

To fear or not to fear?

Colleagues,

To fear or not to fear? That is the question. Good Christmas theology, “Good News gospelly” Christmas theology, is a tad rare these days. Even among Lutherans. Even in THE LUTHERAN, national magazine of our ELCA.

Example #1

The main theology piece in this year’s Christmas issue is “Emmanuel, God is with us!” It wants to show us how to find Good News in the Jesus of today’s so-called “Jesus Seminar.” It’s pretty thin stuff. At key points it’s even “worse than that.” Listen. Jesus is the great “God-revealer.” What he reveals is “what ethical and moral conduct [God] calls forth from me.” The “image of Jesus challenges me to think about how I’m following Jesus, how I’m living by his example.” What about his cross and resurrection? “So powerful was the [disciples’] experience of Jesus, that even after his death they felt alive and empowered by his Spirit. This Jesus we know was truly a remarkable man.”

If today’s world is as threatening as other articles in this issue portray it, then that thin gruel is no good news at all. Fact is, it’s an “other” Gospel. Yes, that’s a sharp verdict. Point is whether it’s accurate or not. I’ve corresponded with the editor on earlier items of thin theology in his journal. He was not convinced. So what else is new—even among Lutherans these days? Small gospels with small joys (or none at all) abound.

With all hell breaking loose everywhere, it is only THE Gospel that is both GOOD enough and NEW enough to be the “GOOD NEWS of great joy” heralded in the first ever publication about Christmas. “Other Gospels” have scads of promotional agents in

today's Areopagos of American culture. They don't need our help. Paul on Mars Hill proposed God's own "other gospel." It was radically "other" than the one(s) all over the place in the Athenian marketplace. We are called to follow in his train.

Example #2.

In the Jan. 2003 number of THE LUTHERAN a major piece urges us "Fear not," and strangely claims 300 New Testament citations for support. That huge number jolted me. I knew it was frightfully (sic!) inflated. So I counted them. I found about 15. There must be some glitch here. But that's actually beside the point.

By contrast my concordance says there are indeed almost 300 texts throughout the Bible that DO commend fear. The Jan. LUTHERAN article ignores them all. In the NT, for example, we hear Jesus chastize the Pharisees for "not fearing God." So which is it? To fear or not to fear? Since both are undeniably Biblical, we can't just choose one (actually the smaller number of texts) and ignore the other (much larger number). But it's not a numbers game, of course.

We need, not a second opinion, but a sequel article.

Actually THE LUTHERAN did indeed do that—exactly 10 years ago. In the Dec. 1992 "Christmas" issue Bob Bertram's "Fear, fear not" article, picking up on the piety of "putting the Babe back into Christmas," made the following pitch: "But putting the baby back means putting the fear of God back into Christmas." Which may well make us twitch. And rightly so.

What Bob does in that article of a decade ago is what Tim Lull commends as the Lutheran key in his "Our Faith" piece on p. 6. of the Jan. 2003 LUTHERAN. I.e., Bob practices the famous Lutheran "proper distinction" as he reads these contradictory texts. The Gospel finally triumphs, but not simply by Bob's ignoring the massive textual evidence for "Yes, fear!" He traces

out how the Manged Messiah engages the reality of that “rightful” fear and finally kills it. But it cost that Messiah plenty. Costly grace indeed.

Bob’s piece is so good, I’ll pass it on for today’s ThTh 237.

In THAT Gospel—Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder

Fear, fear not
by Robert W. Bertram

Shortly before his assassination, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote his mother about the next sermon he was planning to preach. He titled it, “Why America may go to hell.”

We may wonder what he would have said had he lived to preach that sermon or why he was kept from preaching it. Did God not want America to know? But if King and all the preachers in America had preached it, would America have heard it anyway? Maybe America has lost the ability to fear God – not the ability to fear, mind you, but the ability to fear God.

If so, the worse for us. And the worse for Christmas.

Americans fret much about Christmas. Seldom do our Christmas fears include the One who is truly frightening – the Christmas God. Instead we worry that Christmas has become too pagan, too commercialized or too busy, all of which is true. So we tinker with the celebrations. We even try to “put the Babe back into Christmas.”

But putting the baby back means putting the fear of God back

into Christmas. What could the Christmas baby possibly have to do with the fear of God?

*Start with the Christmas shepherds. Luke says “they were filled with fear.” *Fear* means just that, not awe or reverence. For the next thing the angel told the shepherds is, “Do not be afraid.” Surely that did not mean “do not be reverential” or “stop feeling awe.”*

Newer translations say the shepherds “were terrified.” And well they might have been. As a lot, shepherds were not exactly saints. Like most of us they had plenty to hide. But suddenly the lights came on. “The glory of the Lord shone around them.” Their cover was blown.

If the “glory of the Lord” suddenly exposed all the dark corners of our lives, we, too, might fear, as Luke says in Greek, “a mega-fear.” We might, if we had the shepherds’ rare gift of fearing God.

Someone to fear

Or is this a misreading of the Christmas story? The angel promptly told the shepherds not to fear. Doesn’t that prove their fear was groundless?

No. What better grounds could their fear possibly have had? They feared “the glory of the Lord,” not something else, some lesser idol. Otherwise they would not have been told they need fear no longer. That is said only to those who first of all do fear God. Otherwise not.

In other places, Luke reports that the Jewish religious authorities feared “the people.” The Lord granted them no relief. Similarly Luke writes that the disciples feared the authorities. For that fear they are faulted, not comforted.

When they are at sea in a storm, they fear drowning. For that Jesus rebukes them. When Jesus stills the storm, they suddenly face someone truly terrifying: “Who is this that even the winds and the sea obey him?” For that fear Jesus offers no rebuke.

Had King lived to preach his sermon he might have told us that we shouldn’t fear those who merely kill bodies but the One who “can destroy both body and soul in hell.”

“Yes, I tell you, fear him,” Jesus adds in Luke’s Gospel.

And Luke is supposedly the kindest Gospel. It is the same Luke whose gentle Mary, in her Magnificat, sings that God’s “mercy is for those who fear him.” God reserves that mercy for her: “The angel said, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary.’” He reserves it for her “terrified” old in-law: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah,” and for the “terrified” shepherds. They feared God.

In Augsburg, Germany, in 1530, some reform-minded lay Catholics – later called Lutherans – answered the emperor’s summons to explain their doctrine. For example, what were they teaching about sin?

Every sinner, they answered, is inherently *unable, not just unwilling,* to fear God – not just to trust but to fear God. In describing sin so drastically, they had Scripture on their side, also the best Catholic tradition.

But much shallow spirituality so common today simply dismisses the fear of God as morbid. Is it?

Grace and fear

What is it about God that enables some sinners to fear God? It is God’s mercy. That is hardly morbid. True, along with God’s mercy there is also a show of might: Jesus stills the tempest; God grants pregnancy to post-menopausal Elizabeth and Mary the

virgin; glory lights up the Judean night for a few shepherds. But that might always serves mercy's purpose.

In each case, God showers some magnificent, unexpected favor upon undeserving sinners. But does God's kindness make beneficiaries afraid of their benefactor? Put it in terms of law and gospel: God's law exposes our life and initiates fear of God. But only the gospel can complete in us true fear and trust of God.

Jesus once terrified mourners at a funeral in Nain (Luke 7:11). He didn't thunder at them for their sin or warn them about hell. He "had compassion," told them not to cry, then raised a dead boy to life. It was then, not before, that "fear seized them all." They realized that God was "visiting his people." God had come to see them. And nothing could make them feel so naked, so unpresentable, as when this gracious God looked at them.

I recall a terminally ill woman who was cured by an unforeseen medical breakthrough. Responding to a reporter who asked how she felt about her cure she said, "I didn't realize how sick I was until I got better."

Luke tells of the time Peter the fisherman was down on his luck. Jesus filled his boat with fish, gratis. That was gospel. Peter's response? He didn't say, "What a lovely catch. How can I thank you?" He said, "Depart from me for I am a sinner."

Only the gospel finally freed Peter to say it and mean it. The law was not enough. As the hymn goes, " 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear." It is like a man I know who weeps over his sin not because he is threatened or rebuked but because he is overwhelmed by some utterly undeserved act of mercy.

And what did Jesus do? He said, "Don't be afraid." He did not

say, "Peter, you're not so bad" or "So who's perfect? We all have our faults." Not for a moment did he minimize the sin Peter finally confessed. Nor did he say Peter's fear was groundless.

Jesus let the gospel bring him to the terror which the law by itself had been unable to consummate. Only then, once Peter recognized there truly was Someone to be afraid of, did Jesus intervene: "Don't be afraid."

God's proper work

" 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, 'twas grace my fears relieved." Grace does both. That happens not just once but over and over.

God demands both fear and love, and with the gospel, provides both. The One we come to love most is also the One whose love we most fear losing. Only God's love is potent enough to release us from that fear.

To some this may still seem morbid. Why should a loving God want us to be afraid in the first place, even momentarily? Isn't this fear destructive? Yes, it is mortifying. "This child" whose birth we now celebrate "is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel," old Simeon tells us.

Falling? Yes, to take us down to death with himself to purge away our old morbid selves. This Christ, precisely because his mercy stares straight through us, can play rough, inspiring mortal fear of himself, burning away our petty phobias.

Every day God re-enacts our baptism, doing the **alien work** of putting us to death only to make room for the **proper work** of resurrecting us. **Amazing Grace** does both.

Our dying is dying with him, and it is always for the sake of

rising. At just the right moment, Jesus breaks in and reverses our dread. With split-second timing he intervenes, "Don't be afraid."

—from The Lutheran, December 1992

Peace on Earth in Bethlehem 2002. A Blue Christmas?

Colleagues,

Appended below is a message I received from Bethlehem earlier this week anticipating a "Blue" Christmas. Makes me think of an earlier text impacting that "little" town linked to political ordinances with military enforcement: "And there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus" to which everyone MUST conform. It was "taxing." The Manged Messiah and the heavy hand of Caesar were the original text and context for Christmas. So what else is new?

Reminds me also that the "Peace on Earth" present in Bethlehem that silent night patently did not need a peace-able Caesar as prerequisite. Nor—in today's context—a friendly Israeli Defense Force. From the git-go, in the face of old-creation un-peace, new-creation peace happens. And Caesarian sanctions don't change very perceptibly afterwards either. His legions just keep rolling along. Caesar-peace and Christic-peace were not corollaries at the premiere performance of Christic-peace. Nor are they now, even though both are "on earth." But they differ from each other as—you guessed it—God's law differs from God's

Gospel.

For their dis-congruence there is considerable evidence. Christ's peace waxes, not wanes, in the face of Caesar's opposing decrees—and IDF curfews and US war-madness and even the gates of hell. Jesus said so. Paul and Silas sang hymns (Christmas carols? It WAS midnight! Maybe even “midnight clear?”) when Caesar's agent slammed them into solitary confinement (Acts 16:25). No matter how coercive the nemesis, it is structurally incapable of barricading what God's up to at Christmas. Both at the first one and at this year's Blue Christmas on Manger Square.

But such nemeses could mess up the Christic-peace of Christmas if Christians opened the doors of their heart, the God-box, and gave them entry. That's just as much a danger for Christic-peace among “secure” Christians in our land as it is anywhere in the world where Caesar sends tanks down the streets. ‘Fact is, we're more vulnerable by virtue of Caesar's cajoling, then the siblings are when Caesar thunders his threats. Cannon in the streets makes for clarity of the alternatives—aut Caesar aut Christus. Au contraire, the conning of our own culture seeks to blur the difference.

So for coping with Caesar-hard (cannons) or with Caesar-lite (cajoling) we all need to sing “O come, O come, Immanuel.” When Christians do sing that “O Come,” HE does come—both through the walls of Caesar's cannon and curfews, as well as the walls of his cunning and conning to insure “homeland security.” He comes into the God-box, the messy manger of human hearts. And he's quite at home there, as he has been ever since he first showed up.

Granted, it's dicey for an American like me with near global “freedom of movement” to be saying that to Christian siblings in

Bethlehem. They can't even go to the store to buy groceries. And you reading this are most all in similar "free" situations. But vast differences in Caesar's machinations don't divide when it comes to the Manged Messiah. 'Fact is, it is finally the 2002 "shepherds" (=pastors and people) of Bethlehem today who give clear (even clearer?) witness telling us about Someone sustaining them. And we "who hear it are amazed at what these shepherds tell us." Though tortured by the non-peace on the immediate Caesar front, they keep on keeping on. They patently have Someone with them there in the fiery furnace. Look closely. Isn't it someone (that fourth person ala Daniel 7) "who has the appearance of the Son of God?" Does that make for a blue Christmas or a blazing one?

The view of Bethlehem 2002 sketched above is not entirely clear in the pained report appended below. And my words should not minimize anything of the horrendous realities in the text of the report. But might it be true nonetheless, that Christic-blaze slices right through Caesar's blue—both in A.D. 1 and in A.D 2002?

It is finally no one of us, but that Son of God in the furnace who finalizes the "distinction" between Caesar's peace (or non-peace) and the Peace of God. The Peace that comes with the Manged Messiah, a.k.a. God's mercy-management of sinners, is neither thwarted nor assisted by Caesar's decrees. If Caesar-oppression didn't thwart it the first time, it can't thwart it any time. Hither or yon.

When the heavenly messengers hyped "peace on earth," they were NOT talking about cessation of hostilities among conflicting humans. Their heavenly hype was for a peace more radical, more cosmic, a primal peace twixt God and sinners. And yes, they chanted, that primal peace was now "on earth," and not just in the mind of God, now "done on earth as it is (already) in

heaven.” And where on earth? In the Suffering Servant Savior “wrapped in cloths and laid flat” in a box in Bethlehem. Luke’s baby-bed description is a pointer. It took his Good Friday (where for one final time he was “wrapped in cloths and laid flat” in a box) and his subsequent Eastering to bring it to completion.

Since THAT agenda, that primal peace, was what the Bethlehem broadcasters were singing about, it’s no surprise that Jesus’ first post-Easter words to his disciples (ala John)—and spoken three times!—is “Peace be unto you.” His birthing brought it to earth, his Eastering makes it stick.

In that Peace and its Joy!
Ed

December 16, 2002

***Blue Christmas
Holidays are ‘not as happy as usual’ in Bethlehem
this year
by Alexa Smith***

EAST JERUSALEM – Bethlehem isn’t skipping Christmas this year, exactly, but it isn’t clear how the town of Christ’s birth will observe the holiday.

What is clear is that many residents are finding little to celebrate this year.

Just eight days short of Christmas Eve, the Israeli government, the Israeli army, the tiny town of Bethlehem and the 13 Christian communions that call the Holy Land home were still

discussing whether there will be a holiday break in the curfew that has had Bethlehem's 28,000 residents under house arrest for nearly a month.

"It is going to be a very sad Christmas in Bethlehem," a shopkeeper said the other day. "There is no Christmas. No trees, no lights. We were supposed to have some tourists, but they've cancelled. We are not allowed outside our houses. ...

"There is curfew. How can you have a Christmas celebration?"

The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) reoccupied the city on Nov. 22, one day after a Jerusalem bus was bombed by a 22-year-old whose family had lived in a rented home on the outskirts of Bethlehem for just a few months. The army demolished the bomber's house and arrested his father. It also reimposed the curfew, brought in tanks and armored personnel carriers, began patrolling the streets in Jeeps.

For the sixth time this year, life in Bethlehem came to a dead halt.

Why the curfew was renewed is a matter of dispute.

The Israelis claim that militants from across the West Bank took shelter in Bethlehem when the IDF pulled out as part of a negotiated settlement three months ago. The Palestinians were drawn to Bethlehem, they say, because other West Bank towns, like Ramallah, Nablus and Hebron, were still shut down tight. City officials say that's a lie. Mayor Hanna J. Nasser argues that the crackdown is a political ploy intended to bolster the Sharon administration's hard-line image in advance of Israeli elections in January.

Nasser, long a critic of what he calls "the disastrous militarization" of the current Intifada, is furious that

150,000 people in the Bethlehem district are being punished for the actions of a few. With only intermittent interruptions amounting to three to six hours a week, the curfew is keeping Bethlehem's streets empty. Residents live behind shuttered doors and windows, unable to go to school or work, unable to maintain a routine.

Last Saturday and Sunday, the army eased restrictions from morning until early afternoon. It was the first time breaks were granted two days in a row. Whether this heralds a Christmas furlough remains to be seen.

With nine days remaining before Christmas, IDF troops have secured Manger Square, determined to prevent a repeat of the public-relations debacle of last spring, when Palestinian gunmen sought sanctuary in the Church of the Nativity, the basilica on the site where Christians believe Jesus was born.

A senior IDF official told a Jerusalem newspaper last Thursday that troops will not pull out of Bethlehem by Christmas.

That contradicted a promise made the previous day by Israeli President Moshe Katsav to Pope John Paul II, who had appealed for a holiday respite. Katsav said the IDF would redeploy outside Bethlehem for Christmas if there were no immediate threat of terrorist attack.

Yoni Peled, a spokesman for the Israeli Foreign Ministry, told the Presbyterian News Service that it hasn't been decided yet whether any special provisions will be made for Bethlehem at Christmastime. He said one thing is certain: Yasser Arafat, the chairman of the Palestinian Authority, won't attend the traditional midnight Mass at the Church of the Nativity, but will remain confined to his compound in Ramallah.

If Bethlehem stays "quiet and in order," Peled said, the IDF

may allow civilians more freedom of movement. He said he expects a decision by the end of this week.

The birthday of the Prince of Peace seems unlikely to ease the discord here.

Christians in Israel say they don't believe the wider church understands how the occupation affects their daily lives.

"The gap between what people are singing about and the reality of life in this city bothers many people here," said the Rev. Mitri Raheb, the pastor of the Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem's Old City. Raheb said what should be under discussion is not a one-day lifting of the curfew for Christmas, but a lifting of the curfew, period.

"One hundred and fifty thousand people have been living under 24-hour imprisonment for three weeks," he said. "If Arafat comes or not, that isn't the issue. He shares the same destiny as the rest of us; he is imprisoned. And the issue is not whether we allow a few pilgrims to enter Bethlehem. ... Local people here are not allowed freedom of movement. What's the sense of opening Bethlehem up for one day for tourism, for people to be able to say that they celebrated Christmas here? "People need to see the ugly face of occupation. I wonder what songs President Bush will be singing this Christmas?"

Church leaders actually are negotiating three Christmases in Bethlehem. The Western one, to be presided over by the Latin patriarch, Michel Sabbah, takes place on Dec. 24 and 25. The second Christmas festival, whose leader is the patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church, comes on Jan. 6 and 7. And the Armenian Christmas is celebrated on Jan. 18 and 19.

Greek Orthodox Archbishop Aristarchos said his church has a verbal commitment from the Israelis to lift the curfew for all

three, so that people can worship at the basilica.

The chancellor of the Latin Patriarchate, Father Shawki, said he is unaware of any such commitment – and even if one has been made, it can be withdrawn in a heartbeat.

In any case, he added, “We don’t just want them to lift the curfew. We want them out of Bethlehem. People are suffering. Really. Really. Really.” Shawki pointed out the same is true of the residents of other West Bank cities, including Jenin, Hebron and Nablus. The patriarch said he will go to Bethlehem for midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, but that won’t make it Christmas. “Christmas means justice,” he said. “No justice, no Christmas.”

Mayor Nasser is upset about Israel’s unilateral decision to nullify the “Bethlehem First” agreement of last Aug. 19, under which the curfew was lifted and Palestinians took responsibility for security in Bethlehem. The IDF withdrew to the city’s perimeter. People were free to move inside the city, but not to leave it.

“I don’t see the justification,” he said, rejecting the notion that his town is a haven for extremists.

For the moment he’s focusing on the smaller picture: How to plan Bethlehem’s Christmas, if and when the curfew is lifted.

International choirs are awaiting the downbeat hold. The Christmas tree outside the basilica is bare. Holiday activities are on hold.

Eighty-year-old Michael Zebaneh said he has seen a lot of Christmases in Bethlehem since he moved there in 1950. He is hoping his permit will come through so he can visit his daughter in Jordan over the holidays. Yet another waiting game.

But he's done lots of waiting in his long life.

He wishes the international church would do more on behalf of the Palestinians under house arrest on the West Bank.

"Everyone knows that the only way to solve this is for the Israelis to withdraw from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip," he said. "It is the only way to stop the massacres every day, the killing of Palestinian people.

"Did you know that five Palestinians were killed yesterday? Did you know that a few days ago in Gaza, 10 more died? There is killing every day, and among the dead are children."

Zebaneh, who plays the organ at his church, said celebrating this Christmas will be a challenge: "The heart is not as happy as usual."

(Alexa Smith is on long-term assignment for several months in Israel/Palestine, covering the situation there in depth for the Presbyterian News Service. She is based in East Jerusalem.)

Semper Fideles (Always Faithful) at a Time of War

Colleagues,

The flu bug hit me this week. So I'm posting someone else's prose for your ThTh 235 reflection. I know nothing more about author Jim Lewis than what you can read here. 'Fact is, I don't even know how this got into our "IN basket."Although

Jim never mentions “left-hand-of-God” rubrics in this essay about war, he could have, I sense. Even if some of you Arch-Augsburgers may detect some left-hand/right-hand mis-meshing on occasion, my hunch is that he’s also working with St. Paul’s axiom in 2 Cor. 5:14ff: “For the love of Christ urges us on . . . [and therefore] from now on we regard no one ‘from a human point of view’ [the Greek term is starker: kata sarka, ‘according to our sinful flesh’].” Christ has now become Paul’s new lens for viewing everyone. Either they already are “in Christ,” and that means already “the new creation.” Or they are at present outsiders, not yet “in.” But that does not prompt Paul to say: OK, in that case treat them as outsiders and give ‘em hell. Instead he counsels us to “regard” them too through the Christic lens. Thus they are potential insiders, and when we regard them thus, they might just “become new” themselves.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Autumn Leaves And A Journey Into Faith

Nations will hammer swords into plows, their spears into sickles, there will be no more training for war. Each person will sit under his or her fig tree in peace. Micah 4:3-4

Notes From Under The Fig Tree

Jim Lewis

November 20, 2002

Autumn Leaves And Thoughts About Being Faithful

A drive over the mountains and a walk in a cemetery, which is

what I did last week, puts me in touch with leaves. They are resplendent, and they are falling, and they are in view and underfoot.

The sight of dying leaves always makes me say, "What a way to die."

Leaves know how to depart in style, don't they? Not content for a quiet and unobtrusive disappearance into the earth, they hang on for dear life, spurting and splashing the land with radiant red, yellow and orange just before falling into shadow and soil.

They are like that one last guest at the party who won't go home without a final loud shout before falling into his car and disappearing down the road.

Back home from mountain roads and scattered tombstones, a cold breeze and a drizzling rain say good morning to me as I pick up the morning paper tossed on the front porch by someone I've never met while I slept out of the reach of sound.

I resist the temptation to sink into my big chair only to disappear into the news of the day. Instead, I remain faithful to my morning discipline-my walk around town. Bundled, I begin the trek beneath an umbrella and the knowledge that another day has begun in this place I call home.

I say that I am "faithful to my morning walk," which means no more than getting out the door and doing what I said I was going to do before I discovered the rain and the chill as an obstacle. But maybe I should take more time with this whole matter of faith and faithfulness-more time than it will take me to traverse the path I've charted for my walk, and the time it takes to eat breakfast and digest the newspaper upon my return.

Maybe leaves aren't content merely to be pressed between the pages of a book. Perhaps those leaves, having shaded me from summer sun, are now able, through their death, to be the transparency through which I am able to see and better understand such things as faith and faithfulness.

The hillside, once green but now making one mad dash to brilliance before sinking into brown and black, has a way of inviting me to explore such things as I myself pass through another season on my way to earth.

Semper Fidelis-Always Faithful

For some time now I have been writing and speaking and organizing around the subject of war.

President Bush has made the "war on terrorism" and a military campaign against Iraq, his top priorities. He seems to me to be hell-bent on taking our nation to war and possibly plunging a whole host of countries into a blood bath.

When war rears its ugly head, I'm like an old fire horse that rushes to answer the alarm. Trying to be faithful to the life I've been given, and the source of that gift, and to the Christian mission of peacemaking, I'm compelled to answer the alarm. As an ordained minister, knowing the moral issues raised by war, and the pastoral consequences that arise from a war, my response becomes a matter of faith.

An old friend from school days, who also served in the Marine Corps back when I did in the late fifties and early sixties, recently read a copy of these Notes and sent me an e-mail. I think he was somewhat worried about me, because in the e-mail he mentioned the Marine motto "semper fidelis," (always faithful) and wondered if I was still the same guy who had worn the uniform years ago.

That message reminded me of the time back in the late sixties when I was asked to speak at a Rotary meeting in Martinsburg, West Virginia. It was about this time of the year, right before Thanksgiving, and I was asked to give a seasonal message about America and the war we were engaged in with Vietnam.

In the audience was a marine general who had driven over from his home in nearby Shepherdstown. An old marine buddy of mine was working as his aide at that time and had suggested he come to hear me speak.

I used the occasion to say that the war with Vietnam was a tragic mistake, and that patriotic Americans should do everything they could possibly do to bring the troops back home and put an end to the war.

After the talk, the general came over and shook my hand. It felt obligatory. I could tell from his face, and from his entire body, that he had not approved of my message. The consternation between the lines on his face told me that he could not imagine a Marine espousing such a message. I am sure he thought my words bordered on treason and that I had betrayed the emblem we both had served under-semper fidelis.

A learned a lesson that day at Rotary. I learned that a word spoken, in order to be faithful to God, and the vision I'd been given, could very well spark conflict from people who saw loyalty to the nation and faithfulness to God as twins joined at the hip.

Responding to my old friend who wondered whether I had forgotten semper fidelis and the Marine Corps I'd once been a part of, I wrote back to him that being faithful was something I had learned even before I'd gone into the military. I said that it had something to do with having been carried into a church as a baby and splashed with water in a baptismal service

in a Baltimore church.

I smile when I think on my baptism and the Marine Corps. Going through the marine corps physical, the corpsman charged with giving me a series of shots discovered the tiny tattoo on my shoulder I'd gotten as a high school boy. In an apologetic way, I told him I was going to have it removed. His response: Don't do that because the tattoo would make it easier to identify me should I become a combat casualty.

That priest who splashed water and traced with his finger the ecclesiastical symbol of the Cross on my forehead had simply done what the tattoo artist had done for fifty cents in a Baltimore Street tattoo parlor. He'd marked me for life and destined me to live under a symbol that challenged me to be faithful to a belief in the overriding power of love through nonviolence.

When Loyalty Leads To Lockstep And Lockjaw

My book reading has slowed immensely, the reason being that I have gotten the part of the stage manager in a local production of Thornton Wilder's play Our Town. One of the things I promised myself when we moved back to Charleston was that I would get back into community theater. So, for the past month I have been learning a ton of lines and, therefore, a pile of books by my big stuffed chair is gathering dust.

After Our Town closes, maybe I'll have time to read the recently published Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers by Daniel Ellsberg. Until then, I must be content to sample only bits and pieces from various book reviews.

Last month I addressed a group of students at Marshall University. When I mentioned Ellsberg's name, with the

exception of a few elderly townspeople who had infiltrated the class, faces glazed over. They knew who Scott Ritter was (the Marine who was an arms inspector with the UN team and who had just returned from Iraq bearing a “don’t-go-to-war-with-Iraq” message), but they didn’t know anything about the old Marine, Daniel Ellsberg.

For those who might glaze over while reading this part of Notes, I should say that Ellsberg is the man who blew the Vietnam War wide open in 1971 by copying “Top Secret” government documents, which revealed that the war with Vietnam was hopeless and wrong, and giving them to various major newspapers for publication.

Up to the point of making public what have now come to be known as the Pentagon papers, Ellsberg had been a faithful and loyal government official. A combat veteran right straight back from Vietnam, he did work for the State Department and the Pentagon. In one of life’s great ironies, he was given the assignment to travel to Vietnam as an analyst of the war, helping to compile the mass of indicting material about our folly half-way across the world.

Returning to Washington from Saigon, Daniel Ellsberg heard Robert McNamara, then Secretary of Defense, say that in Vietnam “the underlying situation is really worse.” Upon landing at Andrews Air Force Base, McNamara told reporters “that we are showing great progress in every dimension of our effort” in Vietnam.

These lies, and the secrecy surrounding them, propelled Ellsberg to finally spill the beans all over the world, as he made the real facts about the world available to the press.

A footnote: President Nixon was responsible for arranging the burglary of Ellsberg’s psychiatrist office hoping to dig up a

little dirt and discredit him.

Ellsberg was viewed by some as a turncoat. He was seen as being disloyal and not faithful to the motto he had worn so proudly in the Marine Corps-semper fidelis.

Daniel Ellsberg is a hero in an odd way. He faced-up to the fact that the virtue of loyalty, like fine pasteurized milk, can turn sour at a moment's time. Semper fidelis can backfire and become a vice-a vice that can lead individuals and a nation down a disastrous path.

I mentioned Scott Ritter, another Marine, who has become an outspoken critic of war with Iraq. What Ellsberg was to the Vietnam era, Ritter is to us at this moment. I find it interesting that both these men wore the semper fidelis motto as United States Marines, and yet they were able to be loyal to an even higher value-the pursuit of the truth.

When loyalty requires us to walk in lockstep to a drumbeat we are out of step with, the next step, if we stay committed to the march, is lockjaw-a loss of our ability to speak.

With Minnesota and Paul Wellstone much on my mind, I can't help but see an interesting comparison between the now dead senator and Minnesotan Hubert Humphrey, Vice President under Lyndon Johnson.

During the Vietnam War, Humphrey was the loyal Johnson supporter. He walked lockstep with Johnson's buildup of troops in Vietnam. He was the loyal, faithful lieutenant who squelched his own personal opposition to the war. Because of his loyalty to Johnson, he was inflicted with a massive case of lockjaw. He ground his teeth while hundreds of thousands of people were killed and maimed in Vietnam.

In contrast there was Paul Wellstone, another one of those clay-footed heroes. (I just love the Ellsberg and Wellstone pattern of clay pottery.) Now dead when we need him, he stood his ground and refused to vote against his own conscience when it came to giving away the constitutional power that would make George Bush an emperor rather than the president we elected him to be. Right up to his own death, Wellstone lived out the very quality I look for in an elected official. He was willing to acknowledge that there are some things you have to vote for even though it might cost you an election. Losing an election is better than losing your soul, and, God knows, Wellstone had soul.

Believe me when I tell you that I am no Daniel Ellsberg or Paul Wellstone, but almost ten years ago I had my own struggle over this matter of loyalty.

At that time I was fired by a newly elected bishop in North Carolina. His explanation to me was that I had not been loyal to the retiring bishop. What he meant was that he didn't appreciate my public stance involving another priest who had been fired on what I saw as trumped up charges that involved racial matters.

My views had caused an open disagreement with my bishop at that time, and even though I loyally loved and respected him, I could not avoid disagreeing with him over this matter. My open disagreement with the bishop evidently made the new bishop nervous and so I was handed my walking papers. But it turned out okay in the long run because I avoided a lockstep march off some cliff and the dreaded lockjaw.

Losing One's Faith While Killing Reflexively

Twenty years ago I made my first trip into El Salvador. It was a life changing experience. While there I saw the horror that

we as a nation were inflicting on the people of that country. Under the guise of anti-communism and anti-terrorism, we funneled military equipment to a ruthless government that eventually killed over a hundred thousand people and caused about a million people to leave El Salvador and flee here.

While there, I had the opportunity to meet a young reporter by the name of Chris Hedges. At that time he was writing stories for the Christian Science Monitor. He impressed me because he wasn't one of those media people who print U.S. Embassy press releases as news, and he wasn't a reporter who hung around the hotel pool picking up second-hand stories to report as if they were news from the battlefield. Chris was out in the field where bullets were flying and people were dying. His reporting reflected it and whenever I saw his byline, I paid special attention.

His new book, War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning, has just been published, and I gobbled it up between rehearsals. It is an excellent book and I recommend it to anyone concerned about war and the long-term implications of war-a subject that should occupy our attention given the fact that a war with Iraq appears to be inevitable.

Hedges not only looked into the face of the dead in El Salvador, he also covered the Gulf War, battles in the West Bank and Gaza, Nicaragua, Turkey, Sudan, and Bosnia. Returning to the United States, he took seminary classes at Harvard Divinity School in an attempt to gather his experiences into a larger framework. His book is a distillation of what he experienced, and looks at the magnetic forces that draw nations and people into war, along with the consequences of battle.

He observes: "The military histories-which tell little of war's reality-crowd out the wrenching tales by the emotionally

maimed. Each generation again responds to war as innocents. Each generation discovers its own disillusionment-often after a terrible price. The myth of war and the drug of war wait to be tasted. The mythical heroes of the past loom over us. Those who tell us the truth are silenced or prefer to forget. The state needs the myth, as much as it needs its soldiers and its machines of war, to survive."

I say that war with Iraq seems to be inevitable because the troops and equipment have been put in place. (The military is already in the region, even on Iraqi soil.) The posture of war has been struck. (President Bush struts like a bantam rooster and crows wherever he goes about grinding Saddam into the ground.) And the battle plan has been made and revealed. (Read Nicholas Lemann's article, "Order of Battle," in the November 18 issue of The New Yorker where we are told the details of how we will "own the Euphrates," and where Iraqi forces will "become the speed bumps on the road to Baghdad" as our troops turn them into "toast.")

This generation, if it is called to war with Iraq, will, as Hedges reminds us, discover its own disillusionment, and surely at an awful price. It is already happening.

Special Forces operating in Afghanistan have already begun to come home. Some are telling us, by word and deed, what the price is for waging war. News reports tell us of a number of violent killings by men who have turned their violent rage onto their wives. Peter Maass, the writer who refuses to shun any story, tells about the men who are trained here to engage the enemy in hand-to-hand combat where they have to look into the eyes of the people they kill (The New York Times Magazine, November 10, "A Bulletproof Mind"). Trained to be emotionless as they shoot or bayonet another human being reflexively, void of emotion, these men are already feeling the stress of such

behavior.

Maass quotes Major Peter Kilner, a professor at West Point: "When soldiers kill reflexively-when military training has effectively undermined their moral authority-they morally deliberate their actions after the fact. If they are unable to justify what they have done, they often suffer guilt and psychological trauma."

In 1976, I gave space in the church here in Charleston to a Vietnam veteran's group. They were organizing to affect public policy around the chemical, Agent Orange, which many of them had been hazardously exposed to. They also met to talk about the problems they were having with what has now been called "delayed stress syndrome." That's psychobabble for "my life has been screwed up by war." The stories I listened to when I attended their meetings mirrored the slew of stories I have heard for the past thirty years as I have seen Vietnam veterans in homeless shelters and prisons, in troubled marriages, and in hospitals where they dealt with the "drug of war" by self-medicating on drugs grown in Southeast Asia (and Afghanistan) and sold on their own city streets.

Recently I read that large numbers of soldiers are now turning to chaplains and mental health officials to find ways out of combat. (It's always interesting to me that a person who can't kill another person is viewed by the military, as psychologically disturbed.) A Gulf War veteran, now chaplain in California, says that, "Some of these infantrymen look like little boys to me, and it's unsettling to put them in harm's way."

I'm on the lookout these days for churches, and other religious communities, who will openly and boldly advertise the fact that they are willing to assist young men and women unwilling to

fight in Iraq, or a number of other countries I could name in that region. I long to see a center for nonviolent study in my part of the country (Appalachia, where our nation comes when "it needs its soldiers and its machines of war."), where nonviolent methods to conflict are learned, and where the young are taught negotiation rather than nuclear resolution to world problems.

When we baptize someone into my faith tradition, the entire congregation has to promise that they will "seek Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself." They promise to help shape the newly baptized person into a human being capable both of seeing something eternal in other people, as well as treating people with the respect due such divinity.

On the brink of war, I ask: How can men and women, who rely on Christian chaplains for counsel, engage in "seek and destroy" missions with bayonets, grenades and "smart bombs" designed to turn people into "toast."

I want to know what "terrible price" they must pay for running a bayonet through Christ or having dropped a bomb on a site where a whole host of Jesuses reside.

Winning A War And Losing The Constitution

Speaking of Jesus, there is a Christian scripture that goes like this: "What does it profit a person to gain the whole world but lose his or her soul?" Thinking about the big give away of power by the Congress to President Bush, I want to say: "What does it profit a nation if it wins a war and gives away its Constitution?"

Beginning And Ending In Leaves

A word from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* that describes

President Bush: "ALL you are doing and saying is to America dangled mirages. You have not learn'd of Nature-of the politics of Nature."

Advent Letter from Bethlehem & Apocalypse Now

Colleagues:

I just received this e-mail from Mitri Raheb, pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem. It got me thinking. Today's posting gives you both. Peace & Joy!

Ed

Sent: Wednesday, December 04, 2002

As Advent begins in Bethlehem...

By Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb

It is Sunday morning, the first Advent. The streets of Bethlehem are deserted, very unusual for such a day and such an occasion. A strange silence overshadows the area. It is a silence crying loud towards heaven. The silence is disrupted every now and then with the sound of two Israel Military tanks roaming the streets and announcing curfew: Mamnou' attajawul. "Moving is forbidden. Leaving homes is forbidden." In other

words, "You are prisoners. Stay where you are, otherwise you are violating the holy military rules. You will be put in prison."

I sneaked out to ring the bells of Christmas Lutheran Church at 10:00 a.m. For me this was an act of nonviolent resistance. We will not let them steal from us even the sounds of the bells calling for worship. At 10:30 Rev. Sandra Olewine and I gathered at the church entrance for worship. We put our advent purple stoles on, although we were not sure if any one would be able to make it to church on this Sunday. At 10:30 we rang the bells, while the first 7 people were already gathered in the sanctuary. One of the young people asked if today is the first Advent, since he could not see the Advent wreath. He is right. We could not get pine branches to weave the wreath, since Bethlehem has been under curfew for the last ten days. But even under curfew and in spite of the lack of a wreath, we still wanted to celebrate the Advent of the Lord. We had to miss the Organ sound too. Our organist could not make it. He lives too far away from the church. But still at 10:40 there were 27 people gathered in the sanctuary. I could not believe my eyes. I knew how dangerous it is to be on the streets. But the 27 members, children, youth and adults came to celebrate the first Advent because they wanted "to obey God more than men."

As we were gathering, we read the words of St. Paul assigned for first Advent: "The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light." How challenging and comforting were these words. Challenging because the "night" of the 35-years old occupation is very long and seems endless. It feels as if we are still at midnight, in the middle of a long and dark tunnel with no light at its end. The day of freedom and life in dignity seems far and not at hand. How else can we explain the arrogance of the Israeli occupation, which reoccupied Bethlehem

shortly before Advent and the Christmas Season, demonstrating that they do not care for the whole Christian World? If they wish they can smash the "little town of Bethlehem." It is too "little," compared with the might of their tanks. Yet there is comforting good news in St. Paul's words: The night has lost its power. The Gospel calls us and empowers us to cast off the works of darkness and of occupation. The light of right is stronger than the power of might. The presence of the Church members, in spite of the curfew, was the best expression of this.

The first candle lit at Christmas Lutheran Church on this first Advent is an expression of the light of right. It starts small, one candle at first and then the second will follow and so on. What comforts us is that there are so many friends world wide lighting candles on our behalf, enabling us to continue to spread the light in a context of darkness, despair and hopelessness. So, when you light the Second Advent candle, please think of the power of light spreading all over the world; a light that will finally cast off the works of darkness and occupation, preparing for the coming of the Prince of Peace and the Source of Hope.

Dear Mitri,

Our time with you at Christmas 1998 provides many pictures in our mind when we read the grim-yet-gospelly messages that have come our way from you during these past months. Although our liturgies at Christmas Lutheran Church in 1998 had nothing of the conflict-context you have now, when you speak of the Sunday service above, I see myself there. What you and your 27 co-confessors drew from the Epistle reading on the First Sunday in Advent is good news indeed. Perhaps in the full extent of the liturgy (your sermon, for example) you

heard even more Good News from that text. Namely, good news, good enough for Bethlehem “bound” Christians to trust, even if “they” will never go away. Even if, worse still—and God forbid!—you and your people, your congregation too, die as the last (probably made in USA) Israeli tank someday crushes you all to death.

To sound so pessimistic, to say “suppose it never gets better,” could sound faithless, but need not be. You yourself told us in one of our meetings that you’d still “plant my olive tree, even if I knew tomorrow was the end of the world.” Those words (like Luther’s precedent whom you were recalling) were a fresh confession of faith in the Gospel even if it never got better. In fact even if tomorrow brought Apocalypse.

Such feisty faith connects with Romans 13:11-14, your text for Advent I. The admonition in those verses comes from the language of apocalyptic. Paul could have said: “Beloved, it IS apocalypse now. Therefore know the time, wake from sleep, salvation is near, live accordingly.” In the three-year lectionary now widely used in the USA, the Gospel for Advent I (in each of the three years of the cycle) is no longer the Palm Sunday pericope of the old lectionary, but the respective “apocalypse chapter” of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. So we had a direct “apocalypse now” reading for our liturgy last Sunday. We were hearing from Mark 13 what you heard from Romans 13—know the time, wake from sleep, salvation is near, live accordingly.

If Jesus said it then, and Paul repeated it a few years after him, then today too is “Apocalypse Now.” And when we go to the classic Apocalypse of John, we hear the full bad news confronting THE Good News, that death will indeed have its way—via any one of the four apocalyptic horsemen: famine,

plague, war or death. So the proclamation of Gospel is to anticipate openly that “they” will not go away, at least not before I do, and still proclaim salvation (i.e., victory) in the face of inexorable loss. If “they” were to go away, that would indeed be a “blessing,” but not yet “salvation.”

I speak, of course, from my own context here in the USA which may seem to you as different as ice is from fire when compared with your tyrannized ghetto life in Bethlehem. But there are some parallels. I too live in a highly militarized context, a nation with the most mega-military machine ever manufactured by human hands. Many think of that as our claim to fame. Biblically viewed, it is our shame—a cause for repentance, not rejoicing. I am not the enemy-object of that military power, as you are. Supposedly my nation’s military power operates to defend me, to preserve me from the very threats that terrorize your daily life. And in doing so my nation’s supposed preservation is linked to your people’s devastation. [I have spoken on that frequently since September 11, 2001, and won’t say more here. If interested you can check]

The point in NT apocalyptic texts, so it seems to me, is Good News—Good News centered in Christ—in the face of the four horsemen who never go away. They appear to be eternal. Like the armor-plated curfews of Bethlehem, they always return. To survive them you have to survive death. The N.T. apocalypse material, beginning with that in the synoptic Gospels, claims that in Jesus a “proleptic” apocalypse has happened. Proleptic = one that comes ahead of time, beforehand, finessing the final one, “heading it off at the pass.” So in Jesus, specifically the “apocalyptic” events of his Good Friday through Easter Sunday, a Judgment Day has occurred that “heads off” the Last Judgment. That’s good, of course, only for those who trust him for it. To wit, trust his

Cross/Easter apocalypse as their own when their final one comes. And that “final” one comes many times in individual lives—many times before the “last” Last Judgment comes. Such as whenever one of the 4 horsemen rides into our lives and has his way with us.

So if there are many “final” judgments before THE final one, why call the former final? It’s all related to the Judge. Who is THE judge? THE answer, of course, is God. [But in the rhetoric of current American political leadership you would never guess that, even though our president professes to be a born-again evangelical Christian. For if God were acknowledged as THE judge, then our first posture would not be to assume we are his agents in the war of Good vs. Evil. Rather we would see ourselves as folks standing in the dock before that judge and hearing our own case tried before the divine bench. And hear the divine verdict that comes to every empire without exception: “Mene, mene, tekel, parsin”: You have been weighed and found wanting. The apocalypse now that you threaten to inflict on another is the apacolypse now I will return to you. Lincoln believed and said that a century and a half ago. Since then most Americans have weighed our nation and found it righteous. But self-ascribed righteousness always—repeat, always—fails before the divine bench. Check the Pharisee and Tax-collector parable. But I digress.]

To survive apocalypse, you need to survive before the divine bench. That’s the bottom line. Any one of the four horsemen may indeed “get” you, but if you’ve got credentials valid before the divine bench, you survive your own personal apocalypse along with the “final” Last Judgment at the far end.

After our Advent 1 Sunday service, where our pastor did not

preach on the Gospel text, the past president of our congregation (Peter) cornered me in the narthex, held up to me the Mark 13:24-37 text printed in the bulletin and asked: "Ed, what is all this stuff? Sun and moon darkened, stars falling. All this to take place in this generation. Nobody knows when the day or hour is, not even Jesus. Keep awake. For what?"

I gulped. "Good questions. Wish the pastor had preached on that text for you, Peter." "Well, he didn't. So you tell me." I punted. But one of these days I'll have to 'fess up. Absolutely fundamental to any answer is the overarching Gospel claim that in Jesus a "merciful apocalypse" has been offered to folks, all folks, who can never pass muster before the divine bench with their own self-righteous resources. Easter says that the divine judge has said Yes to Jesus's Good-Friday personal apocalyptic and validates it as good for all who trust him for it. Trusting this apocalypse, they can then trust the Judge in every instance when the four horsemen ride into their lives. I.e., trust that judge's mercy to trump the dead-end verdict that would otherwise seem to apply.

That means trusting the Judge's favor when the horsemen claim to be executing the ultimate verdict themselves. The issue is one of dominion. Who's in charge. Does death (and death's executors including tanks, rockets, missiles and suicide bombers) have dominion over me, or does the Mercy Messiah? On this one, as you trust, so it is for you.

So there are really three apocalypse eras in New Testament chronology: past, present, future. The merciful proleptic one of Jesus at Jerusalem in the first century, the one(s) we bump into sometimes daily when all hell breaks loose and life is shattered even though we keep on breathing, including the

one that finally bumps us off when we do not keep on breathing, and then the “last” Last Day that is the final windup.

For each and all, the same counsel applies, whether from Rom.13 or Mark 13: read world history with a “third eye,” the eye of The Judge and his Beloved Son (faith); stay focused on where apocalypse survival is to be found for the long haul (hope); Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and live daily life wearing that outfit (love).

It’s finally about salvation in both Romans and Mark – saving or losing your life. Bob Bertram (nearing his own personal apocalypse) taught us how to read Jesus’s outrageous aphorism that seeking to save our life, we will surely lose it, but whoever loses it “for my sake (the sake of the Gospel), will save it.” Note, Bob pointed out, it’s not “win-win,” but “lose, lose.” “Everybody loses. No exceptions to memento mori. But there are two different ways to lose. One is to lose period. The other is to lose, comma, with another clause that follows.”

Christmas inserts the comma after the memento mori. Yes, it’s a wild claim. No wonder its first promoters called it Good News. Incredibly good, and wildly new. The new of the Nativity crosses over and crosses out mortality’s period. So the Nativity gospel claims. Wild as it is, we trust it, and hope that you do too.

Peace & Joy!

Ed

Thanksgiving. A Gratitude Attitude? Not Really

Colleagues,

D.v., Marie and I will be in California most of this week, so ThTh 233 gets posted a few days early. Occasion is the memorial service on Wednesday for Marie's sister Dorothy Scharlemann, who died in Santa Barbara just short of her 90th birthday. That's the third such liturgy on Marie's side of the family in eleven months. Next day we'll celebrate Thanksgiving with the larger Scharlemann family of Dorothy's four children.

The proximity of events makes you think. As we did almost 30 years ago when we buried my mother just before Christmas Eve.

Of course, the respective clans had grounds to be grateful. But gratitude is not quite what Biblical thanksgiving is all about. I learned that years ago when we had a semester-long Crossings course on Psalm 118, the lectionary Psalm for Easter, and we looked more closely at the term. Ps. 118 opens and closes with: "O give thanks [you plural imperative] to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever." It's only seven words in Hebrew, and the vocable for "give thanks"—regularly used throughout the Psalms—is tricky. Its root meaning is "praise," says OT grand guru Claus Westermann. "In the OT praise is the most frequent expression of a positive relationship to God. The OT has many verbs for praise, whose meaning is difficult to express in modern languages."

So what is the praise-base of "yadah" [the verb] and "todah"[the

noun]? It is first of all not attitude, but action. And above all public action. You don't do "todah" in your heart, but out in the open with other people around. If you'd want to film it, you'd put someone on a soapbox out on the sidewalk and give her some lines that said: "Look what God did for little old me!" Or in the plural, as it is so often: "Look, what great things God has done for us!" It's "declarative praise," Westermann says. Proclamatory action—a public event. When Paul is hustling the Risen Christ to the cultured crowd on Mars Hill in Athens, he's doing Todah. Or when in autobiographical reflection he marvels (out loud) that although he once was a persecutor of Christ-followers, he's now become one himself, he's doing Todah. "Look what God did to this old enemy of his! By the grace of God I am what I am."

No wonder St. Jerome, when translating the Bible into Latin, the so-called Vulgate, rendered "yadah" with "confiteor"— "to confess, to reveal, to acknowledge, to make known." He had learned Hebrew from a rabbi in Antioch, and must have learned it well to chose that vocable. That Latin term is witness-stand language. It points to a public forum. "Status confessionis," in Lutheran lingo. Fessing up about the Gospel—and, yes, it could get you into trouble. Even so, fessing up to the Gospel so others hear and benefit. [Blessed Jerome, incidentally, did his translation work at Manger Square in Bethlehem, where he lived out the last years of his life 386-420 A.D. If he were still there on this very day, he'd have an Israeli tank "protecting" him, a tank probably "Made in the USA."]

Confessing is not contrary to saying "thank you," but its intended audience goes well beyond God the Giver. It proposes to strike human ears making known the "chesed" (mercy) of God. "Y'all give thanks to God, for his ches ed/mercy lasts forever. And if you ask me why I'm here on the soapbox saying that, I'll say: Thought you'd never ask. Let me count the ways." What

triggers "todah" is not gratitude—some tit-for-tat sense of obligation that "since you did this good thing for me, I'll reciprocate and say thanks." Now there is nothing wrong with reciprocity for benevolence received. But it's too flat for Todah. At root it's still "law," good law, but not yet the response that fits with receiving God's mercy. Which being interpreted is "faith." Not the gratitude attitude, but faith in God's mercy triggers Biblical thanksgiving. Not "be grateful, and say thank you," but be faith-full and tell the world whose mercy it is that lasts forever.

Final anecdote. True story. In ancient days the LCMS used to have an annual "fiscal conference" (I think that was the name) to talk about raising money. Once I somehow got into that solemn assembly. Keynote speaker was Richard R. Caemmerer, the seminary prof who taught me how to preach the Gospel (and in the opening class session he told us that from experience he knew that most first-year seminarians didn't know what the Gospel was. So in session one he told us. Then in session 2ff. he started shaping us to preach it.) I can still see and hear him at that fiscal conference session.

You preach to your people, he said, "Out of gratitude, you should give more generously to the work of the church. Out of gratitude this...and out of gratitude that..." Joe Schmidt sitting in the pew starts twitching. He grabs his suit-jacket lapels, pulls them away from his chest, looks first to the left inside, and then to the right (and RRC is play-acting this at the mike), and says: "What do you know I AM out of gratitude! There's none there." And then ":Doc" concluded, It's faith in the Gospel, not a gratitude-attitude, that generates generous hearts.

We'll be linking Todah and Easter in California this week, not only in remembering Dorothy, but in remembering how God in Christ remembers her, marked as she was by mercy for her own

Eastering.

May your Todah be that sort if you're are celebrating American Thanksgiving Day this week. And if you are in some other spot on the globe, as many of you are, get on your own witness stand and do Todah "your way," for his mercy endures forever – everywhere.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Interfaith Prayer

Colleagues:

THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY's Reformation Festival issue (they didn't call it that), posted the end of October 2002, featured two of the best-known Lutheran theologians in America, Martin Marty and Gilbert Meilaender [hereafter MM and GM]. MM's photo even made the cover. Both GM and MM were reared in the theology and ethos of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. Both have come prominently into the mainstream of American theological conversation. MM was at "the sem" when I was. In his senior year at Concordia, St. Louis, ('52-'53) Marty edited the student theology journal SEMINARIAN and I was one of his stringers. A generation later GM was my student at the same sem. Both have gone a long way since then.

GM went to Princeton for a Ph.D. in Christian Ethics with Paul Ramsey, taught for years at Oberlin College, and now has an endowed chair in ethics at Valparaiso University. He is on the LCMS clergy roster. Though not an official spokesman for the LCMS, some sectors of his church listen to him. Even more, I

sense, he is a major voice in today's ecumenical conversation in Christian ethics. In his article in the CC he "puzzles" (his term used 8x) over a problem that is now vexing the LCMS, namely, the ethics of Christians praying together with folks of other religions at a time of national crisis. More about that below.

Marty, now 75, has for almost half a century been writer-editor with the CHRISTIAN CENTURY, America's liberal Protestant journal, and for one third of a century Church History prof at the University of Chicago. His list of publications is so long that friendly wags talk about him as "the only man I know with no unpublished thoughts." The article in this issue of CC was not BY him, but ABOUT him. A MM retrospective: "The sense of place. The many horizons of Martin E. Marty." After 20 years also on the LCMS clergy roster Marty moved (was moved?) into the ELCA during the Wars of Missouri in the 70s. With some sectors of LCMS he is not persona non grata. E.g., for this past spring's 50th anniversary reunion of the "Class of '52," Concordia Seminary invited him to be the memorial speaker.

For a second time today I read the two CC articles side-by-side. One thing jumped off the pages. The MM article (remember, not by him, but about him, authored by Wendy Murray Zoba) has something like 14 column inches of Marty citing Martin Luther and appropriating his theology for such a time as this. In GM's article neither Luther nor the Lutheran Confessions ever get mentioned. But other prominent Protestants drawn on for support as GM threads his way through the puzzle are C.S. Lewis, Donald Baillie, and Karl Barth.

Strange. Especially since the MM article is more biographical, and thus plausibly could get along without Luther quotes, while GM is wrestling with an ethical issue that is currently wrenching his own LCMS denomination, a church known for its

claim to be true to the Lutheran Reformation. So why not draw on the Lutheran Reformation here?

I asked GM that question in an e-mail after my first reading. I even sent along the Luther quote from the Large Catechism where ML says that people of "other religions" "even though they believe in and worship only the one, true God, nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them, and thus cannot be confident of his love and blessing." Gil thanked me for the reference, but saw it focused exclusively on salvation (soteriology) and not the ethical issue raised by LCMS District President David Benke's public prayer in the "Mars Hill" assembly at Yankee Stadium shortly after Sept. 11. Well maybe.

Now the last thing I want to do (according to one inner voice for sure) is to offer theological assistance to the LCMS in their time of trial. They once declared me along with 44 colleagues heretics "not to be tolerated in the church of God," a synodical resolution that is still on the books. So when the LCMS has internal strife, my besetting sin is "Schadenfreude," rejoicing in someone else's (deserved) affliction.

But reflecting on GM's article nudges me to propose what seems to be better theology than Barth, Baillie, and Lewis offer, viz., explicitly Lutheran stuff. First hermeneutics, then soteriology, then ethics. Linking hermeneutics and soteriology was at the center of what ThTh readers have heard me label "the Augsburg Aha!" of the Lutheran Reformation. Namely, what Luther once called his breakthrough, the "discrimen" [distinction] present in the Bible itself that "the Law is one thing, but the Gospel is something else." That was Luther's "aha!" (and the Augsburg Confessors' after him), both for reading the Bible and for understanding how people got saved. In the axiom of Bob Bertram (he now in periculo mortis): "Biblical hermeneutics is at no point separable from Biblical soteriology." Or in the

words of the second great “Martin” of the 16th century, Martin Chemnitz: “The distinction between law and gospel must be made at every point in Christian theology.”

Therefore also in Christian ethics. Therefore also in evaluating Benke’s action in Yankee Stadium.

It seems to me that Gil ignores this Lutheran touchstone in his puzzling about Christians praying on Mars Hill. Yes, he didn’t quote Luther. But that’s not yet a demerit. What is “puzzling” is that the theologians he does use, and use affirmatively (at least the two that I know fairly well, Lewis and Barth), also ignore the Lutheran “discrimen” in doing their theology. Barth in fact claimed that Luther’s “discrimen” was a big mistake.

GM also does Biblical interpretation on his own in the essay. It seems to me that he ignores the discrimen. And that may be a segment of “old Missouri” within him. Even though the LCMS tradition is to hype “the proper distinction between law and Gospel,” it is hyped as a “doctrine” to be taught and believed. One bane of Missouri—one that got 45 of us axed—is its heritage of “believing the Bible,” but ignoring the “discrimen” as the axiom, the method, to be practiced in “Biblical hermeneutics and Biblical soteriology.”

Gil goes to the Scriptures for precedents that may have some analogy to the Yankee Stadium event. From them, careful and clear-headed scholar that he indeed is, he carefully makes his own distinctions (but not the law/gospel one) about differing contexts and then weighs the possible applicability of these texts to Benke’s action. There ARE no “easy” direct parallels, of course. Paul’s discussion of Christians eating “meat offered to idols” gets yes/no answers from Paul himself depending on the circumstances. GM also examines passages in the Psalms, Romans, Amos, Malachi that come close, but none are direct parallels to

“public prayer with people of other faiths.” So even at the end of the article he is still puzzling. “We need to think more, and harder, about how to manage this.” And he concludes with Karl Barth’s proposal for guarded “tolerance” with non-Christians in the public arena.

Canonical use of the Bible is a clear alternate to the Augsburg Aha! for reading the Bible. It was so in the 16th century. It is so now. Canonist hermeneutics is what I learned in 8 years of LCMS parochial education. It’s still vexing Missouri and the Benke brouhaha is its most recent bizarre episode. GM’s essay, it seems to me, doesn’t help much because it does not move beyond canonist exegesis. The soteriology linked to canonist Biblical theology is one that says—sometimes sotto voce—the more you can believe and live your life in accord with all that the Bible says, the more you are pleasing to God. Granted, God is fundamentally pleased with you by virtue of Christ’s death and resurrection. That’s soteriology. That’s number one. But there are also these secondary matters. . . . Case in point: Benke in Yankee Stadium. Does the Bible say God was pleased with that or not?

Personally I’m paying little attention to the LCMS hassle about Benke—and linked to that the hassle about the LCMS President Kieschnick who approved his actions. But from what I pick up through the grapevine, it is indeed being pursued canonically. Not only with canonist readings of the Bible, but (no surprise) with conflicting canonist interpretations of “The Handbook,” the LCMS’s book of canon law. It was not a frivolous binge on Luther’s part when he tossed the Roman books of canon law into the flames in that protest parade at Wittenberg 5 centuries ago. Law, even “church law,” is “something else” than the Gospel. But even worse than the bondage inflicted by canon law is bondage to canonist readings of the Bible. It seems to me that GM reads the Biblical texts as a canonist. If a Biblical text carefully

parsed allows what Benke did, then it was OK; if the text does not, then he should not have done it. And he does come to a soft conclusion: "I doubt that it was wise for Benke to participate in the event." In this article he doesn't want to discuss the case, but instead use it "to provoke us to larger thoughts" about INTERFAITH 'PRAYER,' even though he finds himself "very puzzled about those larger questions."

Wouldn't the puzzle be easier to solve using the Augsburg Aha! for exegesis? And then through the hermeneutics, soteriology, ethics chain reaction you could get to Yankee Stadium? I think so. But I really ought to wait until "they" ask me (ha!) to do so.

One of the ancient captains on "our side" during the Wars of Missouri urged me to "say something" about GM's article in CC. He appreciated Gil's careful thoughtful procedures, but didn't agree with the conclusion. That reminded me of a classic bon mot from my grad student days in Hamburg Germany decades ago. It was Church Historian Kurt Dietrich Schmidt's seminar. One of the much-brighter-than-I doctoral students made a brilliant case for something contra the professor's position. Schmidt's response: "Was Sie sagen stimmt schon, aber es ist trotzdem falsch." [What you say makes perfect sense, but it is still wrong.] Canonist renderings of the Bible can be well argued, but they are regularly still wrong.

And another story, from the patriarch of the university where GM now teaches, O.P. Kretzmann. O.P. was riding in a cab in Manhattan, conversing with the garrulous cabbie about the difficult meeting he was heading for at the Lutheran Center. "On the one hand this...." O.P. said, "but on the other hand that." The cabbie cut him short: "Father," he advised (O.P. was wearing his clerical collar), "Sometimes you just gotta forget your principles and do what's right!" Did Benke do what's right? Even

though I've only second-hand data, my guess is yes. My second guess is that there are principles—the Augsburg Aha! for hermeneutics, soteriology and ethics—to support that yes.

But I really ought to wait until they ask me.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Book Review – Colin Chapman's WHOSE PROMISED LAND? THE CONTINUING CRISIS OVER ISRAEL AND PALESTINE

Colleagues,

Art and Mitzi Preisinger are friends from ancient days when Art and I were sem students together. Now retired from early years in campus ministry and later on Art's professorship in theology at Texas Lutheran University, they keep on keeping on. A year or so ago it was at the Lutheran Seminary in Umpumulo, South Africa. This past Spring Semester 2002 they were in Beirut, Lebanon where Art taught church history at the Near East School of Theology. One colleague at NEST was Colin Chapman, frontline Christian scholar on Islam. Here's Art's review of Colin's recent book.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

An examination of the claims and counter-claims in today's Israel-Palestine conflict is the subject of Colin Chapman's book, WHOSE PROMISED LAND? THE CONTINUING CRISIS OVER ISRAEL AND PALESTINE. Oxford: Lion Publishing, 2002. 347 pages.

Originally written in 1983, the book was revised in 1985, 1989, 1992, and again this year. This edition assumes great importance in light of September 11, 2001, and contains new chapters on Zionism, Christian Zionism, and Dispensationalism. An American edition (paperback – Baker Book House) has just come on the US market.

This past spring I taught at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut, Lebanon, where Chapman has been lecturer in Islamic Studies since 1999, as well as dean of the chapel. He is an ordained Anglican priest who has spent nearly seventeen years in the Middle East. He speaks fluent Arabic and has written "Christianity on Trial," "The Case for Christianity," "Cross and Crescent: Responding to the Challenge of Islam," and "Islam and the West: Conflict, Coexistence or Conversion?" I was privileged to be his colleague on the faculty of NEST, if only for the semester. And I am happy to review this important book for Thursday Theology readers.

"Whose Promised Land?" is in three major sections:

- 1. Understanding the History;*
- 2. Interpreting the Bible;*
- 3. Appreciating the Issues Today.*

Chapman reviews the history of Palestine from the time of Abraham to the present – what groups occupied the land, who ruled it and when. The initial understanding, then, is based on Biblical history, canonical as well as apocryphal. But Palestine was occupied by Canaanites and others a thousand years before Abraham, and I missed that important ingredient in the cursory review. For if the legitimacy of the occupation of the land is based on who was there first, neither Israelis or Arabs can claim it for that reason.

During and after the New Testament period Palestine had been occupied by Romans, then successively by the Byzantines, Arabs, Seljuk Turks, Mamluks, and Crusaders. After World War I and the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, it was put under a British mandate until the founding of the state of Israel in 1948. Since then there have been a series of conflicts: the Israeli-British-French attack on the Sinai and Suez after the nationalization of the Suez Canal by Egyptian President Gamal Nasser; the so-called Six-Day War (1967); the Yom Kippur War (1973); the Israeli invasions of Lebanon (1978 and 1982); the first Arab Intifada [“Uprising”] (1987-1993); the invasion of Kuwait and the Gulf War (1990-1991) in which Arafat’s support of the Iraqi invasion damaged the Palestinian cause; and the second Intifada (2000--).

Chapter 2, as Chapman says, “is a kind of anthology of [Jewish, Muslim and Christian] quotations” mostly from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These sources comment on the roots of anti-Semitism and Christian contributions to it; Zionism, its origin and evolution into a political movement; the British exacerbation of the problem by making contradictory promises to both Jews and Arabs. To the Jews: the Balfour Declaration of 1917 which favored the establishment of Palestine as a national home for the Jewish people, and which Arthur Koestler described as “a document in which one nation solemnly promises to a

second nation the country of a third nation.” To the Arabs: the Hussein-McMahon correspondence of 1915 promising the Arabs hegemony over Palestine in return for an alliance against the Central Powers.

Then came World War II and its aftermath, the creation of the United Nations, the plan for partition, and the establishment of the state of Israel. The Jews, representing one-third of the population, were given 57% of the land, and the better land at that. The Arabs were given the hill country, the poor part of the land. Resentment and anger fueled the conflict up to, and including, the Al-Aqsa, or second Intifada.

Chapman is impartial in his use of sources. He presents an equal number of “witnesses,” Jewish and Arab. But it is a somewhat tenuous neutrality. His heart is with the downtrodden and oppressed, and the Palestinians are precisely that.

The three chapters of the second section are a study of the interpretation of “the land” in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Bible as a whole. Chapman examines the development of the theme of the land as a central theme of the Old Testament. The question is do Jesus and the writers of the New Testament understand this theme differently than the narrative and prophetic voices of the Old? And what does this mean in the contemporary context?

Those of you who have evangelical friends who are pro-Israel because “the Bible promised the land to the Jews in perpetuity” will want to take advantage of Chapman’s mature and sophisticated exegesis of these promises which are indeed a central theme of the Old Testament in particular.

The final chapter asks if there is any hope of reconciling the conflict. The author examines in depth Christian Zionism and its parent, dispensationalism. The dispensational view has been

with us for centuries (e.g., the twelfth century exegete and mystic Joachim of Fiore), but it has been promoted in the nineteenth century by John Darby and in the early twentieth century by the Scofield Reference Bible. More recently dispensationalism has been popularized by Hal Lindsey's "Late Great Planet Earth" (1970) and Tim LaHaye's best-selling "Left Behind" series. "Rapture" and "tribulation" are key characteristics of this apocalypticism. (Years ago we were treated to bumper stickers in West Texas which read, "In case of rapture, this car will be unmanned." Initially I thought this was vaguely pornographic, but since most of the cars having these stickers were in the parking lot of the First Baptist Church, I realized that something different was afoot.)

Christian Zionism is characterized by four basic assumptions:

1. The Jews have divine right to the land because of God's promise to Abraham;
2. the return of the Jews to the land is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies;
3. The creation of the state of Israel will lead to the conversion of the Jews and ultimately to the second coming of Christ; and
4. Christians should not only support the idea of a Jewish state, but support what it stands for and defend it against attack.

These assumptions, in turn, are based on the assumption that all prophecy in the Bible must be interpreted literally. God is pursuing two distinct purposes, one related to the earth with earthly objectives involved, which is Judaism; the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved, which is Christianity. Christian Zionism, says Chapman, does not understand the nature of the conflict between Zionism and the Palestinians, it has a one-sided political

stance, it lacks concern for people of other faiths, and it does not represent the views of the majority of Christians in the Middle East. It is, in fact, a Euro-American importation.

Chapman notes that Islam's relation to Palestine is a powerful symbol, abetted by the Crusaders who, say the Muslims, killed every person in sight when they entered Jerusalem, in contrast to Saladin, who killed no one. Israel's theology of the land helped to create a new Muslim theology of the land. Muslims, like secular/nationalist Jews and religious Jews, have their problems with the PLO, which is essentially secular and nationalistic in contrast to Hamas and Islamic Jihad, who refer to the Qur'an as their constitution.

Finally, the author spells out Israel's options and asks pertinent questions of the Palestinians. For Israel these options include the one-state solution. This poses the problem that if Israel were to remain a democracy all the Arabs would become citizens and be given the vote. In time they would outnumber the Jews. This is unacceptable to most Israelis, as is the creation of a single secular state.

Or Israel could crush the Palestinians militarily. World opinion would not tolerate this. Or would it?

Or in the long run, the Palestinians and Arabs will destroy Israel. This is most unlikely.

The one option that makes the most sense is the two-state solution, the original proposal of the United Nations. This was rejected by the Palestinians because they were not consulted and the division of the land was seen to be unfair. Yet this seems to be the only possible solution to the problem. The only way for Israel to guarantee its own security is to make peace with the Arabs. And this can be done only by Israel conceding to the Palestinians the right to establish their own state.

But this brings up several questions for the Palestinians. Are Palestinians willing to renounce violence and would Hamas and Islamic Jihad do the same? If you can understand the despair which has driven these people to violence, can Hamas and Islamic Jihad ever be convinced that violence simply leads to more violence? Are Palestinians really ready to accept the existence of Israel? Are Palestinians ready to accept compromise? Do they have proper leadership to create unity among Palestinians? How important is Islamic ideology for Palestinians to express their political and social beliefs? Is it possible to reconcile Islamic ideology and human rights as understood in the West? And finally, if and when a Palestinian state comes to be, will it be a secular state or an Islamic state? If the latter, how would Muslims reconcile this with their rejection of a "Jewish" state? How would Christian minorities fare in an Islamic Palestinian state, remembering that Christian minorities have not always found it easy to live in Islamic states.

The Arab-Israeli conflict has been going on since 1948. Given the precarious state of the world today we do well to pay close attention to what is going on now in that little piece of land where our Lord chose to do his salvific work. Palestine is a flash point, and Armageddon may indeed take place there. Unfortunately, it won't be the Armageddon Christian apocalypticists long for. Colin Chapman's book will bring you up to speed on events in the "Holy Land" and their interpretation as the drama of the Middle East unfolds. It's very much worth the reading.

*Art Preisinger
Seguin, Texas*

You're in Charge and I'm Not

by Robin Morgan

In my continuing quest to understand what is going on with our country, the other day I realized that the closest I can come to making sense of our newfound patriotic zeal and willingness to sacrifice our freedom for supposed safety is by comparing it to the way my husband and I were acting shortly before we discovered our sons were using drugs.

We knew something was terribly wrong in our family. From being a happy crew of five, eating dinner together, going to Little League games and enjoying each other's company, we'd become five individuals who were in the process of tearing each other apart.

Hal and I had different ways of dealing with this new reality, but our goal was the same – get back to the way things had been before. I favored the clamp down method – take away privileges and make it utterly clear we would not tolerate the way the boys were treating us. Hal had a more irenic style. He would do whatever it took as mediator, go-between or truce maker to keep everybody in the house, no matter how painful it was.

Not until we took the boys to a psychologist who told us that our 17-year-old was a level one alcoholic and his 15-year-old brother was on the same path did we really face what was going on. We were at a crossroads. Did we refute or ignore this news, assume that the psychologist was exaggerating or just plain wrong? Did we keep doing what we'd been doing, fighting with each other and the kids, hoping something might change? Or did we listen to the psychologist and act on his suggestions?

It was a horrific time. Whether or not our family and our marriage would survive intact was hanging in the balance. The happy past was gone, the present was chaotic, the future an impenetrable blur.

If I prayed at all during this time, it was only in frantic sound bytes: "Help!" or "Why us?" or even "I hate you" when all seemed lost as it did so often that one summer.

But somehow we decided to try out the psychologist's advice and ended up in the office of a 22-year-old self-described recovering dope fiend who had the audacity to tell us that if we did exactly what he told us to do, there was hope.

An upper middle class, middle-aged married couple, a lawyer and a pastor, putting the life of their family in the hands of a 22-year-old drug addict? If you're desperate enough...

Little by little, step-by-step, things began to change. We did what we were told to do by this unlikely soul and life started to come into focus again, but it wasn't what it had been like before all the chaos started. On some primal level, Hal and I had always assumed that if we did the right things, raised our kids the right way, we were guaranteed a happy family. If we did what we were supposed to do, we got the pay-off we wanted. But there are no guarantees in life. Both of our sons have been sober for over two years now and our family has a newfound serenity that I still marvel at when we sit around the table laughing and talking together, but there are no guarantees.

I'm hoping that as you have read our story you've been making some connections to our national scene. We are demanding guarantees, demanding that our government do whatever it takes to get us back to that happy past. We must have been doing the right things then because we've become so prosperous. Surely God is on our side.

A few weeks ago I was in a class with a group of people talking about these issues in light of Jeremiah's temple sermon (ch.7). As the discussion heated up and a certain frantic quality began to creep into the voices of the people around the table ("What can we do, what can we do?") one man suggested that we can't really get to our leaders anymore, the only things we can do are to act ethically with our immediate neighbors.

I pointed out that Jeremiah wasn't only concerned with how the Judeans treated their neighbors, but he went after Josiah the king as well. Then our teacher reminded us that Jeremiah's ultimate critique didn't stop there either. It wasn't just how the people and the leaders treated each other, it was their disregard for their relationship with Yahweh that Jeremiah claimed was their downfall. "Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.'" (7:4) They presumed that they could do whatever they wanted to because Yahweh lived in the temple in Jerusalem. They were safe.

Our future is an impenetrable blur. Some of us favor the clamp down method of retrieving the past, some of us favor keeping us all together no matter how much we attack and wound each other in the process.

I can't see what's ahead, but I have started a new prayer regimen in the last few weeks that I learned from the teenaged dope fiends in my life. Every morning before I start my day, I get down on my knees and I pray, "You're in charge and I'm not." It may seem simplistic, certainly not the complex economic and political answers we need to shore up our wobbling world. But I've watched such humility snatch messed up teenagers back from the brink of certain death.

You'd be surprised how hard it is to get down on your knees

(irrespective of physical conditioning) and say that every morning. I've become aware of how much I have in common with Adam and Eve as I alternately conveniently forget, think I'm too busy or even become angry at the prospect of "hitting my knees."

Interestingly, as I've reflected on this new regimen, I've realized that there is no way I could have come to this point, acknowledged my utter dependence on our Creator if I didn't first of all know that Creator as Abba. I have no intention of ladling sweet Jesus juice over what I've already said, it would be a disgrace to our Lord and a disgrace to the significance of what transpires among people with addictions when they come together to support and encourage one another.

But I realize that I have the luxury of allowing myself to embrace the freefall of looking at our family and the world as they really are because I know that no matter how far I fall, His hands are still underneath me and that He never leaves me alone. I know I have only minimal understanding of how hearing the Gospel, partaking of the sacrament, praying and fellowshiping with other Christians has wrought this conviction in my being, but it continues to grow inside of me. Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit continues to infuse me with hope when there is no earthly reason to hope.

Amazingly, it is Jeremiah who offers us one of the most compelling pictures of such new covenant hope even in the midst of the political and economic chaos of his time:

"I will put my law within them, says the Lord, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."

(31:33,34)

The Festival of the Reformation

Colleagues,

Today's posting is the current draft of my paper for the international conference on "The Future of Lutheran Theology: Charisms & Contexts." Time and place for the gathering is January 2003 at the University of Aarhus in Denmark. Last week's ThTh 228 was Robin Morgan's paper prepared for the conference. Last week we told you about Aarhus and also held out our tincup asking for your help to get us there and back. The price tag for the whole ball of wax (airfares and conf. expenses) comes to \$3,000.

Since you are a willing receiver of ThTh—or so we think—we deduce that this cause is your cuppa tea. Well, then.... If so, send your check—payable to "Crossings"—to

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P.O.Box 7011

Chesterfield, MO 63006-7011

Designate your gift "Aarhus Conference." Thanks.

Veteran readers of past ThTh postings will notice that some of the material in my Aarhus paper below looks like stuff you've seen here before. But they haven't seen it in Aarhus!

Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder

The Future of Lutheran Theology: Charisms & Contexts

University of Aarhus (Denmark) January 16-20, 2003

Law-Promise Hermeneutics, Lutheranism's Core Charism – for Every Context.

Case Study: Mission Theology

A Conference Paper by Edward H. Schroeder

My thesis is already expressed in the title above. What is the Core Charism of Lutheran Theology? Answer: hermeneutics. The Lutheran Reformation's fundamental charism was not new doctrine for faith and life—even so fundamental a doctrine as justification by faith alone [JBFA]. JBFA was itself already the result of something more fundamental that preceded it. That was the hermeneutic, a new way to read the Bible which then opened the scriptures to show the JBFA center of the Word of God. So the primal Lutheran “Aha!”—if I may call it that—was how you read the Bible, and subsequently, how you read the World. I propose to document that claim and then illustrate its value in a missiological context, a Case Study of the Mission Theology of my home church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America [ELCA].

1. SOLA FIDE, NOT SOLA GRATIAIt appears from the topics given for the major lectures here at Aarhus that “sola gratia”

[grace alone] is being proposed as a major Lutheran “charism.” I have not seen any of the texts of these major presentations, but I wonder why that charism was chosen. At least at the time of the Augsburg Confession (1530), the Roman Catholic critics of the AC claimed that the AC was OK on “sola gratia.” No controversy there. It was the AC’s “sola fide” [by faith alone] that they condemned. “All Catholics confess that our works have no merit [apart from] God’s grace. . . . But the [Augsburgers’] ascription of justification to faith alone is diametrically opposite the truth of the Gospel.” [Confutatio Pontifica of Aug. 3, 1530] The central conflict issue at Augsburg 1530 was sola fide, not sola gratia. When Melanchthon returns to JBFA (art. IV) in his Apology to the AC, he takes note of that in his very first sentence: “In the 4th, 5th, and 6th articles, as well as later in the 20th, they condemn us for teaching that people receive the forgiveness of sins not on account of their own merits but freely on account of Christ, by faith in Him.” In short, sola fide.

2. THE HERMENEUTICS UNDERLYING SOLA FIDE

1. MELANCHTHON – Behind the Reformation “Aha!” about sola fide was a hermeneutical “Aha!” Melanchthon makes that very point in Apology IV. Before he even addresses the many charges brought by the Confutators against JBFA, he says: “We need first to say a few things by way of preface in order that the sources of both versions of the doctrine, the opponents’ and ours, can be recognized.” Both the confessors and the confutators cite scripture to support their theologies, but “the sources” Melanchthon is talking about are not the Bible and the Christian tradition. No, the differing “sources” are the differing HERMENEUTICS whereby these common sources are read. The confessors’ source is that

“all Scripture should be divided into these two main topics: the law and the promises” and the text goes on to define the two key terms. The Confutators source? “Of these two topics, the opponents single out the law . . . and through the law they seek the forgiveness of sins and justification.” In addition to scripture’s law, the confutators, so Melanchthon, “add” the non-scriptural “opinion” that people “doing what is within them,” can fulfill God’s law and achieve “Christian righteousness.” The “source” for JBFA is law-promise hermeneutics for reading the Bible.

2. LUTHER – Luther himself in the late years of his life was once asked what Biblical text triggered his own Reformation “Aha!” Here’s what he said [Table Talk, 5518] “For a long time, as I was teaching the Bible at the seminary, I knew I had discovered something important, but I was never clear about just what it was. Then one day I was reading Romans 1:17 again: “Righteous people will live by faith.” That text helped me, for in the verse just before it were these words: “The Gospel is God’s own righteousness. It is revealed through faith.” So I connected the two: God’s own righteousness [= the righteousness in God himself] and righteous people who have faith. When I made that connection, I saw what the Gospel was. The Gospel is the story of God’s own righteousness. And what is that? Answer: The righteousness of God is God working to make us righteous. He makes us righteous when he leads us to put our faith in Christ.

“Before that discovery I had never noticed any difference between the righteousness of the law and the righteousness of the gospel. I always thought

that Moses (the law) and Christ (the gospel) were basically the same thing. The only difference, I thought, was that Moses was farther back in history—and not God’s full revelation, while Christ was closer to us in time—and God’s 100% revelation. But I always thought that God’s word from both of them was the same.”But when I found the distinction [das discrimen fand] that the righteousness of God’s law is one thing, and the righteousness of God’s gospel is something else, that was my breakthrough. [German: Da riss ich herdurch.]”

“Before that discovery I had never noticed any difference between the The law-promise hermeneutic for reading the Bible is the core charism of the Luth. reformation. “Da riss ich herdurch.”

3. THE ‘LARGER’ HERMENEUTIC UNDERLYING ROMAN SCHOLASTICISM
- Not mentioned here by Melanchthon is the “larger” hermeneutic lying behind the “law plus opinio legis” hermeneutic that he finds at work in the theology of the confutators. It is the “larger” hermeneutic of medieval scholasticism: the nature-grace axiom: “Grace does not diminish nature, but brings it to perfection” [Gratia no tollit naturam, sed perfecit.] Luther doesn’t name this either in the Table Talk statement cited above, but he could have, for in his reference to his earlier notion that “Moses and Christ” were the same, he is drawing on that hermeneutic. Expressed simply. it is that all of God’s revelation is “grace,” some less complete (Moses), some more complete (Christ)—and that the function of God’s grace is to “fulfill” (literally fill-full) what is lacking in as-yet unperfected nature, specifically imperfect sinful human nature. That grace is understood as a metaphysical

medicine flowing through the sacraments of the church, bringing to completion what is still lacking in the incomplete righteousness of sinners, what is still lacking for the salvation of the world.

Does that notion of grace have Biblical foundations? The Augsburg confessors said no. They also claimed that the notion of “nature” in the scholastic hermeneutical axiom had no Biblical equivalent at all. A fuller evaluation of this “classic” hermeneutic in the Latin church follows in #5 below. My point here is to propose that the law-promise hermeneutic for reading the Bible was a fundamental “Aha!” for the Lutheran reformers, and that it was their counter-proposal for the otherwise dominant nature-grace hermeneutic of the western theological tradition.

4. FROM GOD’S TWO WORDS TO GOD’S TWO HANDSBy using the law-promise hermeneutic for reading the Bible, which exposed two different righteousnesses in the scriptures, the reformers’ saw many more “two-nesses” about God in the Bible: God’s 2-covenants, 2-creations, 2-messages, even God’s 2-wills and “2-grammars.” This duplex hermeneutic for reading the Bible opened the reformers’ eyes to such two-ness in God’s activity in the world—God’s left-hand work and God’s right-hand work. God’s right-hand work always centers in the promise (both before and after its fulfillment in Christ); God’s left-hand work centers in “Moses,” God’s law. The works of these two hands come to expression in an offertory collect commonly used in U.S.. Lutheranism: “We dedicate our lives, Lord, to the CARE and REDEMPTION of all that you have made.” Left-hand care of God’s creation, right-hand redemption of that same creation. Same one-and-only God, but two distinct kinds of works—law and promise, care and redemption.

5. IN REFORMATION LUTHERANISM LAW-PROMISE HERMENEUTICS

REPLACES NATURE-GRACE SO THAT MORE OF GOD'S WORK BE "SAVED," AND THEN "USED."

1. I think it was Aristotle who said that the task of any philosophy was [in Greek] "sozein ta phainomena," to "save" the phenomena, the data, that the philosophy pursued. Whether consciously or not, the Augsburg Reformers were saying the same thing about good theology. Best theology was that which "saved" all the word of God and didn't "lose" fundamental elements of it. Over and over again Melanchthon in the Apology criticizes scholastic theology for "wasting" or "not using" or "misusing" basic components of the Word of God. His claim is that the opponents aren't "saving" what good theology ought to save. They are "losing" it. This can be illustrated at three places.
2. First of all THEO-logical-basic "God-data." Lost in the opponents' theology is God's law. One might think that by propounding a "legal" reading of the Scriptures, as Melanchthon claims they do, they really let the law come to its fullness. Not so. By turning the law into a soteriology, they lose the whole dimension of "lex semper accusat." God as critic, judge, accuser of sinners gets lost. And with the loss of the law, the Gospel too finally gets lost. When sola gratia is made a principle in the grace-nature paradigm, grace as Biblically proposed-God's mercy toward sinners-also gets lost. No longer needed is an intervention from God to trump the law's curse. There is no place for God bending-over-backwards to be merciful to sinners. Since God is by definition grace-full, God's radical criticism of sinners is lost, and surely "lost" is something as grim as "the wrath of God." The nature-

grace hermeneutics undergirding scholasticism cannot “save” these Biblical data. The AC and esp. its Apology is a tour-de-force proposal for using the law-promise hermeneutic for precisely that purpose: so that all of the Word and Work of God be saved.

3. The next two key segments “lost” in scholastic theology, and thus needing to be saved, are CHRISTOLOGICAL – that the merits and benefits of Christ be rightly “used” and not wasted—and finally PASTORAL – that sinners actually receive the Good News God intends them to have. For our Lutheran audience I need not expand on these. They are Melanchthon’s drumbeat throughout the Apology. The fundamental contra-Christ heresy of the scholastics, he claims, is that although they profess Nicaean-Chalcedonian orthodox Christology, they do not “need” that high Christology, and therefore they do not “use” it in articulating their doctrine. And when Christ is “wasted” instead of “used” to bring Good News to sinners—with or without “terrors of conscience”—the results are bad pastoral theology, very bad.

6. CASE STUDY: MISSIOLOGY

1. The hermeneutics at work in the official mission theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (and elsewhere in contemporary missiology across the ecumenical spectrum) departs from the law-promise hermeneutic of Augsburg Lutheranism and returns to the nature/grace hermeneutic of classical scholasticism, but now in a 21st century format. My text for documenting this thesis is the “Vision Statement” of the Division for Global Mission [DGM] of the ELCA entitled GLOBAL MISSION IN THE 21ST CENTURY [GM21] together with discussions at a missiology conference in Chicago [September 2001]

with DGM mission executives on this mission statement. I was more than a casual partner in these conversations, for my job was to present a "position paper" on law-promise hermeneutics for Lutheran missiology. Thus I drew flak from the DGM staff. Here are four comments I received from DGM voices:

- A. You parse God's work of law and God's work of gospel under the rubrics of "care for creation (=law) and redemption of creation (=gospel)." To talk about "care" under the rubric of God's law and "redemption" under gospel is not right. "Care" belongs under gospel.
- B. Redemption as you present it is an "individualized act, not world-wide." The real nemeses in the world are the evil powers of destruction manifest in the oppressive structures that tyrannize humanity. Your individualized redemption doesn't get to these evil powers in the world. The Gospel of redemption as you present it doesn't transform the world.
- C. Your presentation centers on "getting me saved," and not—as mission should—on transforming all creation. God's mission in the world is to transform creation for the sake of life.
- D. You stay too narrowly in the second article of the creed. God the creator of life is the central metaphor for mission. Life is God's highest value. God's goal is to transform the world so that we may have "life in its fullness."

The frequent accent (4x in the comments above) on

“transforming the world” is at root a nature-grace project. “Individual salvation,” “getting people saved” was central to Reformation theology as God’s chosen way to “save the world,” but it is peripheral to the DGM perspective. And that’s why “care of creation” belongs to Gospel in DGM theology, because Gospel is God’s good action, care is God’s good action, and all of it can be subsumed under God’s grace, a grace that transforms creation—or, to use scholastic language, “perfects nature.”

2. Greater clarity on the alternatives in the discussion—nature-grace vs. law-promise—didn’t come until one of the DGM execs walked us through GM21, the vision statement, and another DGM colleague put THE ISSUE into words: “The reign of God is God’s mission to the world. It is the transformation of creation for the sake of life. [For Lutherans today the question is:] how do we exploit this understanding without getting bogged down in sorting out the Two Kingdoms notion.”
3. For me that was an Aha! My earlier position paper had been arguing for the exact opposite thesis: “Concerning God’s Reign in the world—how do we exploit this understanding without getting bogged down BY NOT sorting out the Two Kingdoms notion.” God’s double operation—law and promise, God’s left hand and God’s right hand, care and redemption, each term “distinguished” from its partner term in each pair—was a fundamental core charism of the Lutheran Reformation. DGM missiology claimed that attention to that charism would get us “bogged down.” At the very least, this was an “anderer Geist.”
4. Hermeneutics and soteriology go together. GM21’s

calls us to an alternate hermeneutics. That also has soteriological consequences. Soteriology in GM21 is as follows: GM21 “opts for LIFE as the central metaphor ” for salvation. It’s a “paradigm shift,” we hear. Indeed. One shift is that its soteriology comes out “law-shy.” God, our critic, pretty well disappears when GM21 articulates its Trinitarian salvation: God “transforming creation for the sake of life.” Question: Does salvation—under any Biblical metaphor—ever occur if God, the world’s critic, is ignored? Not only St Paul, but also St John and the synoptics say No.

5. Parallel shift (on the promise side) is that the Reformation drumbeat for “necessitating Christ” suffers. “Theology of the cross” in GM21 designates the shape (humble, vulnerable, suffering) of God’s work, but not the content. Nowhere does GM21 offer Christ’s cross as a “new thing” that “God was [doing] in Christ,” namely, “reconciling the world to himself,” and doing so in clear contrast to God’s “normal” way of dealing with us, viz., “counting our trespasses against us.”
6. GM21’s crispest statement about the cross comes on p.8. “Jesus’ ministry is a radical struggle for life. This puts him in continual conflict with those who would limit and destroy life. Jesus ultimately expresses God’s vulnerable love for all humanity in his willingness to die in this struggle. Finally, he is put to an unjust, humiliating and yet redemptive death on a cross.” [The “redemptive” aspect of the cross surfaces at Easter.] “The resurrection of Jesus is God’s re-affirmation of life and a sign of hope in a world marked by sin and death. It declares that God’s salvation, the restoration of life for

all people and all creation, is rooted in God's compassionate and vulnerable love embodied in Jesus' ministry and death."

7. "Expresses" and "reaffirmation" are significant terms in the paragraph above. Question: If Jesus had never shown up, would God's project "to transform creation for the sake of life," have gotten derailed? In GM21's soteriology, it seems to me, the answer is: not necessarily. Christ "expresses" God's vulnerable love, and Easter "reaffirms" it, but there is no "necessitating Christ" for that love to be there at all, and for sinners to have access to it. Same question, different angle: apart from the cross, does God, or doesn't God, "count trespasses?" If God does, then the cross is a cosmic shift in God's dealing with sinners, not simply an expression of what God has always been doing.
8. Summa. GM21 openly calls the ELCA to move beyond the hermeneutics, the paradigm, of 16th century Lutheranism. Why? It had defects then, we learn, and even some of its good aspects are not relevant today. To move us forward, GM21 surprisingly proposes an even more ancient paradigm, the hermeneutics of medieval scholasticism, reading the Word and the world under the rubrics of Nature and Grace. In GM21 "nature" is "creation" still tragically deficient of "life in its fullness," and "grace" is God—and God's people wherever they may be—"transforming creation for the sake of life." That's the scholastic axiom: God's grace perfects nature, does not diminish it. The Lutheran Reformers found that medieval paradigm defective, so defective that they replaced it with another one, which they claimed was the hermeneutic the Bible itself

commended—law and promise. Yet GM21 opts for the scholastic one and commends it to Lutherans today. Why?

7. ELCA MISSIOLOGY AND THE 3-FOLD CRITERION FOR “SAVING THE DATA.”

1. The parallels to the Augsburg critique of scholasticism are striking. THEO-logical. God’s word as “law” gets lost. There no place in the GM21 blueprint for “lex semper accusat,” God’s own usus theologicus legis. In GM21 God’s critique of what’s wrong in creation is not directed to sinners’ unfaith (coram deo matters of the heart) but to evil principalities and powers in the world that diminish and destroy life. God’s action to counteract such destruction and to preserve an endangered creation (God’s own “care” agenda) is not seen as “law” (God’s own usus politicus) but is already designated Gospel. For it is a good action of God and produces beneficial results. But with such a paradigm, the law’s own usus politicus and usus theologicus are lost.
2. Paralleling that, of course, is CHRISTO-logical loss, since losing the law regularly also loses the Gospel. Christ is presented as good news, of course. The DGM Gospel comes under the rubric of the Reign of God as spelled out in Luke 4 (the canon-within-the-canon for “grace” in this nature/grace blueprint). The center of God’s reign is God’s good news and good action for the oppressed. But that sort of Gospel needs no crucified or risen Messiah to make it all come true. Cross and resurrection are not ignored in DGM theology, but they too get “transformed.” Like this: Christ’s cross signifies that suffering is part of the package in God’s

transforming the world vis-a-vis the mighty tyrants that oppress it. And Easter signals that such world-transformation will indeed finally be victorious. Both Good Friday and Easter are signals, but nothing substantive changes in the cosmos when Christ dies or when he is raised. In Melanchthon's language (Apol 4:157) this "robs Christ of his honor as mediator and propitiator." Paul called that "Christ dying in vain." An Easter where death itself (along with the other cosmic nemeses that vex sinners) was not put to death is an Easter that leaves us "yet in our sins."

3. And that highlights the PASTORAL loss. In the language of the Luth. confessions: If Christ does not "remain mediator," sinners "do not find peace of conscience"; they are left with nothing "to pit against the wrath and judgment of God." (Apol 4:214)

All of the losses indicated above do serious damage to Christian ministry wherever it occurs—whether in the context of Christian congregations or on the mission frontiers. What are the particular "gains," the "savings," when law-promise hermeneutics are practiced by the church in mission?

8. THE PROMISE OF A LAW-PROMISE HERMENEUTIC FOR CHRISTIAN MISSION ON THE NEW AREOPAGUS OF TODAY'S 21ST CENTURY CONTEXT. TWO EXAMPLES.

1. REPENTANCE The context for Christian mission today is "the new Areopagus." Paul's Athens in Acts 17—"the city was full of gods"—is everywhere in today's world. This is especially true in the so-called "Christian" lands of the west. And, as with Paul on Mars' Hill, Christian witness invites people to change gods—it's as crass as that—to hang their

hearts on a god previously unknown to them, the crucified and risen Messiah. "Repent" is the technical term—a 180% turnaround. "Times of ignorance God overlooks, but now he commands all everywhere to repent." Nature-grace theology has a hard time calling for radical repentance. If human "natura" needs only "perfecting," ("transforming" in the rhetoric of GM21), then radical switching of deities, and dying/rising of repentance, sounds like overkill. To law-promise theology it does not. Can Christian mission proceed without a call to repentance? It never did in the NT era.

1. Remember that the call to repentance in law-promise theology does not have to be a hellfire and brimstone sermon, though Jesus did that with the hard-of-heart of his generation. L. Goppelt calls that Jesus' "condemning call to repentance." But there was also his "saving call to repentance" to the vast majority of his own mission audience. Such a call diagnoses people's lived experience using God's law as "mirror" so that we see the facts of our own lives. No more traumatic than having an x-ray, although subsequently reading that x-ray (with God as radiologist) may indeed bring sobriety—even terror. But with that X-ray Aha! comes another call, the call to move away from the truth of that x-ray to the "grace and truth" of the Gospel. That Gospel is God's own "alternative in Christ" offered for the people just diagnosed, a healing to hang their hearts on. "Repent and trust the Good News," was the two-step invitation recorded as Jesus' first

public words in Mark's chapter 1 and throughout his ministry in all four Gospels. That is law and promise proclamation, not "nature and grace."

2. DEUS ABSCONDITUS, A LINK TO OTHER WORLD RELIGIONS An insight arising from law-promise reading of the scriptures, viz., Luther's concept of deus absconditus, humankind's common experience of God-hidden – in contrast to deus revelatus, God-revealed-in-Christ – is a fundamental resource for Lutheran mission theology and practice. Although generally unused (yes, unknown) in today's mission discussions, it is a unique resource for Christian mission in today's "world of faiths." If for no other reason than that the absence of God's grace—the essence of deus absconditus experience—is such common daily life experience throughout the world.

1. The hiddenness of God does not mean that there are no signals of God at all in people's lived experience. On the contrary, God's creation abounds with such signals, as Paul says in Romans 1:19ff: they have been evident "ever since the creation of the world." But not so the Gospel, God's "mercy to make sinners righteous." Out there in our general experience of God in creation such Good News is abscondita, hidden – often contradicted – in the God-encounters all people have in God's creation. That Gospel is what deus revelatus is all about (Rom. 1:16f): "For in it [the Gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith."

2. Deus revelatus is God in the Gospel. Deus

absconditus is God in the law. It is the same “one and only true God” but as different as left-hand and right-hand. Because deus absconditus encounters with God are common among all human creatures – those who trust Christ as well as those who do not – there is common ground here, common “God-experience” for Christians to engage in God-talk with all people of other faiths.

3. USING THE GOSPEL TO COPE WITH DEUS ABSCONDITUS Deus absconditus encounters are not all doom and gloom. God creates and sustains and “cares” for us creatures through the multiple “masks” he wears in these daily life encounters. But they do have their downsides as well, also their dreadful downsides. And that too is common God-experience throughout the human race. What might we learn from beginning interreligious conversation with the daily lived experience of “God hidden”? How do encounters with the hidden God appear in the experience and perception of people of other faiths? That leads to a different focal question for mission conversation: It is not “what do you believe?” but “How do YOU cope?” “What do you have in your God-experience to cope with the downsides of life?”

1. And “having” is a Lutheran key term for faith. “To have Christ”–Christum habere – is a regular synonym for “faith” in Luther’s vocabulary. “Glaubstu, Hastu; Glaubstu nicht, hastu nicht.” [When you believe, you have (something). When you don’t believe, you don’t have (it).] Faith is a having, a possessing of a resource not had before. And with new resources, you can cope as you were not able

to cope before. Yes, even cope with dark side of encounters with deus absconditus.

2. It ought to be obvious. Christians claim to “have Christ” to cope with the deus absconditus encounters of daily life. In order for someone who doesn’t “have Christ” to have him, someone else must offer Christ. Christian mission is precisely such an offering. In Apol. 4 Melanchthon makes the point that the fundamental verb accompanying God’s promise is “offer” (in contrast to the law’s fundamental verb “require”). Both Luther and Melanchthon complained that the medieval church so often “made Christ unnecessary,” and with that it was joining the ranks of the Turks and Jews. The upshot of “sharing” deus absconditus experience in mission conversation and dialogue is to listen for and to hear those signals of people’s need for Christ – the same need(s) the Christian also has living in the same deus absconditus world we all do. It is a coram deo [face-to-face-with-God] need which “necessitates Christ.” Offering Christ is what the missionary is called to do.

9. SOME CONCLUSIONS

1. No one’s day-in/day-out religious experience – whatever their religion – is grace alone. To center inter-religious conversation on grace-experiences leaves vast areas of God-experience untouched, and almost guarantees that Christian grace-talk, centered in the crucified and risen Messiah, will be blurred. The law-promise hermeneutic “saves” such experiential data.
2. Inter-religious conversation that sidelines negative

God-experiences is not speaking the whole truth. To talk about Christian grace-experience without specifying the antithetical God-experience it must cope with does not give the dialogue partner a fair shake. Nor does it clarify the Good and New in the Good News of the one Christians call Lord. Here too a law-promise hermeneutic saves the data.

3. The grace of God in Christ is not simply an unexpected and undeserved experience of goodness, as one missiologist defines it. It is rather a surprising fresh word of mercy from a Creator whom we chronically distrust, and to whom we are unendingly in debt. Might not this fact – Christians' own chronic distrust of their creator, with all its consequences, and their willingness to confess it – serve as a leaven in the dialogue? Even a leveler? Christians come with paradoxical God-experiences and paradoxical faith-confessions. "Lord I believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). And Christians admit to being "simultaneously saint and sinner." Thus, Christians are no "better" in their moral life or the strength of their faith than their dialogue partners. They might even be worse. Their claim is not about themselves, but about a Word they have heard, that "surprising fresh word of mercy," which encourages them to live in hope before the face of God despite all evidence to the contrary. The law-promise hermeneutic "saves" these data.
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Law and Gospel Theology: An Unused Resource for Social Ministry

Colleagues,

First off, A REQUEST FOR FUNDS.

Robin Morgan, Ed and Marie Schroeder have been invited to “do Thursday Theology” at an international conference middle of January 2003 at the University of Aarhus in Denmark. “The Future of Lutheran Theology: Charisms & Contexts” is the conference theme. Folks already registered (61 so far) are from all over the planet.

Both Robin and I, d.v., will be presenting papers there. Today’s ThTh posting is the current draft of Robin’s paper. Next week’s ThTh will show you mine (if I get it done.). After the Aarhus event Marie and I travel further east to St. Petersburg, Russia, for some Thursday Theologizing with Lutheran seminarians there. [Yes, in the middle of winter, that is crazy. But they asked.]

The price tag for the whole ball of wax comes to \$3,000.

So we hold out our tincup and ask for your help to put Thursday Theology into these venues. **Contributions to Crossings are tax-deductible in the USA.** If we get more than we need—wouldn’t that be something!—we’ll earmark the extra for similar sorties next year. E.g., there’s one pending for the Lutheran Seminary in Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia. If promoting this cause is your cuppa tea, **send your check—payable to “Crossings”** – to

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Designate your gift "Aarhus Conference." Thanks.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Law and Gospel Theology: An Unused Resource for Social Ministry

[A Presentation for the Aarhus (Denmark) Conference, Jan. 16-20, 2003]

By Robin J. Morgan

One of the ongoing struggles in Christian life is the transition from Sunday to Monday. What does our relationship with God mean the other six days a week? Especially in our social ministry endeavors, how do we live as Christians? There are many factors, which are relevant to these questions, but I am going to look at only one – our theological foundation.

Lutherans have two useful theological categories through which we can read and understand the Bible and the world – law and gospel. The law is how we learn what is God-pleasing and how God shows us our sin. How we learn what is God-pleasing is called the civil use of the law. How God shows us our sin is the theological use of the law. I will be focusing on the civil use of the law. One scripture verse to keep in mind is Micah 6:8, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?" The civil use of the law is how God gets creation cared for.

The gospel is how we learn what God has done through Jesus

Christ to forgive our sins and reclaim us as God's own. Through Christ we become worthy through no effort of our own. We are redeemed, bought back from Satan by Jesus Christ's sacrifice on our behalf. The gospel is the means by which God gets redemption of the world done. . Even though these definitions very clearly distinguish law and gospel from each other, it is important that we continue to remember these differences when we begin to look at our lives as Christians in the world.

Many Christians think about social ministry by beginning with Christ's admonition to reach out to the world in love. ('as the Father sends me, so send I you"). Though love is a result of Christ's work of redemption in the life of a Christian, it is the civil use of the law that calls each and every human being to care for creation.

The civil use of the law had been in operation long before Jesus of Nazareth came on the scene in first century Palestine. Care of creation has been going on since the beginning. Human beings were first called to care for the world in Genesis ("The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it." Gen. 2:15). Adam and Eve were the first human beings, not the first Lutherans nor even the first Christians. Our first parents were charged with the care of creation as every human being since them has been charged. There is no difference here between Christian, Jew, Hindu, Atheist, Muslim or Wiccan when it comes to this calling. We are all, as human beings, called to care for creation. This care for creation is the civil use of the law.

To narrow the focus to a specific social ministry concern, let's look at Luther's explanation of the seventh commandment in the Large Catechism:

"But beware of how you deal with the poor – there are many of

them now – who must live from hand to mouth. If you act as if everyone has to live by your favor, if you skin and scrape them right down to the bone, if you arrogantly turn away those who need your aid, they will go away wretched and dejected, and, because they can complain to no one else, they will cry out to heaven. Beware of this, I repeat, as if it were the devil himself. Such sighs and cries are no laughing matter, but will have an effect too great for you and all the world to bear. For they will reach God, who watches over poor, troubled hearts, and he will not leave them unavenged. But if you despise and defy this, see whom you have brought upon yourself. If you succeed and prosper, however, you may call God and me liars before the whole world.” [Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000, 419:247]

Luther places care of the poor in the seventh commandment, “You are not to steal.” Luther’s words here and the commandments, which he was explaining, are not exclusively addressed to Christians, but are addressed to all human beings. The Creator’s law, as Luther used it here expresses both uses of the law as the Reformers articulated them: the civil use and the theological use. Caring for the poor is part of our responsibility as human beings, that is an expression of the civil use of the law. Then Luther goes on to use the law theologically by warning us of the consequences of rejecting this responsibility from our Creator. There is no mention of Christ, of his love, of our faith in Him as impetus or motivation to care for the poor. These commandments apply to us whether we are Christians or not. Each and every human being has been mandated by the Creator to participate in the care of creation.

It is the second mandate from God to which Christians alone are called. As human beings, we are responsible for the care of

creation, the civil use of the law. As Christians, we are also called to participate in telling the world of God's promise in Christ, the redemption of creation, through preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments.

Here I believe we can learn from our Pentecostal sisters and brothers. Clodovis Boff, a Brazilian liberation theologian, says that even liberation theology has not been effective with the poorest of the poor in Brazil. As he was exploring the success of the new Pentecostal churches among these people, Boff asked a Baptist cab driver what he thought of the Pentecostal groups and he said, "They are intensive care units for those in misery." [Clodovis Boff, www.sedos.org/english/boff_1.html]

Though there are many reasons the Pentecostals are effective with the poorest of the poor (hospitable atmosphere, strong sense of identity, ethical rigor, institutional flexibility, overflowing emotions – Boff), it is their core theological message that reaches to the very depths of their misery. "You think you have no value, you think you are worthless; but you are wrong. For Jesus, your value is infinite." [John Burdick, *Blessed Anastacia*, New York: Routledge, 1998, 125]

It is vital that we don't let law and gospel blur in our thinking as we work to make sense of the myriad of circumstances which we encounter every day. Christians who have become aware of and committed to care of creation issues through social justice ministries run by other Christians often assume that care of creation is a responsibility of Christians as Christians. However, the fact that we are now finally aware of our responsibility does not change how God originally set up the world and our place in it. I believe that Christians who continue to avail themselves of the nourishment of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Eucharist, prayer and fellowship with other like-minded Christians, can bring a unique perspective to social

ministry, to social justice work. Those of us who know that our worthiness is based on what Jesus Christ did, not on our own actions or inactions, and who know that for Jesus we have infinite value, have a unique kind of freedom to give our lives on behalf of the world. But again, our freedom in Christ does not change the first mandate we were originally given as human beings. Our freedom may enhance our ability to carry out that mandate, but it doesn't change it.

It also doesn't change the second mandate we were given in our baptisms to participate in sharing the good news of our Lord with others. This doesn't mean we coerce people to be baptized, it doesn't mean we force our beliefs on anyone else or that people who are not Christian are somehow sub-human. Instead we are free to offer the joy and peace of our relationship with Jesus to anyone who wants to hear about Him.

When we keep a clear understanding of the differences between law and gospel while also understanding how they work together, they can be useful resources for ministry, particularly social ministry, in our world today. A clear understanding of the civil use of the law, as distinguished from the theological use of the law and as distinguished from the gospel, can help Christians work side by side with all other human beings who respond to the Creator's mandate to care for the creation. By distinguishing social justice issues (care of creation) from our mandate to share the gospel of Jesus Christ (redemption of creation), we are able to move freely among our fellow human beings as fellow workers in the multitude of individual and collective activities that need doing to keep some semblance of social justice and peace in place in our world.

Likewise, our mandate to speak the gospel of Jesus Christ, to participate in the redemption of the world, can be undertaken as Christians who have been set free by the work of our Lord.

Speaking the gospel is not a substitute for taking care of the world, nor is care for creation a substitute for telling hungry souls about the healing power of Jesus. As Christians we have both of these mandates from our God. Law and gospel theology, properly distinguished, is the touchstone we need to carry out both of our responsibilities with integrity and respect for all with whom we live and work. We can stand side by side as equal partners with whoever is working to make the world a better place and when someone asks us about the hope that is in us, we can be ready to give an answer with gentleness and reverence. We have the resources to live our lives as God through Christ would have us live them.