down to us through our Lutheran history is the expression "orders of creation." That term is actually not found in 16th century Reformers, although terms almost like that are present. But they come with a particular "twist." In our language "orders of

creation” sound like patterns that God put in place right from the beginning. That would then make them permanent, sanctioned by God, and we’d better not mess with them. Most talk about the “orders of creation” is like this: God’s eternal blueprints for creation from day one.

30. Not so the Reformers: In “Lutheran” German it’s *SchoepFER-ordnungen* not *SchoepFUNGS-ordnungen*. In English it’s “the creator’s ordainings” rather than “orders of creation.” “The creator’s ordainings” puts the focus first of all on God the creator and not the creation. Secondly, it accents God’s continuing creating activity. God’s “ordainings” are not the permanent blueprints put in place once-for-all, but are what God is continuing to do. And as we noted above in the secular section, as time changes, as history unfolds, God “ordains” changes in the patterns and structures of human life and society. At whatever point in time, whatever place on the planet, in whatever web of relationships that God “ordains” for me to live, these ordainings are the “givens” of MY personal life as God’s creature. They are the “specs” God places on me (and you), first setting our lives in motion and then continuing to sustain us.

31. This case-specific focus on each of us as distinct persons created (ordained into life) by God, Lutherans know from Luther’s Small Catechism. What we believe about creation, says Luther, is not the story of Genesis, but the story of ourselves: “I believe that God has created me, linked together with [his German word is “samt”] all creatures; that he has given me and still sustains my body and soul, all my limbs and senses, my reason and all the faculties of my mind, together with food and clothing, house and home, family and property; that he provides me daily and abundantly with all the necessities of life, protects me from all danger, and preserves me from all evil.” In this specific way, with all these personal attributes (God-

ordained for me) I am called "to thank, praise, serve and obey God. This is most certainly true."

32. Luther doesn't mention sexuality in that gift-list, but today we're conscious that it's on our gift-list from God. Now to the jugular: If "hetero-" is one of the creator's ordainings, then wouldn't "homo-" have to be too? That doesn't mesh with "blueprint" notions of the orders of creation. But it can mesh with Creator's ordainings. "Ed, I'm wired different," one of my students said. "If I'd had a choice, I'd never have chosen it. But gay is where God has ordained for me to live." From this spot in creation I'm called to "thank and to praise, to serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true."

33. Both homosexuals and heterosexuals have a common left-hand calling from God to care for creation, carrying out the double agenda in God's secular world—the law of preservation and the law of recompense. If the gifts are different, the patterns of care, including patterns of sexual intimacy, will be different. But what about God's law? Remember, for Lutherans that's NOT: Is it right or wrong according to God's law-book. Rather: Is God's left-hand work being done: preservation and recompense—with both gay and straight—with the sexual gift that God has ordained? Despite the current conflict, is it true about sexuality too that "what God ordains is always good?" How can any Christ-truster finally say no to that?

34. Seems to me: this is the real conversation Christians ought to have about ordination and homosexuals. It is not about the pastoral office. It's whether or not the creator "ordains" that some are hetero, some homo. On the theological grounds presented above, seems to me, the answer has to be yes. When you say yes to that question, the pastoral office question disappears.

More on this in my second presentation.

Lecture #2 REFORMATION HERMENEUTICS IN TODAY'S HOMOSEXUALITY DISCUSSION –

Hetero cohabitation, homosexual intimacy, blessing ceremonies, gay/lesbian ordination

Review: My first presentation focused on three items from the Lutheran Reformation:

1. How to Read the Bible (and the soteriology always inherent in any specific hermeneutic).
2. Using the Lutheran hermeneutic on those “tough” texts.
3. Sex as God’s secular work, left-hand operation in old creation; a look at God’s Ordainings.

I. Marriage in the Light of Reformation Theology.

1. God’s management of human sexuality is not the business of Christ’s church. God has since the beginning of creation assigned it to other managers. They are all southpaws, left-handed. But their agenda is godly work. How does that connect with marriage?

2. It was from that conviction that the Lutheran Reformers said marriage was not a sacrament (=God’s right-hand work of salvation). So they returned marriage to the secular/civil realm. That doesn’t mean god-less realm, but the realm where God has other agents and authorities on assignment to care and protect human life on earth. It seemed obvious to the Reformers that marriage was not “churchy,” for it happens all over the world—where there are no Christians and thus no Christian church. God has always been involved in marriage in every

society with his left-hand care and protection, but nothing “salvational” is involved. People don’t become righteous before God—or unrighteous—by marrying or not marrying.

MARRIAGES “IN CHURCH” AND THE BLESSING BUSINESS

3. Which raises a dicey question about getting married “in church.” Before we address the question of blessing ceremonies for gays/lesbians, our Reformation roots urge us to ask: do even hetero-weddings belong “in church?” And from those roots the answer is not automatic: Well, of course!

4. Nowhere in the Old Testament of the Hebrew Scriptures is there anything like a “church” wedding. Marriage is a secular event, a routine happening of everyday life in civil society. Nothing “churchy” (or temple-y or synagogy) about it. The same is true in the New Testament. That’s no surprise really, since the first Christians were Hebrews. The one instance of a wedding in the gospels (Cana: John 2) is not portrayed as a “religious” event at all. Jesus is present, but does no blessing of anybody. His role at that wedding is to be the “backup caterer.” Using this text at church weddings is a real stretch. I’ve never heard it preached at weddings as John wanted (20:31).

5. If there is a “blessing” involved in marriages (I’m not sure there even are such texts in the OT; I’m quite sure there are none in the NT), we need to understand what “blessing” is in Biblical vocabulary. “Blessing” is godly activity, sometimes with God as the subject of the sentence [God blessed Abraham], many times with humans as the subject, this person blessing someone else [Jacob blessing his sons at the end of his life], and also humans blessing God [Bless the LORD, O my soul!].

6. The content of such blessings (in the first two instances) is vitality, health, longevity, fertility, and progeny. All of them “this-worldly” benefits. None of them “spiritual,” theological,

related to salvation. Claus Westermann, big-name Lutheran OT scholar in the 20th century, showed the difference in the OT between God's "blessing" work and God's "salvation" work. Luther picked up the same distinction in his own life-long teaching of the Bible (most of his career he's teaching the OT). He called it the difference between God's left-hand work and God's right-hand work. With the former God cares and protects our life on earth—that's God's blessing work. With the right-hand righteous relationships with God get restored, aka salvation.

7. A Jewish Rabbi helped me see what "Blessing" is. He told me, "You Christians have a tough time understanding what the Hebrew word 'blessing' means. One example of that is how the Beatitudes are translated in the TEV edition of the New Testament. It uses the word 'happy.' That couldn't be more wrong. Blessing is not an emotion or a feeling. It's a relationship. It's almost geographical. It's being in the right place instead of being in the wrong place, obviously first of all in relationship to God. So the first Beatitude in Matthew 5 would best be translated, 'You are in the right place when you are poor in spirit, for yours is the Kingdom of Heaven.' Try that on all the rest of the Beatitudes and see what new meaning you get."

8. I'm told (I haven't checked the sources) that for the first thousand years in Christian church history there were no such things as church weddings. Marriage was understood to be a "secular" thing, something regulated by civil law. When the Western church began to call marriage a sacrament, it started to become "church-ified."

9. Even though it happens all the time today, it is at best "fuzzy" theologically to talk about a "Christian wedding, Christian marriage." The participants can be Christian (Christ-connected persons) nurtured by God's "right hand," but the

marriage itself is something in God's other hand. And for that "other hand," God has other agents in charge, viz., the civil magistrates. The work they do is God's "blessing" work, even if they do not know that or may even deny it. Having a Christian pastor "do the ceremony" is really outside the jurisdiction of a "called and ordained minister of the Gospel."

10. The most "Christian" way to view marriage is to see it in God's left-hand realm. In Biblical perspective, it is the "one-flesh" physical fact of sexual union that constitutes the marriage. The commandment against adultery does not create marriage, but presupposes that marriages are already on the scene, and to this "given" of the old creation it says: "Don't break into someone else's one-flesh union; don't break out of your own. When you do that you are not fearing, loving, trusting God above all things."

11. It is not the vows, the promises, the ceremonies, not even God's "left-hand officers" blessing the partners, but the physical fact that makes a marriage. It is not the blessing that gives permission for one-flesh union. It is the one-fleshing that God's left-hand agents regulate and approbate (aka "bless"). There is no commandment to marry or to refrain from marriage. God gets people married by implanting the sexual electricity that

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pushes them to do what comes "natcherly." And in a fallen world, that "naturalness" always needs regulation (God's law as curb) and blessing (You're in the right place).

12. Our current secular culture—churchly culture too, sad to say—adds a humongous amount of hype to marriage, not only at the wedding ceremony [how can some of them claim to be Christian?], but also enormous hype to sexual intimacy (all those magazines at the check-out counter today), to personal commitment,

personal fulfillment, etc. Even so everybody knows that sex and hetero-marriage is a mess in our society today. The hype doesn't help, but makes things worse. As a member of our congregation recently said, "A wedding is a terrible way to start a marriage."

13. Biblical culture, both OT and NT, cherishing marriage and sex as a gift from God, saw it a lot tamer. Remember where Jesus puts it in one of his parables: "I have bought a field . . . bought five yoke of oxen . . . married a wife." None of them trivial, all of them "natural" in the daily life of God's creation, but none of them purpose for existence. Fredrickson links our modern "profligacy" about sex with St. Paul's own caveats on the subject. "The ideal self in Paul's world and to some extent in Paul's own rhetoric is characterized by self-control and the proper ("natural") use of externals – food, shelter, clothing and sex – with little or no passion." Biblical concern for moderation does not mean having no fun. It means not letting the goodies coming from God move into the God-spot, the place for our verbs of passion: what we fear, love, and trust. That's why the NT regularly points to idolatry as the final diagnosis of profligacy, sexual profligacy included.

SAME-SEX BLESSING CEREMONIES

14. To those getting married, who might even grant the left-handed (civil/secular) character of marriage, the question is: What do you expect to happen by having a "church wedding?" Important events of human life—graduations, daily work, signing a contract, getting a driver's license, birthing a baby, adopting a child, buying a house, etc.—have no "churchly" ceremony to accompany them. Why marriage? Especially if it is not a Christian sacrament? Especially if it is God who has located it elsewhere?

15. So what are we talking about when we ask about the

“blessing” of same-sex unions? Even if such unions can be godly—as I think they can—in God’s left-hand workings, what’s a “church blessing” supposed to do? That is the question, seems to me. What can “the church,” its “minister of the Gospel” add to what’s already there? Is it to pray for the people involved? That can be done, and at our parish regularly is done, at the next Sunday’s liturgy. And if the folks are at hand, we make it case-specific.

16. Folks in our local Lutherans Concerned chapter in St. Louis, where I serve as unofficial chaplain, tell me: since at present in the USA, few states give left-hand “civil blessing” to such unions, the church should do so, at least for the time being. Even so, is this the church’s jurisdiction when you start from the premise of God’s ambidextrous work in the world?

17. Seems to me that the action by the State of Vermont not too long ago, is what we Lutherans should applaud. Here is a left-hand agency of God carrying out the work of God’s law for homosexuals in the legislation it has passed. Whether any of the legislators knew that or not is secondary. Primary is whether or not these laws do the bifocal work of God’s Law in society: preservation and recompense—caring for people’s lives and carrying out reciprocal fairness. If they do, then they constitute the two foci of the “care” component in the “care and redemption” double agenda of that offertory collect. If they don’t, or don’t do it well, then more work is needed to improve them. Policies that do indeed do that for homosexuals, also support them so that they can move on in their own callings of “care”—and if they are Christ’s people also the “redemption”— of all that God has made.

HETERO COHABITATION.

18. Is there any secular legislation on this topic that does anything like the item just mentioned? I don’t know. But doesn’t

the Lutheran theology reviewed above give us help here? I think so. Here's one thought. If "one-flesh" is the fundamental fact of marriage, then these folks are married. Their "sin" (remember sin = unfaith) is not so much a violation of the 6th commandment, as it is in how they are living their married life. Truthfulness and honesty are the first things that come to mind—of all things, the 8th commandment! Is it not the un-faith of not 'fessing up to the truth that they are indeed married? Not saying yes—out loud in public—that from this physical fact that they are now living God has ordained them into this specific location to exercise their left-hand callings to each other? Even though there is God-talk in these sentences, it is left-hand regime God-talk, the jurisdiction of God's left-handers. What's the role here of those also working God's right-hand turf? Say it out loud whenever we can and urge the respective parties to do just that.

CLERGY ORDINATION AND HOMOSEXUAL INTIMACY

19. Earlier I sought to show [Lecture 1, #34] that when you say yes to God "ordaining" some of us to be "wired different" and yes to their calling to live that life in intimacy with another, then the question of ordaining such a one to the pastoral office disappears. To live in homosexual intimacy with another while serving in pastoral office is presently contrary to the rubrics of the ELCA. A commitment to celibacy is required. In substance just how different is that celibacy requirement for homosexuals any different from the Roman church's requirement of clergy-celibacy which the Reformers dismantled in their day?

20. The Reformers called on their theology of creation to oppose required celibacy. Common sense, too, they thought was on their side. Since it was God who created the sexual "pressure" that surfaces at puberty, they argued, to "require" celibacy for the clergy—or anybody—is blatantly contradicting God. For those whom

God “wired differently”—regardless of how that different wiring came to pass—requiring celibacy for them sounds like the same thing to me. It’s God who is being contradicted. Celibacy was fine for the “one in a thousand” whom Luther thought might have such a gift, but demanding it of anyone—and they were thinking only of heteros in those days—was contradicting what God had ordained. They also made much of Paul’s claim that marriage was God’s gift so that heteros could channel sexual pressure in godly fashion and escape the chaos of profligacy and promiscuity. A corollary kind of homosexual union offers the same respite. It surely deserves the same commendation. It is no impediment to exercising the pastoral office. Required celibacy surely is more likely to impede.

21. An editorial in THE LUTHERAN earlier this year called for a moratorium on disciplinary action by the ELCA leadership when congregations decide to call and ordain homosexuals “in committed relationships” to be their pastors. That’s happened in at least three—or is it now more?—ELCA synods. If the congregation really is “the church,” such a decision wherein they followed the rubric of Augsburg Confession 28 for church decisions, “one must consider what the perpetual aim of the Gospel is,” cannot be countermanded by some supposed higher church authority. Not only do the Lutheran confessions say so, so does the church’s Lord.

CONCLUSION: A “Sinner/Saint” T-shirt for Everybody in the Discussion.

22. You can’t avoid talking about sin in this discussion. We touched on it before. Remember that the debate about sin in the Reformation era was the flip-side of the debate about justification and faith in Christ. If you don’t have sin properly focused, the Reformers discovered, the Good News about

justification goes out of focus too. The “other side” in the Reformation conflict said: sin is doing bad stuff, things that God forbids. The Reformers said: doing bad stuff is a symptom of sin, but sin is something else. It’s what’s going on inside people, what the Bible calls the heart. The second article of the Augsburg Confession says it crisply, “not fearing God, not trusting God, and
(in place of these two absent items) with a heart turned in on your own self.”

23. One of the Reformers’ favored Bible texts for sin was Paul’s succinct sentence: “Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.” Sinful is any thought, word, deed, that doesn’t proceed from faith. And the radical opposite is also true: Un-sinful, yes “righteous,” is any thought, word, or deed that does proceed from faith in Christ. Any discussion of homosexual behavior—or heterosexual behavior—as to whether or not it is sin, must pass this check-point, if it is to proceed in terms of Reformation theology. Heterosexual behavior is not automatically sin-less, nor is the homosexual kind automatically sin-full. Can either be done, is either of them done, “in faith?” That is the question. If heteros can live out their sexuality “in faith,” is it not an option for homosexuals too? It doesn’t take much effort to establish that the opposite is true for both gays and straights, namely, that the gift of my sexuality can be lived “without fear of God, without trust in God, and with a heart curved back into itself.” If gifts from God can be received and used “in faith,” then this one must come under that rubric too.

24. Lutherans say that Christian people are “simultaneously righteous and yet still sinners.” Of course, that’s not just true of Lutherans. It’s standard Christian experience. New life in Christ has come to us through the Spirit in Word and sacrament. We’ve stepped into God’s new creation in Christ. Yet the Old Adam, the Old Eve, still spooks us. Faith and un-faith

are both present within us—sometimes barely seconds apart in our lives or even overlapping. The words of the frenzied father [Mark 9:24] are the confession of us all: “Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief.” That sober confession— “sinner and saint simultaneously”—should be printed on the T-shirts of all of us involved in this discussion. Right alongside the hermeneutics of law-and-promise for reading the Bible is the hermeneutics of repentance for living our Christian lives.

22. Now finally. Remembering the “Repentance” story I told at the outset about Luther’s words in 1529. Isn’t that also our calling today—only three weeks away from September 11? Not just for each of us individually, but vicariously also for those who don’t? With Apocalypse Now in the air everywhere, why are we, we Christians in America, even talking about this topic these days—three weeks after September 11, 2001? I know we might say: “‘Cause we haven’t got it resolved yet.” Can anyone hear God saying: “You won’t get that one resolved in your lifetime. You’ll have to live with one another in a posture of repentance on homosexuality. And the posture of repentance is my recommended way for you Christians to be living in the USA after Sept. 11. If not clear before, it should be clear now. From that posture you’re ready to work on my major assignments for you: Care and Redemption of all that I have made. Most all of what I have made is outside the church. That’s where I send you, not just now after Sept. 11, but always. Go ye into all the world. Go for it.”

Edward H. Schroeder
St. Louis, MO
September 29, 2001

[ReformationResources \(PDF\)](#)

A Letter to President George W. Bush

Colleagues,

On Wednesday, the day before Yom Kippur 2001, I sent this e-message to President Bush apropos of national repentance. Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

| | |
|-------------------------|--------------------|
| President George W Bush | September 26, 2001 |
|-------------------------|--------------------|

YOM KIPPUR FOR ALL AMERICANS – CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS TOO!

Dear Mr. President,

1. My email to you last week about national repentance was acknowledged by the White House Autoresponder. “Thank you for emailing President Bush. Your ideas and comments are very important to him. Unfortunately, because of the large volume of email received, the President cannot personally respond to each message. However, the White House staff considers and reports citizen ideas and concerns.” If my ideas and concerns have gotten to your desk (granted a very big “if”), they’ve not yet surfaced in the public messages we’ve been hearing from you. So I write to you again.
2. The repentance call I proposed—clean contrary to Jerry

Falwell's recent words—cited a powerful precedent from almost 500 years ago. As Christian Europe confronted super-terrorist Suleiman (The Magnificent!) in 1529, Martin Luther urged Europe's leaders to see the two enemies laying siege to Vienna. One Suleiman, the other God. And the connection between the two: Suleiman as "the rod of God's anger," the very language from the prophet Isaiah when Jerusalem was under siege two millennia before.

3. That was indeed a wake-up call. Yes, God as Christian Europe's "enemy!" God finally fed up with Europe's phony Christianity and the Holy Roman Empire's tyranny over other peoples.
4. Two very different enemies call for two very different strategies, of course. Rightful warfare to confront the terrorist enemy, but repentance in confronting the divine one. Most important:, better deal with the Infinite Enemy first, or else the finite enemy will win for sure, since the Infinite One continues as Suleiman's ally.
5. As a committed Christian yourself you know that such a call to repentance in the face of catastrophe comes on good authority. It's central to Jesus' own analysis of disaster. Example: Terrorist Pilate butchers people while they are at worship, a tower at Siloam falls and kills 18 more—all of them "no worse" than anybody else—and Jesus addresses the survivors: "I tell you . . . unless you repent you will all likewise perish." What message FROM GOD do the survivors hear when terror strikes, and others perish? That is THE question for them.
6. Biblical repentance does not mean breast-beating. Both the Hebrew and Greek words mean "turn around—Change your words and actions, a 180-degrees switch." Voices in the secular media in recent days are picking it up. They ask the "Emperor's-clothes" question: Why do so many people hate

us? Their answers focus on past words and actions coming from our nation toward many in the world. It's bad stuff that clearly calls for a turn-around—even if God did not.

7. You have been using the presidency as a “bully pulpit,” as did Teddy Roosevelt, a Republican of a century ago. That's good. In the early aftermath of our own September apocalypse, you commended words of scripture to us. Psalm 23: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For Thou art with me.” And a day or two later the words from St. Paul that even this horror “will not be able to separate us from the love of God.”
8. Good stuff, but From the God-confidence you genuinely commended to us, you had a solid platform (bully pulpit) for calling us all to repentance. That didn't happen. As far as I've heard in the last two weeks, it's not happening yet. You might have gotten to repentance with the very next words of your Psalm 23 citation: “Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.” A shepherd's rod and staff are used to whack the sheep on the butt—I think you Texans call it kicking something—to head them in the right direction. Despite the “ouch,” that's great comfort. You can trust the shepherd to protect you from your own penchant to self-destruct.
9. Granted, this is all frightfully theological. Especially for the president of a nation committed to separation-of-church-and-state. Yet you are “doing theology” nonetheless these days, and getting away with it!
10. Yes, politically it's very dicey. “God our enemy” will not get a majority vote. At least, not yet. For two weeks “God Bless America” has been our national anthem. Its unprecedented popularity expresses our people's prayer for our future. But it also says more. It expresses a conviction of the whole nation about our past: God has

ALWAYS been blessing America. So how can there be any talk of God as enemy, any grounds for national repentance? It doesn't compute. It's unpatriotic, maybe even treasonous. Just to speak about God as our critic would already be a major turn-around.

11. Yet—and here's another if—if God actually IS in enemy-mode outside our gates, repentance is the very best of national policy, wise politics—to preserve America, lest the lesser enemy, the terrorists, win despite the massive response you are now orchestrating. The word from the prophets and from Jesus shake down to this: even if we should win the war you've declared on the terrorists—dicey as that's going to be—we will lose the war with God.
12. So how to do “God-talk” to America today? That's what bully pulpits are for. Of course, the congregation in front of your “bully pulpit” in 2001 is much more religiously complex than the congregation Teddy Roosevelt preached to in the early 1900s. But that could be an asset. Already you've been addressing three major American religious communities: Muslim, Jewish and Christian.
13. Despite the theological differences between these three religious traditions, they all have a common component, a central one, in our need for repentance. I write this on the day before Yom Kippur, the explicit Jewish day for repentance. The Koran calls for repentance. So does Jesus. Your theological counselors can assist in working out the details. Imagine the consequences if on tomorrow's Yom Kippur, the president of the USA called all those whom he serves to join the Jews in their penitential practice. It might be a stretch to call us to hang a piece of sackcloth next to our flags. But Muslims, Jews, and Christians would see the wisdom.
14. The deeper theology of such inter-religious association relates to a Biblical notion of “God hiding his face from

us.” That’s also a common religious experience. And because of its commonality, some voices in today’s world-wide inter-religious dialogue suggest this common turf as the best place to start. Before debating the salvation proposals of different religions, they say, let’s talk about the downside experiences, our pain and suffering, our tragedies and failures, the nitty-gritty common to us all. And then from that common base of our lived experience (Biblically labelled “hidden God”) we surely will have solid ground for moving the discussion to the “good news” offered in our various faith communities. But that’s another agenda.

15. So, use your bully pulpit to call us to repentance. Your election last fall, unique as it was, now “calls you to the kingdom for such a time as this,” a time for penitential reflection. And when you do this, you can count on the repentance-faiths of America’s Muslims, Jews, and Christians to give their response: Bully for you!

Sincerely yours,

Edward H. Schroeder

P.S. Should you want some religious music for contexting such a venture, here are three options (two of them brand new) that have been called to my attention.

1. WHEN SUDDEN TERROR TEARS APART

By Carl Daw Jr., Exec. Dir., The Hymn Society of the US & Canada.

[Tune: see info below.]

When sudden terror tears apart

The world we thought was ours,

We find how fragile strength can be,

How limited our powers.

As tower and fortress fall, we watch
With disbelieving stare
And numbly hear the anguished cries
That pierce the ash-filled air.

Yet most of all we are aware
Of emptiness and void:
Of lives cut short, of structures razed,
Of confidence destroyed.

From this abyss of doubt and fear
We grope for words to pray,
And hear our stammering tongues embrace
A timeless Kyrie.

Have mercy, Lord, give strength and peace,
And make our courage great;
Restrain our urge to seek revenge.
To turn our hurt to hate.

Help us to know your steadfast love,
Your presence near as breath;
Rekindle in our hearts the hope
Of life that conquers death.

Tune: C.M. (suggested tunes: BANGOR, DETROIT)
Or C.M.D. (suggested tune: THIRD MODE MELODY)

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60188 All rights reserved. Used by permission.]

2. DEAR GOD, BEHOLD THE CRYING

By Herb Brokering. Tune: O Sacred Head

Dear God, behold the crying, the anger in our eyes,

and danger reappearing as we cannot surmise.
Behold your world is mourning, we bow we bend we kneel.
O hear our grief unspoken and mysteries we feel.

We mold our steel to weapons, you turn them to plow
shares.

We plan retaliation, you give us rules to care.
We bury dead remorseful, you raise us from the dead.
May we when finished crying believe the words you said.

Dear acorn in the forest, awake and face the light.
Dear children who are weeping, God holds you through the
night.

For when the dark is over, there wakes a morning sun,
and what was dead is rising, and life again begun.

Dear Lord you chose the hillside to say the words we cry.
You know the hurt between us, you know the reason why.
When all our tears are finished and minds again hold
still,
surround us with your mercy and lead us with your will.

For all who now go weeping with tears so deep inside,
give them a glimpse of seeing into the other side.
Forgiveness is the power you give us from the tree,
now open dim some beauty ahead for us to see.

And then, this older one—

3. O GOD OF EARTH AND ALTAR

By: G.K. Chesterton [Tune: King's Lynn. (Lutheran Book of
Worship #428)]

O God of earth and altar, Bow down and hear our cry,
Our earthly rulers falter, Our people drift and die;
The walls of gold entomb us, The swords of scorn divide,
Take not thy thunder from us, But take away our pride.

From all that terror teaches, From lies of tongue and pen,
From all the easy speeches That comfort cruel men,
From sale and profanation Of honor, and the sword,
From sleep and from damnation, Deliver us, good Lord!

Tie in a living tether The prince and priest and thrall,
Bind all our lives together, Smite us and save us all;
In ire and exultation, Aflame with faith, and free,
Lift up a living nation, A single sword to thee.

Lutheran Missiology – An Oxymoron? Maybe Not – Especially, Not Now.

Edward H. Schroeder

[Presentation at ELCA Mission “Faculty” Meeting, Rosemont, IL,
September 21-22, 2001]

WHERE ARE WE?

1. If 9-11-2001 was the “Endofawayoflife 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 endofawayoflife 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 a 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 perfectit.*" [*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 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.

[LutheranMissiology \(PDF\)](#)

Terror and Repentance, Part II

Colleagues,

Today's posting consists of responses from many of you to last week's offering. The only words from me relate to what just transpired at our breakfast table this morning. First the bad news: On the radio we just heard that the US response planned for our enemies is now named "Infinite Justice." The sheer blasphemy of that has apparently escaped all the braintrust in Washington DC. Not only blasphemy, but stupidity, "infinite" stupidity. And its consequences—for us! Claiming to administer infinite justice is to invite The Infinite One to "go and do thou likewise" with us. And all

that but 9 days after our own lethal encounter with that Infinite One. Granted, the return address of the Infinite One nine days ago may be blurred—Isaiah’s word is “hidden”—but the apocalyptic destruction has clear addresses. The ancient Greeks, I believe it was, said: whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad. That’s not a Biblical quote, but it still rings true. Favored Biblical imagery for such a time as this is eyes and ears. Check Isaiah’s words in chapter 6: “[You] hear and hear, but do not understand; see and see, but do not perceive.” And when the prophet asks “How long?” the answer is grisly.

Then the good news: We turned off the radio and moved to morning devotions. The hymn slotted for today [Aussie Luth. Hymnal #780] was written by Bonhoeffer. It’s too good not to pass on.

*We go to God when we are sorely placed,
and pray to him for help, for peace, for bread,
for mercy, for us sinning, sick, or dead.
We all do so, in faith or unbelief. We go to God when he is
sorely placed,
find him poor, scorned, unsheltered, without bread,
whelmed under weight of evil, weak or dead.
Christians stand by God in his hour of grief. (Footnote:
Matt.25:40)*

*God goes to us when we are sorely placed,
and feeds body and spirit with his bread.
For Christians and for pagans he hangs dead,
and he forgives all people through his death.*

Upon such grounding,
Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

RESPONSES to ThTh 170

1. From upstate New York

On Friday morning, after working 12-hour shifts for the American Red Cross, I opened my e-mail here at the ARC and found your posting. It was like water in the desert. You see, for those of us (and I assume there are many on your mailing list) who demythologized the M & M's [money & military] long ago, in a strange way (and I hope this doesn't sound blasphemous), your clear word(s) on the matter fell like Gospel on the soul. It has to do with the prophetic message, clear and straightforward with no measure of self-interest or self-aggrandizement (which of course de-legitimizes it as prophetic) that ever so faintly allowed the morning star to begin to rise over our darkness. I began to "sober up" immediately—from my exhaustion and most of all, from the media. I've barely listened to it since and now all that matters to me is to stay sober. There were few places of worship to which we could go yesterday and find 'sanctuary' from the civil religion that now threatens a complete take-over of the religious mind-set and so positions the church in this country for perils yet unknown. Thank you for your clear prophetic word at precisely (for us) the right moment. We're hopeful of staying in touch.

2. From Oklahoma City (sic!)

You're right— "repentance" is not a popular church theme these days. Have you noticed that when even "conservative" or "traditional" churches allow a change or two in the traditional Liturgy, often the first thing to change is Psalm 51 as the offertory? Although the words, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near!" are usually associated

with John the Baptist, they're actually Christ's first commandment, then and to every generation since. To deny or even shy away from repentance is to deny the very need for the Messiah. However, I don't accept that the terrorist acts of last Tuesday were "the scourge of God" any more than I accept that the Oklahoma City bombing was or any other act of the evil one. God, my God, does not cause innocent people to suffer in order to make any of us better people or even to call an entire nation to repentance. St. Paul assures us that, "All things work together to the good of them that love God." That says it for me. There were enough references to the Lord, calls for prayers and reading from the Bible over the air waves to cause the adversary to spin on a spit. The Episcopal priest who performed the service from the National Cathedral called on the Holy Trinity by its descriptives and this was broadcast worldwide. Churches were filled this Sunday. What happened through the hijackings were acts of monstrous evil, (and Luther never denied the presence of evil or its intent), but through the awesome power of the Spirit, we prayed in numbers as we never have before. Could it be that a grieving nation searching for comfort turned back to its roots and is turning back to the Lord? I would never have a single person whose heart was broken in these tragedies think for an instant that his or her lost loved ones were somehow divine "collateral damage" taken in order to bring our country to repentance. Christ is the perfect sacrifice; no other is necessary.

3. Someone sent this excerpt from FOR ALL THE SAINTS, Vol. III, Page 336.

"O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will,

but also those of ill will.

But, do not remember all of the suffering they have

inflicted upon us:

Instead remember the fruits we have borne because of this suffering –

our fellowship, our loyalty to one another, our humility, our courage, our generosity,

the greatness of heart that has grown from this trouble.

When our persecutors come to be judged by you,

let all of these fruits that we have borne

be their forgiveness.”

[Found in the clothing of a dead child at Ravensbruck Concentration Camp.]

4. Thanks for your REpentance article. I have been carrying it with me, REreading it and REpeating it frequently as part of my conversations on the “events of last week”. I note your temerity, or at least caution, lest your words sound too much like Falwell and company. What a difference though, when the critique is “mea culpa” [my guilt] and not “tua culpa” [your guilt]. So, for a prophet to speak the hard word, the prophet must be in solidarity with those under the microscope. As Jeremiah might say, you need to have a piece of real estate in Jerusalem. And that, I think, is true of all of us these days. Even most of “the least of these” in our day have a stake in Wall Street and the security the Pentagon offered. And how healing for us that our Ultimate Critic has such a huge personal stake in us and in our world, being one of us. I have been interested to listen for “your” theme (really, I know where you picked up that theme) in the preaching of others these days. I was surprised to hear so little of it in Billy Graham’s message. He spoke of the deeper roots of this American tragedy as a mystery. Although he did repeat his common call for a spiritual renewal in America.

The Time Magazine special, in the main article, started out with something like this: "If you want to bring dishonor to a major power, you would want to attack their cathedrals." I thought that was reasonably perceptive, and even theological, for the secular press. However, it certainly did not identify the Master Mind behind the crumbling of the cathedrals.

So, thanks for "going to all the trouble".

5. [Here's one that will take your breath away and give you fresh oxygen.]Ed, Another R word, another Re word for you-
Re-lax! Brokaw, Jennings and Rather are not the only talkers talking tonight. Fruit from your farm is ripening out in the provinces. Your Seminex offspring are shooting from the lip all over the world.

Tuesday AM I got the "call" to be the MC (no kidding) for the ministerial association's prayer service that evening at the big Assembly of God church in town. I think I was appointed because [our Luth. congregation] convened and hosted the Shepherds' Meeting (Pastors praying together Tuesday AM's). In fact, 9/11 at 8:45 we were praying over one of the younger pastors who is in tremendous warfare. The anointing was so strong, I had to consciously keep my balance. I remember thinking the anointing was almost too strong, even considering our petitions. When I heard the timing of the first plane crash, I knew what else had been going on in our sanctuary that morning.

Since I was taught very young that "with responsibility comes authority," I began to plan (pray) with authority. Here's how it played out. The service began with the host pastor's welcome and prayer. We started "traditionally," singing Faith of Our Fathers and Amazing Grace to share common ground. Then I set 2 Chronicles 7:14 in the context

of temple dedication and the Trade Center. As MC (mea culpa and/or media consultant), I shared the call to turn from our (not their) wicked ways and the promise of a healed land. My wife then led us into the "contemporary" If My People. The worship was awesome. She then moved into spontaneous praise and we went with her.

Then I shared the promise and turning of Mark 11:24-25. Believe, receive, forgive, be forgiven. We then gave the Holy Spirit time to convict us individually and corporately. Selah. . . . So re-penting and re-remembering no more, we were made ready to stand upright before Him to pray with the power which He delegates to the ones whom He makes righteous. Then we were ready to re-present the poor and needy.

One by one, my prayer partners came up to pray for a "focus group." The dead, injured, the dying, the rescuers, the peacekeepers, medical people, families, America's kids, etc. . . .

The presence of God was so strong and sweet. Following the Holy Spirit's cue, [we moved] into "Jesus, Prince of Peace, holy is Your Name." Re-penting leads to re-joicing. Even the angels were re-joicing Tuesday night. One R word always leads to another. "There is no other place I'd rather be," many people were saying. That's because they know the message of the medium. May we be faithfull, misspelling intended. Peace!

6. You bring us reality. Yes there is room, plenty room for us to wake up and repent as well as to seek justice against those who did this. So few people have any understanding, or will admit understanding, any of our failures even the early ones like abuse of the American

Indians or acceptance of slavery and accommodating it (read the constitution). And the consequences of both are still with us, just like this horrid act can be traced back to our offenses against others. In some ways it is a gift from God. For what I have feared is the destruction of one of our cities by an atomic bomb in the back of a Toyota shipped from anywhere. You . . . force us to deal with the reality of our God and the meaning of his love.

7. Actually your Th Th piece reflected what I have been saying to and praying for all week with people. That's not just because you instructed me thoroughly. This dynamic/ dialectic is the only way to stay in dialogue with (God in) all the scriptures (not just a bowdlerized version of them) and all of life (not just a Hallmark version of it). Thanks for speaking up in this public/ community venue. Blessings,

8. The theme of Repentance is one that I have been focusing on with my people as well. And, so far, I have listeners (Thanks be to God!), even appreciative listeners, but it isn't an easy listen. To me, more disheartening than the actual attack is the poverty of our national discussion on how to respond. Does one "Jihad" beget another? Does one act of self-righteous indignation justify another? That's the rhetoric I hear, as your "re" words display. Even the so called "evangelicals" (I'm referring to Jerry Falwell whom I heard on TV last night), who talk about this as a "wake-up call for revival" don't understand repentance. It's a wake-up call, he says, for the godless liberals, abortionist, homosexuals, ACLU, but not for him, not for the wealth-producing, defense-securing system that is America, and not for the average, good, hardworking people of America. How we use straw men (the short-comings of tax collectors and sinners) to veil our eyes of our own need of repentance.

That blindness is the real danger that confronts us now. The god of America, symbolized in the twin golden calves that fell down, is now to be vindicated unconditionally, and vindicated in the style that the god of the terrorist used, cocksure determination that we are right and our might will be the proof. What is the difference here between these two religions? None that I can see, at least not in a way that really makes a difference. For neither side has the courage to repent, to question their "way of life," and in that fear of repentance we find that these two religions are at root really the same religion. It is most unfortunate, that we the so-called "Christian West" are not using our biblical, prophetic and Christological resources, but instead, we are dipping into the tool box of that "old time religion," old-time as meaning "old Adam and Eve," the religion of standing in the presence of God's wrath and doing nothing more than pointing at one another's sin, remaining blind to our own sin and remaining hopelessly locked into its consequences.

As you noted of Luther, our ultimate hope (then as now) rests not primarily in our military strength—though that no doubt will make the front page news—but in a little band (a remnant) of repenters, whose efforts may never break the light of day, but which may nevertheless break the day of doom—this time, anyway. We can only hope. What's striking to me is how this idea is so vividly depicted in the OT lesson for this Sunday. (Exodus 32:7-14) Moses, of all people, arguing the PROMISE against God's wrath. That's the job of the remnant. But that arguing isn't to be kept in secret—Holy Writ to wit—and neither do we keep it in secret. In that regard, we have something very important to bring to the agenda of the day: Repentance. It may be irritating to many, but it may

catch the imaginations of just enough to make a difference. To that end and in that hope, we continue with the boldness, the boldness of the cross, of dying to self and rising to Christ, the boldness of repentance.

9. I found the long theological argument disagreeable on several levels. Not all of the victims of Tuesday's terrorist attacks were Christians. This tragedy transcends all regions and we should mourn the losses as countrymen and as fellow human beings. Attempts to link political/military actions with divine inspiration have been practiced throughout human history. Human nature is weak, greedy and self-serving. Furthermore a large majority of the population is unable to think for themselves or does not wish to think for themselves but rather wish to be led around blindly like sheep. The inability to think for oneself allows the perversion of religious ideology. Therefore it is not unusual to see attempts to use religion as mask for deeper flawed human nature.

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Having said of all this, it is clear that members of this planet who do not respect fellow human life, whether their beliefs are seated out of ignorance or well-honed hatred, should be exterminated in a expeditious manner.

10. In conclusion an item that one of you forwarded to me from Rabbi Arthur Waskow: In 1984, when the nuclear arms race was in speed-up mode, The Shalom Center built a sukkah between the White House and the Soviet Embassy in Washington.

We focused on the line from the evening prayers – "Ufros alenu sukkat shlomekha" – "Spread over all of us Your sukkah of shalom."

And we asked, "Why a sukkah?" – Why does the prayer plead

to God for a “sukkah of shalom” rather than God’s “tent” or “house” or “palace” of peace?

Because the sukkah is just a hut, the most vulnerable of houses. Vulnerable in time, where it lasts for only a week each year. Vulnerable in space, where its roof must be not only leafy but leaky – letting in the starlight, and gusts of wind and rain.

For much of our lives we try to achieve peace and safety by building with steel and concrete and toughness. Pyramids, air raid shelters, Pentagons, World Trade Centers. Hardening what might be targets and, like Pharaoh, hardening our hearts against what is foreign to us.

But the sukkah comes to remind us: We are in truth all vulnerable. If “a hard rain gonna fall,” it will fall on all of us.

Americans have felt invulnerable. The oceans, our wealth, our military power have made up what seemed an invulnerable shield. We may have begun feeling uncomfortable in the nuclear age, but no harm came to us. Yet yesterday the ancient truth came home: We all live in a sukkah.

Not only the targets of attack but also the instruments of attack were among our proudest possessions: the sleek transcontinental airliners. They availed us nothing. Worse than nothing.

Even the greatest oceans do not shield us; even the mightiest buildings do not shield us; even the wealthiest balance sheets and the most powerful weapons do not shield us.

There are only wispy walls and leaky roofs between us. The planet is in fact one interwoven web of life. I MUST love my neighbor as I do myself, because my neighbor and myself are interwoven. If I hate my neighbor, the hatred will recoil upon me.

What is the lesson, when we learn that we – all of us – live in a sukkah? How do we make such a vulnerable house into a place of shalom, of peace and security and harmony and wholeness?

The lesson is that only a world where we all recognize our vulnerability can become a world where all communities feel responsible to all other communities. And only such a world can prevent such acts of rage and murder.

If I treat my neighbor's pain and grief as foreign, I will end up suffering when my neighbor's pain and grief curdle into rage.

But if I realize that in simple fact the walls between us are full of holes, I can reach through them in compassion and connection.

Suspicion about the perpetrators of this act of infamy has fallen upon some groups that espouse a tortured version of Islam. Whether or not this turns out to be so, America must open its heart and mind to the pain and grief of those in the Arab and Muslim worlds who feel excluded, denied, unheard, disempowered, defeated.

This does not mean ignoring or forgiving whoever wrought such bloodiness. Their violence must be halted, their rage must be calmed – and the pain behind them must be heard and addressed.

Instead of entering upon a “war of civilizations,” we must pursue a planetary peace.

Shalom, Arthur

Coping with Terror—the Missing “R” Word

Colleagues,

It may be too soon to post this to you. Maybe it shouldn't ever be posted at all. I'm not clear on this. So trepidation goes along with this posting.

One “R” word—better, one “re-” word—has been missing in what I've heard from our leaders and media voices about the disasters of Sept. 11 so far. Granted it's only the second day after the cataclysm as I write this. More words and pictures will continue to surfeit us. Maybe the missing “re-” word will surface. To wit, the word “repentance.” Even if our public interpreters don't use that “re-” word, we Christians would do well to put it into the public discussion, wouldn't we?

President Bush offers “re-solve” and “re-assurance” as our government goes after those “re-sponsible.” Somewhere, we're told, a “re-turn” address will show up to identify the villains. And then “re-prisal, re-tribution” will follow. Lots of “re-” words, but not repentance.

But what if one of the names on that return address is “God?” For me too, that sounds crazy at first. Even worse, cruel,

uncaring, supercilious, just awful. But in the Bible, those with ears to hear—seldom ever the majority—did hear God’s voice, God’s call-to-repentance voice, when all hell broke loose in public life as the walls came tumbling down and the butchers entered the city. See the Amos citation below, as one example.

Seeing God in the equation in no way exonerates the villains. Not at all do they come out “good guys.” They are murderers bent on villainy, for which they too will pay, says God. Yet God appropriates them as his agents—using, as Luther occasionally said, one sinner to punish another sinner.

Isaiah 10 is one classic text about this. “Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger... Against a godless nation [Israel!] I send him, and against the people of my wrath [Israel] I command him.” The king of Assyria, of course, doesn’t know that he is God’s agent. He thinks he’s in charge in his own campaign of world conquest. But the Big Screen shows that he’s being used, even as he fills the streets of Jerusalem with blood. The Big Screen also shows that when God’s done using him, he will get his own just deserts. “When the Lord has finished all his work on Mt. Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish the arrogant boasting of the king of Assyria and his haughty pride.” The subsequent scenario for Assyria is not pretty. Even so Isaiah calls Israel to repentance.

Is there any help here for us after Tuesday—for our repentance? Yes, but there are barricades between us and that help. Fed, as we Americans are, on the folk piety of “God bless America,” (the only God-mention I heard from our elected representatives on day #1), repentance is just not on the agenda. To mention it now sounds subversive, unpatriotic, siding with the enemy. In wartime, that’s treason. Even President Bush’s Biblical words from Psalm 23 at the close of the first day—though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for

you are with me—didn't sound much like repentance. The premise for the verse quoted is that THIS Lord really is confessed as "our shepherd." Is that true in any serious sense in our American culture? Would that Bush, evangelical Christian as he is, had cited the classic line from the previous Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why?" Granted, that is a cry of despair, but it does send the right question to the right addressee. And for that question there IS an answer from that addressee: "Why? You have been weighed and found wanting. Ergo, repent." That's not God's entire answer, of course, nor yet a good-news answer, but it starts at the right place.

Repentance, of course, begins with contrition, a "mea culpa" 'fessing up to our wrongness and God's rightness in dealing with us accordingly. That, of course, entails faith in God, trusting God, as we face up, 'fess up, to his own rightful reprisal. Repentance admits that we have a "god-problem." But where do our public figures ever signal that America has any God-problem? With reference to God, Alfred Newman articulates the faith of America: "What, me worry?"

Worry there is aplenty, sure, but not about God. In our American folk piety it's an automatic given: we can count on God to bless America. God's our buddy. One of you readers calls this the "Rotary Club religion" of America, which all too often, sad to say, comes from Sunday pulpits as well. There's no place for repentance in a theology that God only blesses America. Repentance is a response to the opposite, God the critic and our encounters with the rod of God's anger.

But could God really be the return address for Tuesday's airline missiles? God sending terrorists to perpetrate massacre? All those innocent people? Thousands of them? If we think only of the terrorists, then the "re-" word retribution is at the top of the list. And we continue to hear it from the head honchos. But

if God IS in the mix too, if (ala Isaiah) the terrorists are the "rod of God's anger," then the other "re-" word is the only appropriate one. Even in the face of the chaos that immobilizes us and what we've heard to cope with it.

What we've "heard" is the key. Have we heard God assessing (not blessing) America at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001? None of the first day interpreters I listened to gave any signal that they had heard such a word from God. Perhaps the knee-jerk singing of "God Bless America" by Congress members that first day did signal something. But what? Mega-despair? A mini-prayer? Maxi-bewilderment? But it surely was no clear call for repentance. Even so, if we never find out who the human agents were for the disaster, the divine message need not stay hidden. [Dis-aster, by the way, is an eerie term for Tuesday. The word means "bad star." Originally linked, I believe to a bad horoscope. Four bad stars slammed out of the sky on Tuesday.]

But how could the USA possibly be a candidate for God's judgment, a rogue nation? Granted, other peoples say that. Most likely the agents for Tuesday's apocalypse say so too. But they're simply wrong, we say. We are by definition NOT a rogue nation. There are noble explanations for all (well, most all) of our national behavior. For us it's incomprehensible that we genuinely are candidates for repentance. Unless we get illumination from the Word of God and get the eyes to see and the ears to hear. But that vision, that hearing, doesn't come from the financial district of Manhattan or the Pentagon. We've been getting "other gospels" for a long time from those stations.

Yet how could God pinpoint it more clearly by knocking down those two WTC transmission towers and putting a big hole in the one on the Potomac? The messages coming from those "towers" (is

ancient Babel analogous?) are money and military, fundamental “M & M’s” of our national way of life. How can you get to repentance, even hear of repentance, from those loudspeakers? But they are now rubble—and the mega-numbers previously coming from them about our economic and military might are now corpse-counts. Doesn’t that ironically turn them into voices for repentance?

But repentance is tough. Repentance is hard to do even for one person. It’s like dying, says Jesus, like crucifixion. No one in their right mind would do it, unless . . . Unless the alternative were even worse. As it is. But that conviction takes faith. And for that repenters need help so that it becomes a repentance unto life, and not a repentance unto despair. According to the Word of God such help is available.

But how might a nation repent? How national repentance would unfold is hard, well nigh impossible, to imagine. Will any nation, CAN any nation admit to being a rogue nation by God’s own evaluation? Luther confronted the question in 1529 as Suleiman the Magnificent with his 600 thousand (sic!) troops stood outside the gates of Vienna that year, having just scorch-earthed their way through the Balkans to this Eastern outpost of Western Christian Europe. Luther called for all of Christian Europe to repent. But realist that he was, he didn’t actually expect it would happen, so he proposed a Plan B—vicarious repentance, surrogate repentance, some minimal few doing it and many benefitting. Consequently he encouraged whoever would listen to repent and perhaps God would acknowledge that as the repentance of all. There was Biblical precedent for that—remember Abraham pleading for Sodom. Then too, God had once acknowledged a vicarious “atonement” as good for all, so vicarious “repentance” might work too, also on the scene of world politics.

Luther's 1529 essay was titled "On War against the Turks." [It gets a bit macabre when you remember that "Turks" meant Muslims in 1529 and then look at today's world scene.] Luther called his readers to realize that there were TWO enemies confronting so-called "Christian" Europe outside the gates of Vienna in 1529. One was Suleiman and his 600K soldiers. The other enemy was God. The two were in cahoots as God was using Suleiman as "the rod of his anger" against the phony Christianity of so-called Christian Europe. Though allies, these two different enemies required two different strategies. The only way to cope when God's the enemy is repentance. Fighting is nonsense, and if done, is guaranteed suicide. Repentance dissolves God's enmity.

Coping with the God-enemy by repentance brings major benefits for confronting the other enemy, said Brother Martin. Upon our repentance, he claimed, Suleiman's power will be weakened. He will lose his Big Gun. He will cease to be the rod of God's anger, since God responds graciously to repenting people. 'Course we'll still have Suleiman and his 600K out there. But then they are at least theoretically beatable, bereft as they then will be of their divine ally. Without that ally they are just human.

That was the theological rationale for his "military" strategy. So he called "Christian Europe" to repent for its phony Christianity, even though he was not sanguine that many would do so. He knew that on the "Turkish" issue in 1529 he was a voice crying in the wilderness. Some even called him traitor. Nevertheless he encouraged the faithful few, the remnant, to repent, reminding them of the Biblical precedent (and promise) that vicarious repentance "works." There are no statistics about responses to Luther's call for repentance. But someone, someones, must have done so. Maybe just Luther, Katie and the kids around the supper table. For this much is in the history books: Suleiman and his 600K turned around and went home, never

attacking Vienna. Europe was saved.

And now a word from Amos 4:

(God speaking) I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities, and lack of bread in all your places, yet you did not return [=same Hebrew word for "repentance"] to me, says the LORD.

And the litany continues:

I withheld the rain from you...

I struck you with blight and mildew...

I sent among you a pestilence...

I overthrew some of you...

With this verse-by-verse refrain:

Yet you did not return to me, says the LORD.

And with this closure:

Therefore . . . prepare to meet your God, O Israel.

This is not Gospel. It is a call to repentance. But without saying yes to this we never get to the Gospel. Better said, the Gospel never gets to us.

And in the promise of such repentance and of such Gospel for our own nation in agony,

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Getting married in church

Colleagues,

In the ELCA folks are debating whether or not the church should “bless” same-sex unions. Some synods have urged that it be done. Our own congregation here in town has put the topic on the agenda for the Adult Education Forum during the month of September. On one of those Sundays I’ve been asked to lead a discussion about the Biblical view of marriage. Here’s my first draft. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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1. Getting married in church. Does marriage really belong there? I don’t think so.
 2. Nowhere in the Old Testament of the Hebrew Scriptures is there anything like a “church” wedding. Marriage is a secular event, a routine happening of everyday life in civil society. Nothing “churchy” (or temple-y or synagogy) about it.
 3. The same is true in the New Testament. That’s no surprise really, since the first Christians were Hebrews. The one instance of a wedding in John’s gospel where Jesus is present is not portrayed as a “religious” event at all. Jesus does no blessing of anybody. If he has any role at the wedding, it is that of an “emergency caterer.”
 4. If there is a “blessing” involved in marriages (I’m not sure there are any such texts in the OT; I’m quite sure there are none in the NT), we need to understand what “blessing” was in the OT. “Blessing” is godly activity,

sometimes with God as the subject of the sentence [God blessed Abraham], many times with humans as the subject, this person blessing someone else [Jacob blessing his sons at the end of his life].

5. The content of such blessings is vitality, health, longevity, fertility, and numerous progeny. All of them “this-worldly” benefits. None of them “spiritual,” theological, related to salvation.
6. Claus Westermann, big-name Lutheran OT scholar in the 20th century, showed the difference in the OT between God’s “blessing” work and God’s “salvation” work. Luther picked up this distinction with his metaphor of God’s left-hand work and God’s right-hand work. With the former God cares and protects our life on earth—that’s God’s blessing work. With the right-hand righteous relationships with God get restored.
7. I’m told (I haven’t checked the sources) that for the first thousand years in Christian church history there were no such things as church weddings. Marriage was understood to be a “secular” thing, something regulated by civil law. When the Western church began to call marriage a sacrament, it started to become “church-ified.”
8. The Lutheran Reformation said marriage was not a sacrament (=God’s right-hand work of salvation), but God’s left-hand work. So the reformers returned marriage to the secular/civil realm. That doesn’t mean god-less realm, but the realm where God’s left-hand agents and authorities care and protect human life on earth. Seemed obvious to the Reformers that marriage was not “churchy,” for it happens all over the world—where there are no Christians and thus no Christian church. God has always been involved in marriage in every society with his left-hand care and protection, but nothing “salvational” is involved. People don’t become righteous before God—or unrighteous—by

marrying or not marrying.

9. Even though it happens all the time today, it is at best “fuzzy” theologically to talk about a “Christian wedding, Christian marriage.” The participants can be Christian (Christ-connected persons) nurtured by God’s “right hand,” but the marriage itself is something in God’s other hand. And for that “other hand,” God has other agents in charge, viz., the civil magistrates. The work they do is God’s “blessing” work, even if they do not know that or may even deny it. Having a Christian pastor “do the ceremony” is really outside the jurisdiction of a “called and ordained minister of the Gospel.”
10. The most “Christian” way to view marriage is to see it in God’s left-hand realm. Even more in Biblical perspective, it is the “one-flesh” physical fact of sexual union that constitutes the marriage. The commandment against adultery does not create marriage, but presupposes that marriages are already on the scene and to this “given” it says: “Don’t break into someone else’s one-flesh union; don’t break out of your own. When you do that you are not fearing, loving, trusting God above all things.”
11. It is not the vows, the promises, the ceremonies, not even God’s “left-hand officers” blessing the partners, but the physical fact that makes a marriage. It is not the blessing that gives permission for one-flesh union. It is the one-fleshing that God’s left-hand agents regulate and approbate (aka “bless”). There is no commandment to marry or to refrain from marriage. God gets people married by implanting the sexual electricity that pushes them to do what comes natcherly. And in a fallen world, that “naturalness” needs regulation and blessing.
12. In times past the reality of the one-flesh fact called for eye-witnesses, outsiders to confirm that the marriage was indeed a fact, to wit, consummated. So regularly in

Medieval Europe the “first night” had folks around to witness that one-flesh-ness had actually occurred and that there was indeed a marriage between the partners. As bizarre as that seems to our romantic-love-saturated individualistic culture nowadays, that was the way Luther and Katie got married. John Bugenhagen, I think it was, and maybe other of their friends, stood by and watched to then verify that their marriage really happened.

13. To those getting married, who might even grant the left-handed (civil/secular) character of marriage, the question is: What do you expect to happen by having a “church wedding?” Important events of human life—graduations, daily work, signing a contract, getting a driver’s license, birthing a baby, adopting a child, buying a house, etc.—have no “churchly” ceremony to accompany them. Why marriage? Especially if it is not a Christian sacrament? Especially if it is God who has located it elsewhere?
14. So what are we talking about when we ask about the blessing of same-sex unions? Even if such unions can be godly—as I think they can—in God’s left-hand workings, what’s a “church blessing:” supposed to do? That is the question, seems to me. What can “the church,” its “minister of the Gospel” add to what’s already there? Is it to pray for the people involved? That can be done, and at our parish regularly is done, at the next Sunday’s liturgy.
15. Some folks have told me: since at present in the USA, few states give left-hand “civil blessing” to such unions, the church should do so, at least for the time being. Even so, is this the church’s jurisdiction when you start from the premise of God’s ambidextrous work in the world?

Edward H. Schroeder.
St. Louis, MO

The Law's So-called "Third Use"

Hi Folks,

Today's Thursday Theology is in several sections. First is this quick intro by me and some painful news from Thelda Bertram with a prayer request. Next are Ed's intro and historical background to Tim Hoyer's discussions about the third use of the law and what the Bible says about the law's purpose. Plenty of food for thought over this Labor Day weekend. Keep Hoping,
Robin

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

Some of you already know that Bob has been experiencing some health problems. This is to offer some information.

After three MRIs on Bob's brain and numerous examinations and consultations, a team of neurologists have determined that a tumor exists in the right frontal lobe.

A biopsy will be performed next Wednesday (August 29, 2001) to determine the type of tumor present. A Tumor Board will meet the following week to decide on the prognosis.

We welcome your prayers.

Joy and Peace,
Thelda

Colleagues,

Several of you have notified me that “Valparaiso Theology” is weighed and found wanting in the current issue of the Concordia Theological Quarterly [CTQ], a journal of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod seminary in Ft. Wayne, Indiana. Why should that interest me? It’s been 30 years now since Valparaiso University was my workplace. Well, you’ve told me that my name surfaces regularly in the article among the villains of the 1960s and 70s who formulated “Valparaiso Theology” in defiance of the Missouri Synod’s traditional theology. So when am I going to respond?

To several of you I’ve quoted the words from one of the villains of those days, scribbled on a copy of the CTQ article that he sent over to me: “Ed – We’d always known that the devil was the father of lies, but of such obvious lies? He must be slipping. This screed will be the ultimate test of your sense of humor. Bob” To others of you I’ve said that I thought I had other fish to fry. And that’s still my opinion. Nevertheless

Insiders among ThTh readers may remember the history. Those of us teaching at V.U. in those days—from the late fifties onward—didn’t know we were doing “Valparaiso Theology.” We thought we were part of the Biblical and confessional revival going on in world Lutheranism, a 20th century version of what Missouri’s founding father C.F.W. Walther had affirmed as Missouri’s reason for existence. So our pitch was: back to the basics, yes, but with eyes wide-open to our American context. Even though all of us theology profs at Valpo were LCMS members,

and the university itself—though not legally under the LCMS umbrella—was solidly “Missouri” in its students, staff, and supporters, Valpo was always suspect. Even before Valparaiso Theology came along.

In its early years under Lutheran auspices, especially after WW II, the university was under a cloud because it was rumored throughout Missouri that evolution was being taught in VU’s science departments. And that was a no-no. Even though Missouri’s officials arched their eyebrows, LCMS laity voted with their feet and “brought their kids to Valpo.” But the cloud over Valpo got darker when V.U.’s president asked Bob Bertram (1957) to revamp the Religion Department into a “theology” department and to put the Biblical-confessional revival into the curriculum, the credit hours in theology “required” for every baccalaureate degree. Even though we never called it that, Valparaiso Theology got articulated, published, and even “worse,” got into the heads of students—who then took it home at vacation time and told their parents and pastors what they were learning. That’s really where it hit the fan—to mixed reviews from across the LCMS.

But that was long ago, and now it takes a researcher to try to reconstruct it all. And he’s got a hard job just working from the printed documents he cites. And apparently he never found the class-syllabi of those years to learn what we REALLY taught the students. I think it’s safe to say that V.U. slipped off the firing-line in Missouri when “the” seminary in St. Louis started promoting the same sort of Biblical-confessional renewal, and thus moved into the cross-hairs as target for the “we’ve never changed, and we never will change” LCMS leadership.

But I digress. The CTQ article, which I am NOT going to discuss, has a teasing and insightful introductory sentence: “One of the notorious theological hot spots [of Valparaiso Theology vs.

Missouri] . . . was the third use of the law.” And that sentence gets this remarkable footnote: “The third use of the law is no longer a theological lightning rod. For example, at the request of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR), President A.O. Barry removed from the docket of requested opinions an assignment on the relationship of the third use of the law and freedom of conscience that dated from 1973 [Ed: before Seminex! When Valparaiso Theology was to be reckoned with!] and had been placed on the CTCR assignment docket by then President, J.A.O. Preus. The President of Synod no longer saw a need for a CTCR opinion.”

So I want to speak to the third use of the law. Current critics of Missouri’s reigning theology, such folks within Missouri as the Daystar crowd, will say that the third use of the law is now “off the docket” in the LCMS because in its legalist version it has carried the day and is now S.O.P.

It’s my opinion that “third use of the law”—technical Reformation lingo for how God’s law functions in the lives of Christ’s disciples—is never off the docket, a done deal that needs no more attention. The legalism, so prominent everywhere in Christian rhetoric today, is linked to the “wrong” way to practice the law’s third use.

I recently received from Tim Hoyer, ELCA pastor in western New York, the following reflection on this constant hot potato. I introduce it with a bit of historical background from the time of the Reformation.

In 16th century Germany (both before and after Luther’s death) there was controversy among the Lutherans about the law. Amongst the Lutherans (Formula of Concord, Article 6), there never was any dispute about God being serious with his law (A) for compelling at least a modicum of justice in a world populated

with sinners, and (B) for criticizing sinners and “driving” them to Christ. The dispute arose over the role of the law in the lives of those now trusting Christ. Three positions surfaced (though not always kept clearly distinguished).

1. One was the antinomian folks. They claimed that in no way, never, in any sense does God’s law play a role in the life of the redeemed child of God.
2. Another group said: “Oh, yes, even for the Christ-trusters the law serves as ethical counsel to show them how God wants them to live their new-born lives. The antinomians are 100% wrong.”
3. The position which FC 6 approves is a third, one that distinguishes law and gospel in the life of a Christian (as this distinction was spelled out in FC 5). It says: in every empirical Christian are 2 operational agents, one the old Adam/Eve, the other the new Christic person. For the Old Eve/Adam, the law continues to play its A & B roles mentioned above. It is NOT an ethical coach for anyone trusting Christ. For Christ-trusters, the law has nothing to say. Actually in a Christ-truster the law has no candidate to speak to, since that new human no longer lives under law, but lives under the lordship of Christ, and walks by the Spirit, the very Spirit of the Resurrected One. These two (Christ and his Spirit) are the “ethical coaches” for the Christ-disciple.

Tim spells it out beautifully below. Enjoy.

Peace and Joy!

Ed

THE THIRD USE OF THE LAW TWO REASONS WE DON'T NEED IT

1. *To say those justified by faith still need the law to*

guide them is to say that Christ is not enough to guide them now. To put a positive spin on the Ten Commandments as our guide is to take away Christ's glory. 'It is necessary to return to the rule given above, namely, that works are not pleasing to God without Christ because Christ as the mediator must not be excluded.' (Kolb-Wengert: *The Book of Concord*, p. 171) By faith in Christ we feed the hungry, not because we are told not to kill. By faith in Christ we visit the sick, not because we are told not to kill. By faith in Christ we clothe the naked, not because we are told not to kill. Good works do not bring peace to the conscience. If we feel that by following the Ten Commandments when we are in Christ that we do the will of God, we are denying Christ to be the full will of God. Law always accuses, therefore, we will doubt we are doing the will of God and so doubt God is pleased with us. That is no comfort and disparages Christ's death and rising as the way we please God by faith. For does not the unsureness we have about the sexuality issues before our synod (Resolutions 1, 2, 3) show us we don't know how to do God's will? To vote for or against them and grant that either way is 'right' according to the Bible is to trouble consciences. It is to base our acts on law and not on Christ.

The Spirit will produce fruits of faith. When we act in Christ, we do not know if we are right or wrong. Our action is based on faith in Christ. When we act in faith with love, with the fruits of the Spirit, we may not know if we are doing God's will, we only have faith in Christ that we are doing so. Do not fear, only believe.

2. In the new creation, in the resurrected life, there is no law. If there were law, then there would be no faith. If there were law, we would be accused. Sin would work

death. In the resurrected life, none of the old flesh exists. Nothing of this age makes it to the next. We still need rules to preserve how we do our work, how we organize families, how we run a school. Those rules are for this world and this age, not the next. More importantly, they are not connected specifically to pleasing God. As long as rules help preserve creation, then they are doing God's will. If a school has a block schedule or the usual forty-five minute schedule, both preserve creation. One is not better than another as in making one school or the other more pleasing to God. In the same way, the last seven Commandments help preserve creation. But they are not how we please God. If a person cares for their neighbor, and people of other faiths often do that, then Christ is not needed. When there is no Christ, we do not please God.

The Third Use of the Law is defined as being used for those who believe in Christ. But if Law is used to guide those in Christ, Christ is lessened, and consciences will be troubled. In Christ we can 'put the best construction' on the actions of our neighbor, for we will speak of them as a neighbor in Christ, as one who is given mercy and forgiveness. Such a way of speaking is not in the Eighth Commandment nor does any positive spin include it. Only in Christ can we keep the law and only in Christ can we bear the fruits of the Spirit (which the Ten Commandments never even name).

Timothy Hoyer
May 4, 2001

Law's Purpose – What the Bible Says

1. When Moses got the law and presented it to the people, he had a background of thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking. The people were afraid. Moses told them, 'Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.' (Ex 20.20) The law seems to be given to keep us from sinning.
2. Deuteronomy goes on and on about the law being given 'so as to keep us alive.' If we diligently observe this 'entire commandment before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, we will be in the right.' (Dt 6.25) Dt 7.12-13 is positive reciprocity for keeping the law. Dt 8.19 is negative reciprocity (also Dt 11.13-17). Dt 11.26 has blessing and curse, as does Dt 30.15-20, 'loving the LORD your God, obeying him and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days.' We have the law so that by its powers of reciprocity we can live by keeping the law.
3. When Jesus comes, he says that Moses is the accuser (Jn 5.45). To Jesus, that is the purpose of the law. Jn 5. 46 thus says that if 'you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me.' Paul echoes this when saying that the law was in charge to guide us to Christ (Gal 3.23).
4. Paul says that the law brings wrath (Rom 4.15); the law arouses sinful passions (Rom 7.5); the law was added because of our transgressions (Gal 3.19). For those actions the law is holy (Rom 7.7) because without it we would not have known we were in sin, and we would not have known our need for Christ.
5. The Psalmist writes that the law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; that the law is a light unto our feet and a lamp unto our path. Paul makes the law a pedagogue, leading us to Christ. So as Jesus says that Moses wrote

about him, the law is a lamp because it lights our way to Christ. The law is perfect because it shows us our need for Christ. The law revives the soul because it tells us that we need the coming savior who will redeem us.

6. Death is what stops us from being able to please God. The soul that sins shall die, yes, but the righteous do so much more pleasing of God than sinning against God that they are worth giving long life to. That balancing act is what the law leads us to when it is used as a way to please God.
7. Were not the Pharisees convinced there was no resurrection, no life that lasts? Was not the reciprocity of the law for this life, for long life now if obeyed? So the guys who used Moses did not say that it gave the life that lasted, but that it was the way to be right with God.
8. To limit the law's purpose as to what makes us pleasing to God is to doubt the Promise and to take away the glory of what Christ has done for us, not to mention the pangs it causes our conscience. So the guys using Moses as the way to please God took away the people's guide to the savior, took away the people's need for a savior. They took away the diagnostic job of Moses.
9. In Gal 4.4-5, Jesus came to redeem those under (owned by) the law. So is the law a thief and bandit for stealing us from God? (Or did sin steal us and make us slaves to the law? 'We are sold into slavery under sin.' Rom 7.14)
10. By the light of Christ we see what the law does to us. We could not see it before. The guys who were using the law as the way to be right with God argued with Jesus about Jesus being the new way to be right. Jesus offered himself as the way to be right, and also offered life that lasts. What a bonus!
11. With that new life that lasts, the life in Christ, the

life of faith, we no longer need the law's guidance. We have been released from the law so that we serve the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code (Rom 7.6). The only thing that counts in Christ is faith working through love (Gal 5.6). We are led by the Spirit, and the fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Timothy Hoyer

May 12, 2001