

# **A Theology of Acceptance, Part 1**

## **Edward H. Schroeder**

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A piece of promotional mail occasionally pops up in my university mail box with the title MAKING OURSELVES ACCEPTABLE. The content – as I remember – varies, but the point in the title remains. Although the pamphlet is not directed to the concerns of this conference – as I recall it is always addressed to salesmen advising them how to make themselves and their product acceptable to potential customers – the underlying idea of MAKING OURSELVES ACCEPTABLE does have theological implications, especially when we are thinking about A THEOLOGY OF ACCEPTANCE.

When you come right down to it, the endeavor of the pamphlet in my mail box is doomed to failure. MAKING OURSELVES ACCEPTABLE implies that I am in charge of my own acceptability. In more cases – at least in the most important ones – that is simply not true. And here I do not simply mean to call to mind that, theologically, man cannot make himself acceptable before God (at least not before that God whose criterion for acceptance is that we do not strive to make ourselves acceptable), but the same applies for many if not most of our normal relationships with other people. Whether in intra-human relations I am acceptable or not depends ultimately not on my beauty or personality, humor or talent, or any other quality I have, or act I can perform. On

the contrary, it depends solely on an act of judgment from some person outside me. I am not per se (lit., through my self) acceptable, but I become acceptable finally when someone accepts me. Perhaps my talent, humor, personality play into the picture, but the acceptable quality does not reside there. Acceptability – my being accepted – is something I cannot ultimately control. As every recipient of a “Dear John” letter knows (and every jilted bride too), my acceptability is finally entirely in someone else’s hands. Only when the other person accepts me do I have acceptance; only then have I become acceptable. So the title for that pamphlet would have to be reversed to be more nearly true. Rather than MAKING OURSELVES ACCEPTABLE, OTHERS MAKE ME ACCEPTABLE, or, if I am to go to work actively in the realm of acceptance it can only be in MAKING OTHER SELVES ACCEPTABLE.

## **ACCEPTANCE SEEKER**

What lies behind these opening comments is the truth of human existence, that value judgments about our own human selves do not depend on what we are (or even what we would like to think we are), but they depend on what others say we are. We may try to make ourselves acceptable or beautiful or beloved, but even then we do so in the hope that somehow this will convince some person outside us (or perhaps even trick him into it) to tell us how handsome, or intelligent, or lovely, or strong, or good we are. The wicked queen in “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” is a classic illustration of this reality in mankind. Not yet convinced by her own self-evaluation, she needed the evaluating voice from the outside – in this case the “mirror, mirror on the wall” – to tell her that she really was the “fairest of them all.”

My point here is not whether the mirror was statistically true in its assertion; just as the point of statistical truth is

irrelevant when a child tells his mother that she is the most beautiful mommy in the whole wide world. My point is that for judgments of value (acceptance included) which, as we say, "make life worth while," we depend on the value judgments of someone else. Making life worth while means giving worth to life. We cannot give worth to our own life. If we have it, it is because someone else bestowed it upon us. For our own acceptance, which means someone else's value judgment about us, we are at the mercy of other people.

We cannot force anyone to ascribe value to us – twist their arm and make them say they love us, or think highly of us, or admire us. Value cannot be coerced, it can only be bestowed. If we do occasionally coerce it with Chanel #5 or new clothes or a fat wallet, it leads to such tragic or ludicrous situations wherein the "mirror, mirror on the wall," this time as a human being says: o.k., I told you that I loved you; now get out! If there is not at least a small amount of freely bestowed, personally given (not bought) ascription of value and worth, then we know it to be true that we are not the most wonderful sugar daddy or most beautiful mommy in the world after all.

We live by the ascription of value that others bestow upon us or else we have no value at all. This is a properly secularized form of a biblical statement: Man does not live by bread alone, but by the words that proceed from the mouth of his fellowman: "I love you, you're great; you're hired; you're fired; you've had it; I forgive you, darling." Even without getting explicitly theological, the truth is that in human life with fellow humans we do not make ourselves acceptable. We cannot. Others must do it for us, or it does not happen at all and we are unacceptable.

But now it is high time to get more explicitly theological – and subversively we have already been doing so. For this

characteristic of human life that we have been discussing –being dependent on other persons for the acceptance and value judgments that make life worth while – is itself a theological fact. (Theological fact = real reality, not imagined or hypothetical, but actual, factual. Biblical stance: What God says, that is reality. Quantitatively: Let there be...and Qualitatively: And it was good. Depart from me, ye accursed. Damned sinner. Forgiven sinner. Whatever God says about me that is what I really am.)

Man is an acceptance-seeker. He craves value. Even if he does not know or could not care less about God, he wants someone outside himself to say: Behold it (you) is good. There are two theological facts (realities) in this concern of man to make himself acceptable. One is that his life is not complete without the ascriptions of value and worth and acceptance by someone from the outside. Or, expressed in other words, man is a dialogical creature (if not, why does he have language?) and in speaking and responding with someone outside himself, value and worth (whether pro or con) are added to the reality of his life. Secondly, in the very fact of our craving acceptance, we testify that we do not have it, or at least that something is out of order in the over-all design. Theologically, this can be expressed in the words of Augustine: "Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee." Even the secularist acknowledges that man is a social animal, structured for fellowship with other men, and the human being who is completely a lone wolf, is no human at all. Perhaps that is why we call him the lone wolf.

## **THE PLACE OF ACCEPTANCE IN CREATION**

The qualitative judgment which we call acceptance is built right into the created order of the universe, according to biblical theology. This is very clearly the case with reference to man

himself—and we have noticed this reality in our opening observations about the “normal” relations between humans. To the man of the Old Testament this is also true for non-human creation as well. In the creation account in Genesis 1 God makes value judgments of the non-human creation in the repeated phrase: AND GOD SAW THE LIGHT AND IT WAS GOOD. The Hebrew man did not view this sentence as though God was the foreman or inspector in the construction of the component elements of the world. For the seeing is not that of the neutral by-stander. God is not the spectator in His creation, not even after He has brought it into existence. But He is also the evaluator of the existing creation, now that it is in existence. And to be looked at by God is surely not neutral. Be cause God looks at it, because He turns His face toward, therefore it becomes valuable, is GOOD.

This is the common motif throughout the entire Old Testament: that when God turns His face toward someone, acceptance occurs. When God turns His face away – or, as we still say in our own language idiom, when God turns His back on someone – then that man is rejected. Those Old Testament heroes of the faith who “knew God face to face” were not necessarily more intimate with God from the viewpoint of their penetration into His secrets, but they were the very valued and valuable accepted men of God because god kept His face turned toward them. For them the Aaronic benediction was their way of life: THE LORD BLESSED THEM AND KEPT THEM (in that He ) MADE HIS FACE TO SHINE UPON THEM AND WAS GRACIOUS TO THEM. LIFTED UP HIS COUNTENANCE UPON THEM AND GAVE THEM PEACE. PEAAACE, GRACE, BLESSING, these are not three separate items incorporated in the benediction, but they are the terms of acceptance that refer to god’s turning His face toward His creation and establishing relationships to it.

Before the light-wave theory was formulated to explain human vision, the eye was considered the active agent in establishing

contact with the observed object. We think of the eye as a receiving organ of the light waves bouncing off all reality around us. For biblical man the eye is more active and one can turn his vision off or no at will. We still have something of this notion present in our use of the term when we say: He walked right past me and did not even see me. He did not see me because he did not want to see me, even though in terms of our understanding of vision the light waves were bouncing off me into his eyes all the time.

AND GOD LOOKED AT CREATION AND IT WAS GOOD. Not intrinsically is it good, even by virtue of His having created it. It becomes good when God deigns to look at it, to remain in contact with it, to will on His own freely to be related to it, and from this it gets its value. There is no eliciting of god's approval on the basis of some already possessed or achieves value or goodness. The posture of creation is one of pure receptivity.

In the Genesis creation stories the same perspective is retained and expanded. When man is involved, god not only looks at His human creatures, but He also talks with them. The nature of man's acceptance is most easily viewed in the negative mode in which it appears in Genesis 3, namely, then, after it has been forfeited. Instead of living on the receiving end "by every word that preceedeth from the mouth of God" and thereby having everything that makes life worth while, man is tempted to seek self-achieved worth and acceptance. "To be like God" is the teaser. To be on an equal basis with God – that, to be sure, is really a valuable status – to be accepted by rights on the divine level itself – but to be so on the base of an act of his own and/or manipulation of the creation that is at his disposal. One might say that the eating of the fruit in the garden is the Chanel #5 of antiquity whereby men have always striven to MAKE THEMSELVES ACCEPTABLE. Even such a Chanel #5 treatment with other human beings or with God Himself can seem so sensible and

so true; the truth is that it is a lie. Like all lies, it is not an obvious falsehood, but it is a near-truth, so near that it can pass for truth if there is just the least bit of desire in the hearer to have the near-truth be the whole truth.

In the Genesis creation the whole truth is that man is in God's image. The near-truth of the tempter's lie is equality with God. The whole truth is that man is structured to be a God-reflector, and as such a reflector he functions only when he lets the light source outside of himself shine upon him so that it can be reflected to the creatures and creation round about. Man, the God-reflector, is designed to be the key component in God's communicating and relating to His entire creation. The lunge toward equality with God is like a mirror striving to be a light. It is ludicrous and ridiculous for a reflector to strive to be a source. The near-truth is that the mirror can function as sub-source when it is aligned with the genuine source. Light can only come from a mirror when light shines on the mirror. By itself the mirror has no brilliance. In a pitch-black room with no external light a mirror on the wall is indistinguishable from black tile on the floor.

## **HIDING FROM GOD**

The truth about man's acceptability is that on his own terms he is unacceptable. That is the eye-opener experienced by man, referred to in Genesis 3:7, "Then the eyes of both were opened and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons." Setting aside for the moment the implications for sexuality, this verse is the main assertion of what happened as a result of the fall. It must be viewed in connection with the assertion that stands at the outset of the temptation narrative, viz., "And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed." Claus Westermann in his Facet Books publication on Genesis makes much of the point

that it is shame and not sin which is the central item in the fall. The emphatic word for man's paradisaal state is shame-less and not the word sinless. For our purposed, too, shame is more closely connected with acceptable and unacceptable than the word "sin" initially is in our language. "The phenomenon of shame...always refers to a defect, since it is a reaction to being unmasked or to the knowledge that one has been unmasked...therefore always has reference to something like sins, failures, or wrongs doings." "Such unmasking is possible only when the relationship between man and God is ruptured." We might say man is ashamed when he is unmasked, but he is unmasked only when he no longer has God "covering" him. The phenomenon of being ashamed is a pointer to "this riddle of man who was made by God and yet in his own existence invariably exemplifies a telltale defect." Because of the centrality of shame in the narrative, Westermann sees the gift of clothing by God to the man as a meager "yet might sign of God's forgiveness. Life which has been freely given to humans who then forfeited it, is a life which is made possible only by God's forgiveness. This is purposely not stated here, but only hinted at through the sign. Thus verse 21 is a modest and restrained indication of the goal of the story which began with man's creation."

THE TRUTH ABOUT MAN, EVERYMAN (and that's what the Hebrew word Adam means) IS THAT ON HIS OWN TERMS HE IS UNACCEPTABLE. Besides the shame which he feels, Genesis refers to fear and the desire to hide. Not only does the man seek to hide himself physically from God (also somewhat ludicrous, as though the creation itself could insulate one of its own from the Creator who brought all of them into existence), but he seeks to hide morally by refusing to acknowledge his unacceptability – which he personally does acknowledge, else he would not be hiding. He passes the buck for his unacceptability to the women, and the woman passes it on to the serpent, and both of them imply who



they really hold responsible for the whole business. In passing the blame to the woman, the man implies, "And you know, God, who put this woman into my life." And not to be outdone, the woman passes it on to the serpent, implying, "And you know, God, who put serpents into the Garden."

Besides being unacceptable, life after the fall is complicated by the unwillingness to admit unacceptability. The fall shows that man refuses to live solely from the posture of receptivity, on the receiving end of "every creative and evaluative word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." The fear which drives him to hide is the fear that, granted his current unacceptability, he cannot any longer survive on the receiving end; that if he admits he is unacceptable, God will not accept him. But this too is a lie and perhaps the more significant one in the creation story – at least for us, more important than the lie about trying to move up from the imago dei to being like God. For we are no longer in such a paradisaal situation to even be able to fall prey to such an option. But we all now live "after the fall" is that "God will not be merciful to me if I am a sinner," and that therefore I will have to demonstrate to God, as the Pharisee in the parable with the tax-collector, that I am not really as unacceptable as all that after all. The temptation after the fall for man is much less his disrespect for God's law as it is distrust in God's gospel. And yet the truth of existence after the fall is not that you have to become guiltless and then God accepts you, but that "God is merciful to sinners." It was the tax collector who trusted this gospel, who went down to his house "Justified" (i.e., accepted), rather than the Pharisee with his honest report of self-achieved acceptance. Even an unacceptable man can live on the receiving end of God's hand and not be destroyed, but survive. Even and especially unacceptable man is accepted by God. That is the genius of biblical faith. That is the reason for the writing of the entire

Scriptures. Unacceptable man becomes acceptable when God accepts him. The man of faith then, as Paul Tillich phrases it, is the man who “courageously accepts himself as accepted in spite of his being unacceptable.”

- A. Such faith is based on no pre-conditions within the man.
- B. It is based on his participation in something that transcends him, says Tillich. We would say, on God’s turning His face toward the unacceptable man and letting it shine (i.e., smile) upon him, creating communion and value.
- C. This leads to the man of faith being able to use the power (value of the acceptable coming outside himself from God) to take the anxiety of his known guilt and condemnation into himself and live with it. Perhaps here the New Testament would suggest another perspective – not in the direction of taking guilt into myself and having the courage to live with it, but unloading the guilt by the strange alchemy of the atonement and now having the courage to live without it.

The playwright Arthur Miller, one of the most penetrating spokesmen in American letters for the theological realities of the biblical tradition, has written his most recent drama around this very theme of seeking to survive in the world by trying to hide my guilty unacceptability. The very title of the drama makes that plain: AFTER THE FALL. Every major character in the play is personally responsible for the fix he is in, but he convinces himself that he himself is innocent, the victim of others. In striving to live as though they were personally innocent, they destroy each other and the love that bound them to one another.

The central character, Quentin, pleads with his second wife, Maggie: DO THE HARDEST THING OF ALL...SEE YOUR OWN HATRED AND

LIVE. In a Life article (2/7/64) Miller himself says: "Maggie is a character in a play about the human animal's unwillingness or inability to discover in himself the seeds of his own destruction...She exemplifies the self-destructiveness which finally comes when one views oneself as pure victim. And she most perfectly exemplifies this view because she comes so close to being a pure victim – of parents, of a puritanical sexual code and of her exploitation as an entertainer."

"Indeed, it is one of the play's major points that there is not and cannot truly be a divestment of guilt. But there can be – and if life is to be lived there must be – a recognition of the individual's part in the evil he sees and abhors."

"It is always and forever the same struggle: to perceive somehow our own complicity with evil is a horror not to be borne. Much more reassuring to see the world in terms of totally innocent victims and totally evil instigators of the monstrous violence we see all about us. At all costs, never disturb our innocence."

"But what is the most innocent place in any country? Is it not the insane asylum? There people drift through life truly innocent, unable to see into themselves at all. The perfection of innocence, indeed, is madness. What Quentin in this play tried desperately to do is to open Maggie's eyes to her own complicity with her destruction; it is an act of love, for it requires that he open himself to his own complicity if his imprecations are to carry any weight; he must, in short, give up his own claim to innocence in order to win her back from self-destruction."

In his final soliloquy Quentin, seeing Holga, the war refugee, in the distance, says: "that woman hopes! Or is that exactly why she hopes, because she knows? What burning cities taught her and the death of love taught me – that we are very dangerous...Is the

knowing all? To know and even happily that we meet unblessed: not in some garden of wax fruit and painted trees, that lie of Eden, but after, after the fall, after many, many deaths. Is the knowing all?...and the wish to kill is never killed, but with some gift of courage one may look into its face when it appears, and with a stroke of love – as to an idiot in the house – forgive it; again and again...forever?”

What Miller labels the “lie of Eden” is the attempt to live as though it were not “after the fall” for everyman, myself included. It is a lie to try to hide as Adam and Eve did and act as though one is innocent. But it takes something big to overcome the fear of being guilty not only in fact, but in truth (i.e., not trying to pretend it is not there). Miller says it takes “Some gift of courage” to look one’s own guilt in the face.” And indeed it does. It takes “some gift” indeed. The Christian can say: “I’ll say it takes some gift of courage alright to live like that. It takes nothing less than the gift of Jesus Christ Himself for that kind of courageous living. That’s really some gift!”

## **PHARISEE HERESY**

It was one of the insights of the Lutheran Reformation that the biggest sin is to refuse to let God treat you as a sinner. What makes the Pharisee in the New Testament unacceptable is not that his record is besmirched while he thought it was quite clean. His unacceptable status does not lie in the absence of certain qualities which he still has to have if he is to be considered acceptable. But it lies in what the Lutheran reformers labeled the *opinio legis*, the opinion that I can legislate my acceptability if I just work hard enough on it. The *opinio legis* refuses to admit that I live “after the fall.” It is the chronically recurring unconscious, sub-conscious, automatic notion that I must make myself acceptable. Especially for those

of us who live “after the fall” it is the original sin, which originates all thought, word and deeds. Because this opinio legis is classically incarnate in the New Testament Pharisee, I call it “Pharisee heresy.”

There is a good deal of common sense behind this Pharisee heresy, which explains its durability and perennial nature. In normal everyday life we do ascribe value to people and objects because we see valued qualities in them. My children like ice cream cones not by virtue of something in the children that automatically loves inverted conical shapes with spheres on the top. But there is something in the cone itself – the texture, the flavor, the sweetness, the coolness – that makes them say that they just love ice cream cones. The same applies to our love of music, of art, of nature, and in many respects also of other human beings (although with this last reference I am somewhat coming in conflict with opening paragraphs at the beginning of this paper). There is something in the art, music, sunset, or baseball, a beautiful woman, a handsome man, that attracts us, we say. Something in it that draws us to it. The desirable quality in the object alerts us to it and because it is fun, or it is beautiful, we like it, enjoy it, get something out of it. The object has intrinsic qualities in itself, therefore I value it. The same applies in large measure to my appreciation of other human beings, although we indicated at the outset that in the realm of intimate personal relations that is not enough, or even that can be the end of the affair if that is all there is – if people just use each other for what value they already find in the other person for the something they get out of it. But in much of personal relations we do work this way.

Now because so much of normal life runs in this fashion it would make sense to conclude that God too operates by this pattern. He likes what is good and therefore likeable; what isn't good and likeable with intrinsic qualities of value in itself, He does

not like. Conclusion: if you want God to like you, approve of you, accept you, justify you, get busy and get some of these qualities, or, if you already have a few, develop them.

Such a sensible transfer from human relations to divine relations makes sense but it is false. This view was classically rejected by the Lutheran Reformation, if not already rejected even more classically by the preaching of St. Paul, and more classically still by the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. In the Heidelberg Theses of 1518 Luther said such a theologizing that saw God working analogously to man, albeit in infinitely greater quantity, was a theology of glory, finally man's glory, and was to be rejected. The last of the twenty-eight theological propositions summarizes this: GOD'S LOVE DOES NOT FIND THAT WHICH IS PLEASING TO IT, BUT CREATES IT. MAN'S LOVE COMES INTO BEING THROUGH THAT WHICH IS PLEASING TO IT. In commenting on this proposition, Luther notes that the second part makes clear sense to all people. Because the ice cream cone is pleasant, I just love it. But the first part is not clear unless we have recourse to the Scriptures and see exactly how God has operated in the history of Israel and the infant Christian church. Then it too becomes clear because "God's love (which can and does live in man, i.e., Christ's men) loves sinners, evil person, fools, and weaklings in order to make them righteous, good, wise, and strong." Rather than seeking its own good, the love of God flows forth and BESTOWS good. Therefore sinners are attractive because they are the objects of God's love; they are not the objects of his love because they are attractive. For this reason man's love avoids sinners and evil persons. Thus Christ says: "For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners." This is the love of the cross (Luther's contrast to a glory-theology is a cross-theology), born of the cross, which turns in the direction where it does not find good (already existing which it may enjoy), but where it may confer good upon

the bad and needy person. Man's mind is only attracted to the virtues that do already exist, that is, the true and good. "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35), says the apostle. Hence Psalm 41 states, "Blessed is he who considers the poor," for the human intellect is not naturally able to be attracted to an object which does not exist (e.g., the non-existent virtues) in a person who is only poor and needy (whose neediness only testifies to what he does not have). Man's mind judges according to appearances, is a respecter of persons, and judges according to that which can be seen, whereas God's love is no respecter of persons, not judging man on the basis of his past biography – what he had made of himself. God's love judges man in terms of his created destiny – what God wants to make out of him – and then goes to work to bring it about.

The focal point for this insight into the character of God's love, whereby unacceptable men are accepted and thereby become intrinsically acceptable, is, of course, Jesus Christ. This beloved son is God's love in action, loving the unlovable and unacceptable and making them attractive and acceptable. From the wealth of biblical metaphors and word pictures for this issue, I propose to confine myself to a couple of points with reference to Christ which seem pertinent to the fact of human acceptance in Jesus Christ.

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## **Using Luther's Concept of Deus absconditus for Christian**

# Mission to Muslims

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[Presented at the Luther Research Congress, Copenhagen, Denmark,  
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## Thesis:

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" – especially to Muslims.

## Prolog:

I know of no Luther texts that speak very directly about Christian mission to the Turks. In scattered places [e.g., his Ascension Day sermons on the Mark 16 pericope for that day, Mark's version of the Great Commission] he encourages Christians who come under Turkish rule, or are prisoners-of-war, to be evangelists among the Turks. However, he knows that it won't be easy, and may even be impossible. But he does not speak of a program of "foreign missions" anywhere that I have found. My proposal in this paper is to take Luther's notion of *deus absconditus* and work from it to build a theology of mission for today, not only to Muslims, but to all people in the "sea of faiths" (some even claiming to be Christian) in today's pluralist world.



# **I. Introduction: Are Missions Missing in Luther's Theology? The Accepted Wisdom in Missiology Today Says Yes.**

Lutheran churches did not move actively into "foreign" mission work in the wake of the Reformation era nor in the next two centuries that followed. This delay has nourished the widespread opinion that in Luther – and other 16th century Lutheran reformers – "We miss not only missionary action, but even the idea of missions, in the sense in which we understand them today. And this . . . because fundamental theological views hindered them from giving their activity, and even their thoughts, a missionary direction." So says Gustav Warneck in his *History of Protestant Missions*, 1882ff. [Citation from the 1901 English translation, p. 9]

Warneck's work was itself a critical response to other Lutheran mission scholars of his day (Ostertag, Plitt, Kalkar) who claimed the opposite for Luther. But, as far as I know, Warneck's work was the only one that got translated into English. And English is the language of missiology. So his judgment has become the accepted wisdom among today's mission scholars, including some who are Lutherans.

## **II. An Additional Barrier in Missiology Today that Sidelines Luther**

The reigning blueprint in today's missiology is "*Missio Dei*," a *terminus technicus* proposed for Christian mission just 50 years ago (1952) at the International Mission Conference in Willingen, Germany. The current use of the concept (which may not be what

Willingen intended) across the missiological spectrum – from Mennonites and Evangelicals to Mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics – sees God's mission to be all the good things God is doing in and for the world, with Jesus the Christ as God's grand finale in that mission. Christians thus are called to "join in God's mission" with its accents on peace, justice, wholeness of human life and care for the environment – along with salvation for sinners. Important for Lutheran perceptions is to note that there is no fundamental distinction between God's salvation agenda in Christ and all the other good things – care and preservation – that God is doing throughout creation.

It is therefore no surprise that such a unitary vision of *Missio Dei* – a big package of all the good things God is doing – pushes Luther to the sidelines. For Luther's basic claim is that God has TWO missions in the world and that all God's work, even all of God's "good" work, cannot be brought under a single rubric. Luther reads the Scriptures proclaiming that God operates ambidextrously – left hand and right hand – and that these two operations are quite different. One classic text for this is 2 Cor. 3 where the apostle distinguishes the serious differences between God's two ministries (*diakoniai*), God's two covenants or dispensations (*diakhkai*). Those two Greek terms are the closest NT words we have for mission—and in using two Greek terms, the apostle says God pursues two missions, not just one, in the world. Mission theology drawing on such a left-hand/right-hand distinction in God's work is an almost unknown voice in today's missiology. I will seek to show below that Luther does have a mission theology, and that it builds on his Biblical exegesis about an ambidextrous God.

Today's regnant missiological paradigm built on such unitary *Missio Dei* theology envisions mission practice as follows: to seek out the good and godly elements, God's "grace," already revealed among a given people before the Christian gospel ever

gets there. When that data is in hand the mission-task then is to link God's Grace-revelation-in-Christ to the Grace-of-God people have already encountered in their lives. Mission does bring something new, but not qualitatively new. "When the missionaries arrived with the Gospel, they found that God was already there working among the people." That is one way such mission theology gets expressed nowadays.

Luther would ask: "Which God was already working there? God-hidden or God-revealed?" Better expressed, since Luther is a Biblical monotheist: "The one and only God was already there, but in which format? Hidden or revealed?" And if the people did not already have "the merits and benefits of Christ" in the faith they lived, that would answer the question.

### **III. Some Critical Reflection on this–**

1) The *Missio Dei* notion just described builds implicitly (even if unconsciously) on the medieval scholastic axiom: *Gratia non tollit naturam, sed perfecit*. [God's] grace does not abolish nature, but perfects it.

2) The Lutheran Reformation rejected that axiom for Christian theology and replaced it with a law/promise hermeneutic for reading the scriptures, and a corollary left-hand/right-hand hermeneutic for reading the world. That two-phase hermeneutic grounds Lutheran missiology in relating the Word to the world.

3) Thus God's manifold works in creation, the first creation – good and godly though they surely are – are distinctly different from what God is doing in Christ, God's new creation. They are God's good gifts (e.g., Luther's listing of them in the Small Catechism on the Creed's first article), but not (yet) God's

grace, the “grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

4) One of Luther’s favored terms for God at work in the world apart from Christ is *deus absconditus*. He uses this term with several different nuances. In all of them, however, God’s hiddenness does not mean that there is no evidence of God at all. *Deus absconditus* is a revealer. Theistic evidence abounds. But in that abundant evidence a fundamental aspect of God remains un-revealed – specifically the God-data needed “for us and for our salvation.”

## Three nuances

a) God’s work in creation proceeds via “God’s masks,” the *larva dei*. God’s creatures are the masks, with God hiding behind the masks. That is already a “mercy” on God’s part, for if we were to confront *deus nudus* [God naked], we would die on the spot.

b) Yet even though it is a “mercy” on God’s part to stay behind creation’s masks, that much mercy does not yet redeem anything in creation, least of all humans. Even more “hidden” in God’s left-hand working in creation is God’s mercy that does redeem, God’s mercy toward sinners. That mercy, the *favor dei* [God’s favor], comes as *deus revelatus* [God revealed]. That term for Luther is not just any “pulling back the veil” on God’s part, but God exposing a merciful heart to sinners – both in its promissory format in the OT and its fulfilled format in the crucified and risen Messiah.

c) Yet even here in the mercy actions of *deus revelatus*, another sort of hiddenness surfaces. God’s mercy in Christ comes *sub cruce tecta* [covered under a cross], not so much “hidden” so that it is not visible at all, but “covered” under what looks like the opposite [*sub contrario objectu* = under its contrary opposite]. The most bizarre contrary opposite, of course, is the

cross itself, both Christ's own and our own. Yet Christ's cross is manifold mercy. By his stripes we are healed. And taking up our own cross to follow him conforms us to God's same mercy-management "for us and for our salvation."

5) I propose Luther's first two meanings of "hidden God" above – God hiding behind creation's masks, which leaves God's saving mercy still hidden – as a planet-wide common denominator for building a Lutheran mission theology. Both the person witnessing to Christ and the conversation partner not (yet) enjoying "the merits and benefits of Christ" have this broad base of common experience of *deus absconditus*. Granted, that's not yet Gospel, not yet redemptive, but it is a common starting point, where there are common places for conversation—and finally for the question: "How do you cope in your encounters with hidden God? You tell me how you cope, and I'll tell you how I do." That is a much more "Lutheran" question to focus on than "What do you believe about God? You tell me and I'll tell you."

## IV. Finally to Luther

1. At the end of his explanation of the Apostles Creed in the Large Catechism Luther says: "These 3 articles of the Creed, therefore, separate and distinguish us Christians from all other people on earth. All who are outside this Christian people, whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites – even though they believe in and worship only the one, true God – nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing, and therefore they remain in eternal wrath and damnation. For they do not have the LORD Christ, and, besides, they are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit." [**Book of Concord**. Kolb-Wengert, edd., p. 440 (66)]

[German text: "Daruemb scheiden und sondern diese Artikel des

Glaubens uns Christen von allen andern Leuten auf Erden. Denn was ausser der Christenheit ist, es seien Heiden, Tuerken, Jueden oder falsche Christen und Heuchler, ob sie gleich nur einen wahrhaftigen Gott glaeuben und anbeten, so wissen sie doch nicht, was [wie] er gegen ihn gesinnet ist, koennen sich auch keiner Liebe noch Guts zu ihm versehen, daruemb sie in ewigen Zorn und Verdamnis bleiben. Denn sie den Herrn Christum nicht haben, dazu mit keinen Gaben durch den heiligen Geist erleuchtet und begnadet sind.”]

2. People who “believe in and worship only the one, true God [but] nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them” are people who have indeed encountered God, God as *deus absconditus*, to use Luther’s vocabulary. They have not encountered *deus revelatus*, God revealed in Christ.

3. With no “Christ-encounter,” they “do not know what God’s attitude is toward them,” viz., God’s merciful attitude toward sinners. They do not know the Gospel. Not knowing the Gospel (never having heard it), they cannot trust it, and the last two sentences in the citation above are the inevitable chain reaction.

4. Luther does not confine this analysis to the Turks, but to all “*was ausser der Christenheit ist.*” So initially I propose to proceed with the same general perspective for all mission theology reflection, and later come to specific focus on the Turks, i.e., Islam.

5. At first Luther’s evaluation of heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites is surprising: “They believe in and worship only the one, true God . . .” “Only the one, true God”? What does that mean? Since Christ is absent in such believing and worshipping – “they do not have the LORD Christ” – the object of their faith and worship must be *deus absconditus*,

the one, true God, but God with his mercy-for-sinners undisclosed.

6. Remember that 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."

7. *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. Put into the format of the creed: encountering *deus absconditus* [Romans 1] is a first-article relationship with God – in whatever form it may take – but not (yet) a second-article or third-article encounter with God that leads to "new creation."

8. 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" as *Anknuepfungspunkt* for Christians to engage in God-talk with "heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites."

9. This proposal is in conscious contrast to the widespread axiom in missiology today that "common experience of God's **grace**" is a point of contact for Christian conversation with people of other faiths. The Good News of God's mercy in Christ is not "common experience" in the God-encounters of daily life,

even those that do indeed bring blessings. Those are *deus absconditus* encounters, if for no other reason than that God's mercy in Christ is not accessible there. It is *abscondita*.

10. Our common human experience of *deus absconditus* is not all gloom and doom. It includes all the gifts of creation that make human life possible and even enjoyable. See Luther's gift-list in his explanation to the creed's first article in the Small Catechism. "*Alles ist Gabe.*" But there always comes a "but." "But" none of those good gifts suffice to get sinners forgiven, to remedy the "*des alles ich ihm [Gott] schueldig bin*" [for all of which I am already in debt to God] with which Luther concludes that first-article explanation in his catechism. God's gifts of creation are gifts that obligate us receivers to "thank and to praise, to serve and obey him. This is most certainly true." And where is there one human who is "paid up" in fulfilling these obligations? For just one day, let alone for a lifetime?

11. Hidden here is God's grace and mercy for sinners who aren't paying up – who can't pay up – their "debts." Forgiveness is also a gift, but a grace-gift with a qualitatively different character from God's gifts in creation. This grace-gift covers failed obligations. It does not impose new ones. But what about the common "God-experience" of unfulfilled obligations, the common experience of the consequences of "*lex semper accusat*"?

12. *Deus absconditus* encounters have their downsides, 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 the opening question for mission conversation proposed above: "How do YOU cope?" Where in their own "grace" experiences



do they find resources for coping with the obligatory aspect of creaturely gifts received, and with the consequences of failed accountability in meeting such divine debts?

13. Not exactly parallel, but close, are these words from Kosuke Koyama, once a Christian missionary in Buddhist Thailand. He discovered common denominators in linking his own “non-grace” – yes, non-faith – experience with that of his Buddhist neighbors. “We are just alike. We want money. We want position. We want honor. We are both concerned about ourselves. We are failing to practice what the Buddha or Christ commanded. We are quick in judging others and very slow in judging ourselves.” Koyama, himself a Luther-devotee, does not link this to *deus absconditus*. Yet his words do signal what both he and his Buddhist neighbors “don’t have, don’t receive” from their common daily life encounters with *deus absconditus*.

14. And “having” is one of the key terms in the Luther citation above. “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*.

15. So a missionary coming from this *deus absconditus* perspective would first of all listen as people tell of the God they believe and worship, listen for what they do have, anticipating that since/if they do not claim the Lord Christ, they do indeed not have him. Signals of such “not having” are consistent with *deus absconditus* encounters: “not knowing God’s [merciful] attitude toward them, [consequently] having no confidence of God’s love and blessing, remaining in eternal

wrath and damnation, not being illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.”

16. Note that all of these benefits are centered in one’s relationship to God, *coram deo* data, and all of them a “having,” a possessing that people did not have before. E.g., the freedom that comes with “having Christ” is first of all a freedom at the point where it is often least expected: *coram deo*, in our relationship with God. The unitary *Missio Dei* perspective widespread today, while not ignoring faith (=having Christ), in no way makes faith’s *coram deo* agenda so central to the mission task as Luther does here. Primary items in such *missio dei* agenda are in Luther’s language God’s left-hand work in the world and/or the fruits of faith, once the *coram deo* agenda is healed. But the focus on “having Christ” for *coram deo* healing is a very minor melody. To modify Hamlet a bit: “To have, or not to have (the merits and benefits of Christ) – that is the question.”

17. It ought to be obvious. In order for someone to “have Christ,” someone else must offer Christ. Christian mission is precisely such an offering. In Apology 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* need which “necessitates Christ.” That Christ-offer is what the missionary is called to do.

## **IV. Now to Islam: Deus Absconditus and Deus Revelatus in the Life Experience of Muslims.**

Selections from texts in the Appendix below:

1. Luther Engelbrecht, missionary to Muslims in India: "What's Good, What's New in the Gospel for Muslims?"
2. Lamin Sanneh. Born and raised in Muslim West Africa [Gambia], now Prof. of Missions and World Christianity at Yale University. "Muhammed, Prophet of Islam, and Jesus Christ, Image of God: A Personal Testimony," *Int'l Bulletin of Missionary Research* (October 1984), p. 169- 174.
3. "Muslims Tell . . . 'Why I Chose Jesus,'" an article in *Mission Frontiers* (March 2001)

## **V. Some Conclusions**

- 1) No one's day-in/day-out religious experience – whatever their religion – is grace alone.
- 2) 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.
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.
- 4) 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-admissions. “Lord I believe; help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24). And Christians admit to being “simultaneously saint and sinner.”

5. 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 encourages them to live in hope before the face of God despite all evidence to the contrary.

6. Inter-religious conversation that sidelines the 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.

7. When Christians do not hear from the dialogue partners how they articulate their own negative daily life experiences of the divine, and what resources they “have” to bring them through their own valleys of the shadow, then Christians are left impoverished, and the conversation is skewed.

8. It may sound negative to push religious dialogue in the direction of humankind’s common experience of *deus absconditus*, but it does bear promise. First, it ecumenizes the project to include the whole human race. Everyone has personal data useful for the conversation. Everybody can do it. It is not the preserve of the elite. Second, it’s existential, not cerebral, – about life, not beliefs. Though beliefs may eventually enter, the conversation begins on common ground. Remember the Koyama citation above. Third, the standard barricades in Christian-

Muslim conversations – Trinity, Christ's deity, jihad, morality – are moved away from center focus. Fourth, it's "easier" to get to Gospel. What the Christian conversation partner has to offer is the Jesus story as Good News – something Good and something New – both for Christians coping with their own experience of *deus absconditus*, and for the parallel experience of their Muslim conversation partners.

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## Appendices

### APPENDIX A.

Luther Engelbrecht gives his reflections on 25 years in mission to Muslims in India.

"Why Muslims choose Jesus? What for them is Good News? The quranic material about Jesus is quite attractive. The extensive Islamic traditional material [Hadith] in my opinion, is even more so. What more do we have to offer? The Incarnation and the Cross, against both of which most Muslims are well inoculated. Following what I understood was our Lord's own self presentation ("Messianic secret" and all), I shared Jesus with my Muslim "audience" in India particularly as Luke portrayed Him, serving both genders and all segments of society with love and compassion, portraying the "signs" that Jesus did (of which the Qur'an and Hadith have an impressive array) rather as expressions of love and compassion instead of signs of power. Of course, the only "sign" that Jesus made much of (except perhaps in the "semeion" Gospel of John!) could come only at the end, again as in the self presentation of Jesus.

As the meaning of "agape" emerges in the ministry of Jesus and

the involvement of the Father therein, its and His ultimate expression in the Cross takes on new meaning. The cross denied in the Qur'an represents the defeat of God and His special prophet/apostle/word/spirit 'Isa ibn Maryam. The true Cross of Christian faith and proclamation is something else, coming at the end and followed by the resurrection and the ascension in different order and with completely different significance from the quranic story. Islam's "Theology of Glory"-approach, of course, is more attractive to "the flesh". Those who "choose" to follow the crucified One rather than the Victor at Badr and Khaybar (as today's Muslim Palestinians remember!) are usually people who resonate with the Prince of Peace (would that all those who profess to be His followers were the same!).

## **APPENDIX B.**

From Lamin Sanneh Born and raised in Muslim West Africa [Gambia], now Prof. of Missions and World Christianity at Yale University, member of the Roman Catholic Church

Herewith a summary of his article [not easy to understand] in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Oct. 1984, "Muhammed, Prophet of Islam, and Jesus Christ, Image of God: A Personal Testimony."

1."Divinity is compromised by personification in Islam." [For God to get close to being a human person would contradict God being God.] "Nevertheless the Prophet came very close to personifying God in handing to us God's revelation. He was more than a prophet. We were taught to imitate his example. He became for us an intercessor. At that level 'he bore our infirmities.'"

2. Citing specific passages of the Q: "Within its own terms Islam was affirming the inescapability of personal religion." "Muhammad as the devotional magnetic pole of Islam brought

personal religion within range of the ordinary worshiper. But he also released us from a cramped transcendentalism" [Allah being so far away].

3. "This was an abatement, not of God's sovereignty, but of that view of it which rejects that it could have human proportions." [Sanneh is constantly arguing with the "orthodox" interpreters of Islam who claim that Allah is untouched by anything human.] "For the fact is that God did establish decisive and meaningful contact with the historical man Muhammad." M. was our ally and help. "M. the intercessor had . . . brought God within range [of us]." "This makes short work of rigid transcendence."

4. "If human striving [jihad] is worth anything at all, it has to be worth the Creator having a stake in it, of his being at risk in our risks and vindicated in our moral life." This leads Sanneh to speak of "God's unfathomable compassion, what in my language we call his 'numbing' capacity to take on our suffering." Thus there is "intimacy [which] rests on a genuine reciprocity. If we can go on from there . . . the gap narrows considerably between that and the biblical account of Jesus Christ as the divine breakthrough in human form."

5. This possibility "scandalized Muslim thinkers, and a defense was quickly mounted to guard against adopting a human role for God. Yet even al-Ghazali (d.1111), foremost critic of making Allah human, still leans in that direction. "We were shackled to dogma . . . [B]ut our hearts knew better, and here [in the texts he cites] we have both the Q and the Hadith as our ally." "I was in my search increasingly afflicted with the sharp dissonance between this Inner Reason and the fixed center of Exterior Authority. Of course, by looking both at the religious sources before the cold hand of systematization fell on them and at the rich devotional literature available since that time, the dissonance is less pronounced."

6. Mohammed as both deliverer of revelation & “intercessor par excellence” opened the door to “the demands of human need [that] required that the door to personal experience of God be unbarred. M.was the gate through which people, stirred by life’s hurricane, would rise and affirm that God went on his knees & came within human focus. Our trials and misfortunes, as well as our triumphs & blessings, are also his. . . . The prophet, any prophet, is in this regard not just God’s missionary, sent to represent Someone, who would not deign to come himself. The prophet is God’s mission, the prince who can feel in his veins the heartthrob of God’s solicitude. We are a spiritual nobility, conceived in the womb of divine compassion, and the prophets are our kin. Through their earthly exposure we catch a reflection of the stature God also conferred on us at creation.”

7. “The clearest expression of this inner Reason is the gospel affirmation that although the Word was God, ‘it became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.’ . . . Finally, the wraps are taken off and God deals with us outside the veils. God is in the picture now.” [He cites Jeremiah 31 new covenant, and Hebrews 1 & 2 “many ways of old in which God spoke, but now....”] “By adopting for himself the full logical consequences of the moral significance of human existence, God achieved a stupendous breakthrough in Jesus Christ, and no one who is familiar with his ministry and teaching can fail to discern in the following passage the clear-cut details of his portrait even though it existed long before his earthly life.” Then comes the Is. 53:3-5 citation.

8. “ God, who normally delegates his authority to the prophets, is committed to the logic of that delegation by being willing to express himself in one such prophet who, by virtue of that special relationship, must henceforth be described by the strong language of filiation [Son of God]. Rather than rendering him immune to the tragedy of human disobedience, such a prophet is



in fact the supreme subject and victim of its consequences. 'It pleased the Lord to bruise him.' No proximity to the human condition is more poignant than that. It is too lifelike to be mistaken for what it is, a full-blooded encapsulation of the original divine intention. God through him would know our plight & feel our sorrow. Jesus is God in full engagement. Put to grief in the unspeakable agony of human sinfulness, Jesus is the definitive measure of God's 'numbing' capacity to take on our suffering, the Suffering Servant now unenviably receiving the double *salat* (=the fivefold daily prayer. Meaning not clear.) of God & human beings. The Suffering Servant is God's self-portrait, & our unflattering self-witness."

9. "Our perception of this truth is indispensable to our obtaining a right and fulfilling relationship with God. Redemptive suffering is at the very core of moral truth, and the prophets were all touched by its fearsome power. But only One embodied it as a historical experience, although all, including the Prophet of Islam, walked in its shadow. Those who consult their hearts will hear for themselves the persistent ordinance proclaiming God's ineffable grace."

## **APPENDIX C.**

**Muslims tell . . . "Why I Chose Jesus,"** an article in *Mission Frontiers* (March 2001)

This is a Fuller Seminary report drawn from questionnaires in the past 10 years filled out by 600 believers who came from Muslim backgrounds. Here are the captions in the article which collect the responses:

A sure salvation. Hope of salvation is "a bit elusive for many, even the most devoted Muslims." "With Jesus I have confidence about the end of my life." Taught that the "bridge to heaven was

as thin as a human hair," an Indonesian woman came to faith in Christ "realizing that she could not save herself, but that Christ could." A West African woman wanted to know for certain that her sins had been forgiven and washed away. A Persian emigre to the US said: "Oh yes, I feel more forgiven, more assurance of forgiveness." An Egyptian man stated "Assurance of salvation is the main attraction of Christianity for a Muslim." A Javanese man said simply, "After I received Jesus, I had confidence concerning the end of my life."

Jesus. His character "overwhelmingly attractive." He never retaliated. His love for the poor. The Sermon on the Mount. When asked what particular teaching attracted him, an Egyptian man stated simply, "the crucified Messiah."

Dreams and Visions. One-fourth of those surveyed state that dreams and visions were key in drawing them to Christ. A Malay woman heard Jesus in a vision saying: "If you want to come to me, just come." Feeling that she had tried her entire life to reach God without success, she now saw God initiating the effort to reach her through Jesus.

Power of Love. Nearly half of all Muslims now following Christ "affirmed that the love of God was a critical key in their decision." God's love for me in Jesus. Christian people who love one another. A Bengali man says he was "subdued by the revelation [sic!] of God's great love, his own sinfulness, and Christ's great sacrifice for him." A West African man from Gambia says simple: "God loves me just as I am." His experience in Islam was "rigorous submission to God" yet he could never "please God."

Personal relationship with God. Proximity or nearness to God, contrasted with "no possibility of walking together with God" in Islam. Another contrasted "being adopted as God's son' with its

Islamic opposite: “God is universal and has no family. There was no way of knowing what God was like.” [sic!] The author concludes: “Apparently, when Muslims do have an opportunity to see the love of Christ revealed [sic!] in all its fullness, they are finding a life with Christ quite compelling.”

Edward H. Schroeder

[LuthersWritingsTurks \(PDF\)](#)

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## **Now About the Risks Involved... Edward H. Schroeder “Interaction,” March 1975**

“Wow!” That’s what we said last summer when we saw that Frenchman on the tightrope between the two towers of the World Trade Center in New York. No parachute, no net, just 1,000 feet of nothing between him and the ground. That was really risky! I get vertigo just thinking about it. You’ll never catch me risking my life like that!

Really? Reflect for a moment.

Just how risky is the business of being a Christ-truster? We talk about the “venture of faith.” When you get down to brass tacks, Christian Faith is a daring venture – a high-risk profession. Pun intended.

“Profession” is to be thought of here first as a lifelong calling, a vocation, a ministry; and then secondly as something

you profess, a statement made public in specific words and actions out in the open of real life experience for all to see: “come weal or woe, Christ is Lord. He’s the one I’m trusting.”

## **Profession: A Statement Made Public**

So what’s the risk in “making public” my faith? Just what do I take a chance on losing? At the surface the risk of loss in this kind of Christian profession is

1. Secular friends who might well think I’m an oddball. I might lose their value and esteem. Worse than that,
2. When times get really tough the risk is – as someone once said – “and take they our life, goods, fame, child and wife.” That ups the ante considerably.
3. In church-conflict circumstances it can get even worse than that. You risk the loss of the tie that binds, the good feeling we used to have when we were all one happy Christian family. And that ups the ante even more.

But in all of these possibilities and in others that your imagination can supply, there is a deeper risk yet that spooks around behind these risks. It is the risk of losing the divine approval. Suppose, just suppose, that when you were exercising your profession according to your Christian convictions, god were to respond: “This time you blew it! On this one you lose! I disapprove – not just of the action, but of the actor – YOU!”

Are there any resources in the Christian pantry to give us the courage to risk the divine disapproval – and to do so not anxiously, but faithfully? Indeed there are! Fact is, that is exactly what is on the center shelf of the Christian pantry. It’s not that the Christian faith has a special canister high up on the top shelf for those rare moments – once or twice in a lifetime – when risk arises. No, risk is at the very center. At the center of faith in Christ is the risk of God’s own

disapproval, the risk of the total wipe-out.

Trusting Christ is by itself that high-risk venture. We take the big dare that God will not treat us as sinners, even though we know that there is evidence aplenty that we are sinners, look like sinners, act like sinners, think like sinners, talk like sinners. Whence the audacity? The chutzpah? The impertinence? It is not that we Christians think we can “snow” God or pull a fast one, but that we trust Christ in the face of all this sinner-evidence (which is accurate) and take the daring risk that God’s own opinion about us is not; “Sons of perdition,” but rather: “These folks look like my beloved Son; with them I am well pleased.”

We would have to spell out the Good Friday/Easter history to get the solid groundings for such “reasonable” risk taking. If He hadn’t silenced the law of sin and death (God’s own law, mind you) in that weird and wondrous weekend, then our faith is in vain and our daring venture is a sure loser. We lose out on life itself. But when we trust Him as good news, we are entrusting our selves to God’s promising mercy. We are daring to risk that honest criticism is not God’s last word for us.

That really is a big risk, for we see the evidences all around us that God does continue to deal with sinners in terms of deadly criticism. It is not at all automatically obvious that “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Our individual daily lives are full of condemnation experiences, even as we dare to trust in the face of them that God has other intentions for us. If our trust is misplaced, the stakes are total loss.

## **Profession: A Lifelong Calling**

Let’s take a look at the high-risk profession of Christian in the sense of the work we do in the world. Focus first on the

vertigo-inducing word of St. Paul, "For freedom Christ has set us free." Christ's freedom is its own goal. Not freedom so that you can accomplish some further goal, but freedom as Christ's own goal for you. Freedom means nothing holding you back – only Christ up front and the Spirit alongside. Freedom means there are no guardrails to insure that you don't fall off. It is indeed like that tightrope – no security blanket, no parachute, no net, no training wheels, just the word of our Lord over and over again: "Fear not, just trust me." (Mark 5:36)

All the work done by a Christian is work on the tightrope. And the risk involved is not simply the risk of "failure" – that it won't come out the way I wanted it, or that it will do more harm than good. No, the risk is to trust that God will approve of me, the doer, no matter which way it comes out – and that His approval will continue to be grounded where my hope says it is grounded. In the Litany we pray that God would take care of us both in time of prosperity and adversity. When things go well, when they come out "right," my righteousness is still not grounded in the fact that the work was right, but that Christ calls over to me: "Right!" We may comprehend that more easily when we "work" something wrong – and then "naturally" flee to God from the face of our failures to hear from His Christ the "right-making" word of forgiveness. But the worker of success or of failure (prosperity or adversity) has no guardrail other than Christ's supportive word.

All the work done by a Christian is work on the tightrope: the extraordinary works of daring that everyone can recognize – standing for the truth when un-love or injustice is being practiced – as well as the normal, ordinary works. The humdrum works are also daring ventures: get up in the morning, do my daily job, come home, eat supper, do something after supper, go to bed, get up again...This routine is also risk – the risk that God approves of this routine hum-drummer. That He says to me: In

this job, in this action, in this no-big-deal, you are working as my beloved one; with you right here I am well pleased.

Christians get tempted to be “unrisky” in both the humdrum as well as the extraordinary, so we need to refocus on Christ in order to loosen up and be more risky. Risk failure? Of course. With Christ-trusting failures God is well pleased. Try a new method in personal life, or in my Christian work? Sure! If it wins or loses, you, the Christ-truster, have nothing to lose. Teach fellow Christians to be a bit more risky? I should say so! That is the very name of the freedom to which we have been set free.

The rubber band that pulls us back from taking risks is at root the very law of God’s criticism from which Christ has set us free. Check it out for yourself. What is the heftiest pull that keeps you from trying the untried? “Someone might criticize me. God Himself might finally say it is wrong. God Himself might finally say I am wrong. Therefore better not try it.”

Notice what is going on here. Christ is being given one huge vote of no confidence! We are really voting that God’s performance evaluation of us sinners is going to be His last word, and therefore we better make sure our slate is as clean as we can get it. And the scaredy-cat Christian is really saying: I have to make my work good and then I will be a “good” work-er.

But that stands the whole promise of God on its head. God’s promise first approves the work-er and then any work he does as such an approved one is a “good” work. Says who? Says God! But you do have to run the risk of letting Christ trump the claims of criticism, as these claims are made upon you by both outsiders and your inside conscience.

The central proclamation from the heart of the Scriptures is that in Christ God does approve of us workers. Thus our work is

good, by definition, when it is done by Christ-trusters. Any deed offered up in trust of God's promise gets His big thumbs up: "With that I am well pleased!"

Teetering on a tightrope somewhere? Cheer up. It's par for the course. "Fear not, only believe."

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# **"Where on Earth are the Heavenly Places?" Edward H. Schroeder Interaction, February 1976**

The answer to the question in the title is "yes" – the heavenly places are on earth. Ephesians, the only place in the Bible where we run into that prepositional phrase, designates the heavenly places as any place where the Lordship of Christ is in operation. And the most palpable place where Christ is Lord is down here on the ground where people are.

Thus the heavenly places are not some sector of celestial geography. They are the centers at and from which Christ is already running His new creation. So Christians right now are "sitting with Him in the heavenly places," whether curled up in a chair at home, sitting behind the wheel, in a wheelchair, in a dentist's chair, or not sitting anywhere in particular. The accent is not on the posture or position – standing, sitting, and leaning – but on the quality of life. "Heavenly" designates a life qualified by the Life that "ticks" in God Himself.



Let's take a closer look at three of the five heavenly-places passages in Ephesians. Their heavenly encouragement for our heavenly placement is: Don't be dense, but look up. Don't get fidgety, but sit up. Don't clam up, but speak up.

1. Don't be dense, but look up. "God...who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." Ephesians 1:3. Open your eyes to the facts of life. Sure, life in the world is a mixed bag, sometimes a rat race, sometimes great glee. But the overarching blessing which we Christians share is that we are "in" on God's plan for the cosmos – "in" not only because we know what God's up to, but "in" because we are beneficiaries of God's action. And what is that? God's master plan is to bring all creation back together again to Himself via Christ crucified.

At times our incredulous hearts smirk and say, "Big deal!" Yet it really is a big deal. The secret of the cosmos will not be discovered by the next space probe, not even if next summer some living creature walks past our camera as it scans the Martian landscape. As shocking as that would be for all of us, what happened at Calvary and on Easter morn is even more mind-boggling, says Ephesians. The Power behind the entire cosmos (including the Power behind the living or nonliving planet Mars) has made peace with the whole hostile network. He has done so by dying for it in His Son's own body on the cross.

In the surrounding verses here in Ephesians the apostle almost bubbles with the kind of excitement we would have if a six-legged Martian would march across our TV screen. "Have to change my whole way of thinking," we would say. "Precisely," says the apostle. "With Christ on the ground and walking across your screen, the heavenly places are here and you are in them."

Why, then, don't things look better on our own planet? Perhaps we all need to take a look at our own small piece of our planet. If Christ is our Lord, then our space is a heavenly place. How have we been doing there? Not too well, most of us would say. And we frequently add the quick cover-up, "But even if I had been working my territory as a heavenly place, it wouldn't make any big dent on the rest of the world."

That cover-up may seem to make good sense, but it is in reality being dense. Don't be dense, but look up. Look at Jesus' mustard-seed parable which exposes our cop-out. Look up and see what's really happening. The most unexpected figure to pass in front of our camera is the Carpenter of the cross. He has made all things new for you, whether others see it or not. That's the top-drawer blessing. It puts us into the peace-achieved world of the new creation.

2. Don't get fidgety, but sit up. "God...raised us up with Him and made us sit with Him in the heavenly places." Ephesians 2:6 Suppose the apostle literally meant that we are in the same seat with Christ. But, of course, that is what he did mean. Not that we are in the top seat of the divine ferris wheel with Jesus right nearby. No, the heavenly place is right down where we are, and here is where we are seated together with Him. This is the celestial seating arrangement because He came down from heaven and graced us. Occasionally someone will shout in desperation, "Don't just sit there, get up and do something!" But the apostle first counsels us not to get up and do something. He wants us to just sit here and take inventory of the grace-gift of God which has us sitting with Him.

This heavenly-places passage pinpoints the intimacy

between ourselves and the central figure of God's plan. Two of the biographical adjectives predicated to Jesus ("raised up" and "sitting at the right hand of God") are also predicated to Jesus' disciples. In Romans 6 Paul adds other adjectives of Christ ("Suffered, crucified, dead and buried") to each Christian's biography. We get them when we are baptized into Christ. We receive the Easter and Ascension victory adjectives, but only because of the suffering and death adjectives.

"Sitting" tends to be a lazy word in our activist way of life. And even if we sit a while and collect our thoughts, take inventory, or get things sorted out, our next urge is to get up and do something. We don't like loafing. In Ephesians, however, "sitting" is not the loafer's verb; it is the ruler's verb. Christ is running the show. His regime is now "in session" here and now. And we are here with Him. Here is where He-we are ruling this piece of old creation as His cross-purposed new creation.

Co-monarchs are we. But before we get overstuffed with our self-importance, we cast a quick glance at His two-piece wooden throne. He "reigned and triumphed from a tree." And so do we. We sit together with Him in the suffering centers of the world's pain, and reign there-not by ourselves, of course, but with Him as He makes them heavenly places simply by His presence.

To be told that our throne looks like Mt. Calvary might well make us fidgety. But He says: Sit up and rule this situation; use Me as your sidekick to change it from a hellish into a heavenly place.

3. Don't clam up, but speak up. "That through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the

principalities and powers in the heavenly places.”  
Ephesians 3:10 When did you ever hear the church’s task spelled out like that? Go to the places where the Lordship of Christ has not yet infiltrated, Paul advises. Announce to the principalities and powers ruling there that the wisdom of God, in a foolishly weak crucified Messiah, has abrogated their stranglehold over that segment of God’s creation. Move Christ in by sheer audacious proclamation, and make “church” out of the place, for “church” is any segment of the old creation which has been recaptured by Christ and is now under His mercy administration.

This accent in this section of Ephesians is on the power of words, Gospel words. That rings strange to our age of disbelief in “words, words, words!” Yet the tyrants of every age hold power over their victims by words – more so even than by chains. The words we get on the job or at home, the verbalized false gospel of racism, the messages Madison Avenue feeds us about the danger of missing self-fulfillment-all these are the verbal chains of our brand of principalities and powers.

These words do have some dominion over each of us, and massive dominion over many in our world. People need to see that these are false gospels-all of them. And that gets done with words. So don’t clam up, but speak up-speak up the words of God’s action in Christ “to make all people see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages” but now “set forth in Christ.” God has no other agent for finishing out and filling up the cosmic plan. The people caught under the principalities and powers need to have Christ’s victory announced to them so that He can begin “Lording” it over them-so that their place too becomes a heavenly place.

C.S. Lewis wrote an imaginative fantasy tale called The

Great Divorce in which he ostensibly portrayed the contrasting lives of citizens of heaven and citizens of hell after death. He made it biographically vivid that there was a great divorce between the two alternatives. And then, right near the end of the story, he brought the reader up short by saying that all along he had been describing life before death. The heavenly places and their negative counterparts are here on earth now. Sure, there is a heaven to come-but right now folks are living in the valley of the shadow of death and moving toward total death. And right now people are living in the valley of the shadow of life and moving toward total life.

So where in the world are the heavenly places? Christ-connected people are themselves heavenly places. They are God's guerrilla-warriors working among the people to get the planet back under the legitimate administration. God's people already have insight into the whole plan, having themselves been recaptured from death into life. The Son of the High Commander sits with them as they move out on the task with a word about The Word. This is no pretend revolution; the tension and the stakes are high. But His word of encouragement keeps coming across: "Fear not, I am with you."

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## **The Economy of Forgiveness**

Colleagues,

Summertime here in the northern hemisphere. Hot here in the USA heartland. Energy sags. So I've dug up some stuff from antiquity, from the days when energy was at a higher level.

I'd actually forgotten about this one. But when Valparaiso University last Advent published a devotion book with gleanings from the chapel, there to my surprise was one of mine from back in the 70s of the previous century. That's even the previous millennium! So here it is, a meditation on Matthew 18:15-20. Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## ***The Economy of Forgiveness***

*The "Personals" section of our newspaper recently carried this item: "SCOTT Please come home or call. We love you. MOM & DAD." If Scott listens, these parents have gained their son. If not, he stays lost.*

*Behind all such losses is one who sins against another. A "family" falls into "commercial" or "legal" relationships as Debtors and Creditors. First, you lose your brother. Then, by some cosmic order, you don't just end up with nothing, but a debtor replaces the brother. Even that wouldn't be so bad if we didn't make such a "big deal" out of it.*

*– You Owe Me, and I Owe You. We're just settling acocunts.*

*We chronically do exactly that, however. We cling to debtor/creditor relationships and hold others there. This applies not only to the creditors who hold debtors ("You did me wrong, and I want my pound of flesh!"), but also to debtors who have a perverse love/hate ambivalence about their debtor situation. We persist in debtor/creditor relationships because they offer the tempting promise of saving our lives. As a creditor, getting my pound of flesh allows me to save face,*

self-esteem, and finally my life. The permanent debtor mirrors the creditor, for permanent debt guarantees constant attention from my creditor. If she hates me, she at least pays attention to me. I count. I'm worth someone's attention. I even get a part of her life in this deficit accounting game. Through my indebtedness, I control her. She's not "free" of me.

Sisters and brothers remain lost amidst these bookkeeping transactions by which we seek to save ourselves. We lose each other, and finally ourselves.

#### – A New Look at the Books

Jesus offers new insight into this problem by upsetting the ledger books we bank on. "Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." That's upsetting. Life is not a win-or-lose situation, nor does everybody win. Initially, we all lose. Thus, the central issue in the ledger of life is how you do your losing. Sinners cannot escape losing their lives. But in one way of losing life you gain life. Moreover, that life is full of brothers and free of debtors. It is the way of the cross.

First the gospel breaks open the trap of our self-inflicted debtor/creditor salvation. God in Christ opens the cosmic trap by bearing in his body on the cross the debts of all whose accounts are so mortally overdrawn. On Easter morning with the opening of the tomb, he offers escape from the dead end of our debtor's prison. The good news of his death and resurrection provides an alternate source for gaining our lives. The data of old debits and credits remain, but we needn't try to gain our lives from them. Instead, we gain our lives by "losing them for his sake." How? By holding on to Christ in faith as he holds on to us. By trusting him when he takes our debtor's page and says, "I'll sign for that."

When it comes to lost brothers like Scott, the second use of the gospel is to open the trap of our debtor/creditor relationships. How do you lose a debtor and gain a daughter or mother, a husband or wife, a brother or sister? You do as was done to you. You escape debtor status and become God's child, sibling of His only-begotten Son, by forgiveness.

Forgiveness is the only way to restore families. Christ calls us to forgive when "the brother sins against us." Confront him "between you and him alone." Don't grab him by the neck and demand, "Pay me what you owe!" Jesus' parable tells the deadly consequence – for the creditor! – of such confrontation.

A Christian – the already-forgiven former debtor – brings the word of forgiveness into the conversation when the two of them get together. Only forgiveness has the power to "gain" brothers. That is what the Creator created as the power for salvation. As God Himself well knows, forgiveness does not always work. Debtors and creditors can and do refuse to become sisters and brothers. Scotts do refuse to come home. But nothing else will work at all! That's the punch line in Jesus' counsel that if all attempts at forgiveness fail, "let him be to you as a gentile and a tax-collector." Jesus did not write off such folks as bad debts. No, in his ledger they remain candidates for forgiveness, not really different from us who learn to pray "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors" – daily.

"Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." This is the Lord's final promise that our forgiving is worth the risk. Why? Because he himself is on the scene when it transpires. The business we pursue is after all his business – and his Father's as well.

Were it not for his pioneering such forgiveness economics with



*God's debtors in his body on the cross, we should have no light (and no right) to settle accounts except by debits and credits. That firstborn Son, our Brother, continues to pursue his business right "in the midst" of us when two or three of us "gather in his name."*

*– You Can Go Home Again, Scott, Free*

*The ad for Scott appeared among the "Personals." It could just as well have been in the "Lost and Found." The gospel of forgiveness is God's way of going after lost people, and he commends it to us for finding our own lost ones. If Scott listens to their words of forgiving love, Mom and Dad gain their son. But forgiveness must happen – explicitly, concretely, palpably – to offset the debit/credit claims that will arise willy-nilly, else everybody stays lost. That is hard – a kind of death, no less – for us credit managers. The alternative is easier, though it means surer death and guaranteed loss. When we live by forgiveness, death becomes "dying with the Lord," losing "for my sake and the gospel's." It carries the heartening conclusion: "you will gain your life . . . and your brother as well." Amen*

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## **The Exodus: a Saving Event? Not Really [Part 2]**

Colleagues,

ThTh 210 of three weeks ago questioned whether Israel's Exodus from Egypt was a "saving event" at all. A number of you gave

feedback. There was quite a spectrum. From kudos to critique.

1. Kudos: “Once again . . . as the former Talking Heads’s David Byrne is quoted as saying: ‘Stop making sense.’ I.e., Thanks for being a spokesperson for orthodoxy, in the best sense of the term. Our prayers are with you as you continue to re-word God’s Word. Thanks for your being there.” A couple more in the same vein, though not all that hyperbolic.
2. Another of you used the highfalutin word “deconstructing Exodus” for what I was doing, and you weren’t complaining. If indeed I was deconstructing Exodus, I was not doing so very cleanly (or consciously) in the technical meaning that the term has in recent literary criticism. De-construct does not mean to destroy—and then it gets very highfalutin when done by the pros. To this minimal extent I was deconstructing in ThTh 210. I was taking apart a primary OT text and see if “what’s always been said about it” is really so. De-constructing the structure of the Exodus text and its corollary the Sinai covenant, laying out the themes and parts (like a child taking apart an alarm clock) to see what’s really there, and then asking what’s “saving” here? Who got saved? Saved from what?
3. A few asked nitty-gritty pastoral Bible Class questions—“Thanks for the ThTh 210. I read you loud and clear. However may I ask you to say a bit more about the promise to Abraham, thereby helping me to understand more clearly what God’s mercy is as the Psalmists use that term as contrasted (if there is a contrast, although I’ve never thought there was any) with our applying it to God’s forgiveness of sins via the death and resurrection of Christ? In your last two sentences you say that ‘Such central saving does exist. It’s elsewhere.’ My question is – Where?”

“Do an essay sometime on the themes of the OT – why read it, how to read it, how did things look to the original folks. For example, how was Moses saved so that he could end up on the [Transfiguration] Mount with Jesus? Might be helpful for some of us Crossways [sic] teachers and students. Serious lay Bible folks ask here – Might the Exodus (no Sinai experience yet) be the “faith alone in the promise” for Moses? In other words what was the cross-ing experience for the OT folk ‘before Paul’ or ‘before Jesus’ for that matter?”

## Some thoughts:

### *The Psalms.*

*Seems to me salvation in the Psalms is via God's mercy. The seven penitential Psalms (Luther's favorites, next to Psalm 118, his super-favorite) all make that clear as day. If I remember aright they are 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143. What do they say? “Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.” Or again “Have mercy on me, O God according to thy steadfast love [Hebrew: ‘chesed’ with no pre-requisites, no post-requisites], according to thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.” And more. Then again the Psalm text Luther cited for his “Aha!” about salvation in the OT, Psalm 31:1 – “In THY righteousness, O LORD, deliver me.” How did these praying people even hear about God's mercy to blot out transgressions? I don't know. One thing seems perfectly clear, however: they sure didn't get it from Sinai, and if they somehow deduced it from their escape from Egypt, they must have had texts in addition to the ones we have today. The best guess, of course (and I am not jumping to Jesus or Paul), is that God's mercy promise starting with Abraham kept getting whispered among the Israelites. **How anybody got “saved” in the OT.***

That was at the center of the debate Jesus had with Rabbinic Judaism of his day, wasn't it? So it seems to me. That is surely how all four Gospels report it. It wasn't Paul who first came up with the idea (even though his letters doubtless were written earlier than the the Gospels were) that there were two alternate ways to read the OT texts, either legalistically or law/promise-ly. Jesus is constantly arguing with his critics about this question, as they debate the meaning of the Hebrew scriptures. One focal summary of that in the synoptic Gospels is his critical barb back to his own critics: "Go and learn what this means (and he then quotes Hosea 6:6 with God speaking): I desire mercy, not sacrifice." (Mt.9:13) Granted that could also be interpreted legalistically, as though God will reward (save) those who practice mercy, rather than those who practice sacrifice. And therefore right practice is the key. But that can't be what Jesus means. In the context of the entire story of the Gospels it has to mean : "I God desire to be merciful to you [for your salvation]; sacrifices won't do it." Else Jesus could not have followed that with these very next words, "For I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners." Folks praying those seven penitential psalms surely trusted the same thing.

### **How about Moses?**

People who trusted God's [promise of] mercy were "saved," or in the actual words of the OT, were "righteous" before God. People who didn't weren't. Concerning the technical term "saved," see what comes below. How about Moses? Who knows what Moses REALLY trusted? I think God can answer that question, but for the rest of us it's an unanswerable question. We've got no data accessible to

*us. So why try to answer it? "Might the Exodus (no Sinai experience yet) be the 'faith alone in the promise' for Moses?" I suppose it might be, but there is no textual evidence I know of to verify that assertion. And given the "de-constructed" differences that appear when you put God's promise to Abraham alongside God's conversation with Moses that led to the Exodus rescue, seems to me it's apples and oranges. If there is promise there, where is it articulated? Promises have to be clear to be trusted. A fuzzy promise is no promise at all. Even Moses showing up with Jesus on the Transfiguration Mount doesn't answer the question of how Moses was rendered righteous. And as I'll try to show in a moment below, even less does that give us a clue about how/whether Moses was "saved."*

4. But then there were others of you, not totally happy, some very unhappy, with the conclusions of ThTh 210. Example: "I can't help asking, what other kind of salvific event can one appeal to in the OT or expect to uncover in the OT, save this strange event of getting a bunch of Israelite slaves out of slavery?" Answer: no "event" at all of such historical dimensions as the Exodus, but a promissory word. I suppose you could call that a "speech-event." All OT salvation, the sort that will work for the folks praying the Penitential Psalms, is God's (sola-chesed) covenant. The specs of that covenant are found in God's contractual conversations with David, Noah, Abraham, promising God's "chesed," God's TLC to sinners. That is clearly different from Sinai and Shechem covenants where God's TLC is available only for commandment-keepers. Same respondent tweaked me for "foist[ing] onto the OT a criterion that gets clearly and fully articulated only post-Jesus." Some thoughts about that. Is Paul in Gal. 4

guilty of “foisting a criterion onto the OT?” Or Jesus according to John in chap. 5 & 6 and throughout that Gospel? What was the original, the supposedly native, criterion before NT foisting got started? What kind of criterion had rabbinic Judaism “foisted” onto the OT that prompted Jesus to tell them they needed to “Go and learn what this means”? Or was theirs not a foist? What’s the foist of today’s academic OT consensus? When deconstructed, what gets revealed? My hunch is that much of contemporary OT scholarship, also that coming from Christian writers, is rabbinic. But I’m out of the loop.

### **Finally on “being saved.”**

Seminex colleague and NT whiz Edgar Krentz succeeded in getting me to be more textually “clean” when talking about salvation. He showed me that the verb “to save” in NT texts was regularly used in the future tense. So it is an eschatological term focused on the future. “Shall be saved” is the common NT way to speak, not “already are saved.” We believe that we WILL be saved. Saved = surviving the Final Judgment, the Day of Yahweh. That’s how Peter preached it on Pentecost with his text from Joel. When Joel says: Whoever calls upon the name of the LORD shall be saved,” Peter says, The Lordly Name that will actually deliver such “shall be saved” status is the name of Jesus.

For Israel too salvation was always still up ahead. Until the final day comes, God only knows who “will be saved.” Christians trust that they are in that company, not by unassailable proofs that they believed “right” or did “right,” But solely by virtue of the promise of God, the promise we’ve heard in the Crucified and Risen Messiah addressed to us. For us folks too it’s still up ahead. “Saved” is like “survived.” Nobody at present “is survived.” Christians trust that they WILL survive their own mortality, the onslaught of the Evil One, even God’s own

critique of their faltering faith and slap-dash ethics. All of the above—because of God’s Promise.

Wherever there was any confidence among OT folks that Yahweh was indeed pledging to “save” them, have them wind up alive in his presence and not dead in some valley of dry bones, it had to be “faith in the Promise.” Promise is by definition a “future-tense noun.” Sinai’s legislation, also the Exodus rescue from Egypt—neither of these is “by definition” futuristic, thus not capable of being “saving.” What gives one hope for one’s own “saved” future? That is THE “saving event” question, methinks.

### **Finale.**

Back in Seminex days, James Kennedy’s Evangelism Explosion [EE] was wildfire stuff for some at the seminary. In the model living room dialogue presented in EE, the evangelist—after friendly chit-chat—moved to the first big question: “If you were to die tonight and appear at the gate of heaven, and God asks: “Why should I let you in?’ What would you say?” I posed that question with each first-year seminary class I taught. The best answer I ever got was from a Japanese exchange student, Ikuo Nishida: “You said you would.” If God’s promise won’t save, what else will?

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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# **Till the Night Be Past: The**

# Life and Times of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Colleagues,

Guest writer for this Thursday's posting is Dr. Kit Kleinhans, Seminex alum, now Chair of the Department of Religion and Philosophy at the ELCA's Wartburg College in Waverly, Iowa. She reviews a Bonhoeffer book written by her father. "That'll be a dicey job," she said, when I asked her to do it, "to wrap my head around it both as scholar and as daughter." Well, she's done it, and I am pleased. Hope you will be too. Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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***Till the Night Be Past: The Life and Times of Dietrich Bonhoeffer***

***By Theodore J. Kleinhans***

***St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002***

***Paper. 171 pp. \$15.99.***

*When Dietrich Bonhoeffer was my age, he'd been dead for 3 years.*

*Hardly a scholarly claim with which to begin a book review! But then this new Bonhoeffer biography is less a scholarly tome than an inspirational introduction to "the life and times" of this fascinating pastor and theologian who was hanged in a Nazi concentration camp at age 39.*



Why another Bonhoeffer biography, especially given the revised and expanded edition of Eberhard Bethge's definitive volume released by Fortress Press in 2000? The answer lies both in the book's prehistory and in its intended audience. The manuscript that would become *Till the Night Be Past* was first drafted in 1974, when its author, my father, was a student in a Master's program in creative writing (with a "creative nonfiction" emphasis) at California State University, Fresno. Originally intended to introduce young adult readers to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the manuscript failed to attract a publisher in the 1970s, when its subject was deemed to have limited market appeal; it was reluctantly consigned to a file drawer at home, alongside the MFA diploma that marked its completion. A quarter of a century later, in my father's retirement and in response to Bonhoeffer's increased visibility, the manuscript was updated modestly and sent out again, not to compete with the wealth of recent Bonhoeffer scholarship but as a basic introduction for interested, non-specialist readers.

Recognizing Kleinhans' authorial vision and engaging style, Concordia Publishing House is marketing the book under the dual heading "Christian Inspiration / Biography." While the history and politics of Nazi Germany may seem far removed from the life of the average reader, Kleinhans' telling of Bonhoeffer's story focuses on the real human questions with which we struggle, each in our own context: How do I discern what God is calling me to do? How can faith and intellect be reconciled? What does it mean to be a Christian? What is the role of the church in the world? Kleinhans' appreciation for Bonhoeffer's ability to inspire Christians today is expressed most clearly in these final sentences of the book: "He contemplated, he struggled, he matured. Those who read him now can better understand their own searchings and conflicts because he experienced them first" (p. 170).

*"Creative nonfiction" is clearly Kleinhans' forte. His writing is characterized by descriptive detail with a strong sensory appeal, making Bonhoeffer's "life and times" come alive for the reader. Places and scenes are almost painted across the pages of the text: flowering trees, stormy waves, sights, sounds, and even foods are described with a sense of genuine delight in the created world (a delight shared by the author and his subject). Kleinhans' earlier popular biographies, Martin Luther, Saint and Sinner (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956) and The Music Master: The Story of Johann Sebastian Bach (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), exhibit the same evocative style.*

*Yet this creative approach does not obscure the book's solid historical and theological grounding. Bonhoeffer's life and work is situated clearly within the context of pre-war Europe and the rise and fall of the Third Reich; Bonhoeffer's thought is described with specific reference both to his Lutheran heritage and to the emerging theological conversation sparked by Karl Barth. Dr. Wayne Whitson Floyd, Jr., General Editor and Project Director of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English language translation project, offered this comment on Till the Night Be Past: "the bibliographical material is dated, but it has the compensating virtue of being written by someone with a broad understanding of Protestant theology and 20th century history" (personal e-mail correspondence, 5/15/02).*

*Like any book, this one has its weaknesses. Judged on its own terms, it is unfortunate that the author's very knowledge occasionally overshadows his goal of making Bonhoeffer readily accessible to a general readership. While the meaning of German and Latin terms is usually supplied in the text, a few words are unhelpfully left untranslated. Passing references to theologians such as Gogarten and Tillich are more jarring to the uninitiated reader precisely because Bonhoeffer himself is*

so often called simply “Dietrich.” The foreword by Dr. Werner Klaen of the Lutheran Seminary in Oberursel, Germany reads awkwardly in English; the phrase “instructor of opponent vicars,” for example, conveys little or no meaning to someone not already aware of the alternative seminary training associated with the Confessing Church.

Nevertheless, *Till the Night Be Past* is a welcome addition to the growing corpus of Bonhoeffer literature. It does not break new scholarly ground, nor was that its intent. Readers already well-versed in Bonhoeffer’s life and theology may choose not to spend much time with this little book; but it is an engaging introductory text for those relatively new to Bonhoeffer. It serves as a hearty supplement for those whose appetite was first whetted by the PBS film “Bonhoeffer: Agent of Grace.” It might make a nice gift for Bonhoeffer scholars to give to friends and relatives whose own interest in Bonhoeffer is more personal (“Who is this guy you’re so excited about?”) rather than professional. One can also imagine book groups or adult classes using this text as a basis for discussion about what it means to be a Christian amidst the complexities of our global society.

Given the circumstances of Bonhoeffer’s life, much of his work was published posthumously. Here, too, the author mirrors his subject. *Till the Night Be Past* rolled off the presses in mid-March, two weeks after my father’s death and two weeks before what would have been his 78th birthday.

Rest eternal grant them, O Lord; and let light perpetual shine upon them.

Reviewed by Kathryn A. Kleinhans  
Associate Professor of Religion  
Wartburg College

# The World Trade Center Revisited

Colleagues,

This week's posting comes from Walter Bouman, a dear friend and theological buddy. Walt and I have known each other for over half a century starting with our time together as seminary students in 1950ff, then our doctoral studies in Germany in the mid-fifties, and a generation later on the ramparts in the Wars of Missouri. We've travelled different routes but find ourselves linked in common confession of the Augsburg-Catholicism of the Lutheran Reformation. 'Course we continue to argue about just what that means. For example, Walt's spirituality description at the outset of his report below needs "a little work," I tell him, in the very first sentence. He articulates the "biggie" of the work of Jesus, the Christ, to be that he has "defeated the powers driven by death." That is indeed true, but. . . .

Many of you ThTh readers will not be surprised that I urge Walt to see an even "deeper malady," deeper even than death. Christ trumped this one too, so the deeper good news is that he has "abrogated God's critique of sinners." So we go round and round. But we're in the same ballpark.

Most of all I'm the beneficiary of Walt Bouman's advice to a pert young librarian at Concordia Seminary in 1951 named Marie: "You ought to get to know Ed Schroeder. The two of you have the

same sense of humor.” And then, sotto voce I imagine: “You deserve each other!” Well she did, and later we did, and in a few days, d.v., it’s our 47th anniversary. But that’s doubtless more than you really wanted to know. Here’s Walt’s unedited text.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## ***The World Trade Center Revisited***

*I am in New York City for three weeks teaching at The General Theological Seminary of the Episcopal Church. My course is entitled “Spirituality and Social Justice.” It is one of four courses being offered this Summer term by The Center for Christian Spirituality. The director of the Center, Dr. Jonathan Linman, is an ELCA pastor, a friend, and an alumnus of Trinity Lutheran Seminary, where I am Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology.*

*The course description is as follows:*

*“One definition of Christian spirituality is trust in the crucified and risen Jesus, the Christ, as the one who has defeated the powers driven by death. Such spirituality frees persons for engagement with the world in behalf of social justice. The course will explore the foundations for Christian attention to social justice as well as the challenge of involvement in the political, economic, and personal dimensions of the quest for social justice.”*

*I have five class periods set aside for "case studies." One case study compares the contrasting responses of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Helmuth von Moltke to Naziism in the 1940s. Von Moltke believed that Hitler was God's judgment on Germany and his "Kreisauer Kreis" simply gave thought to how Germany could be reconstituted after Hitler. He refused to have "any connection with the use of violence." He was tried for "defeatism" and executed on January 23, 1945. At his trial Judge Roland Freisler told him, "Count von Moltke, Christianity and we National Socialists have one thing in common, and one thing only: we claim the whole man." Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "When a madman is tearing through the streets in a car, I can, as a pastor who happens to be on the scene, do more than merely console or bury those who have been run over. I must jump in front of the car and stop it." He was tried for his complicity in the plot against Hitler and executed on April 9, 1945.*

*One case study deals with the social justice issues involved in the medical case of Karen Quinlan, a young woman who was kept alive for twelve years (1975-1987) although she never regained consciousness after she lapsed into a coma from a combination of barbituates and alcohol. Her parents and family wanted to remove life-support systems, but her Roman Catholic physician at a Roman Catholic hospital refused to do so (although her priest concurred with the family) despite court rulings in a complex legal process.*

*One case study deals with a column by Raymond J. Keating, a LC-MS layman writing for "Newsday." The column was reprinted by Editor Russell Saltzman of "Forum Letter." It criticizes the ELCA's Lutheran Office for Governmental Affairs (LOGA) for its involvement in support of a congressional bill to increase the minimum wage because, in Keating's view, it would price low income workers out of jobs. The column also criticizes LOGA involvement in global warming, "environmental racism/classism,"*

gun control, affirmative action, globalization and trade, affordable housing, the earned income tax credit, Head Start, Low Income Home Energy Assistance, Medicare, food stamps, international debt relief, and transportation policy. Keating supports the LC-MS policy statement on separation of church and state because "the mission and ministry of Christian congregations is to preach and spread the Gospel," not get involved in controversial issues that divide, politicize, and corrupt the church.

The final two case studies will deal with justice issues involved in the events of September 11. In the first case study the class will look at the commandeering of four planes by Muslims from Saudi Arabia and Egypt because of the perceived injustice of the United States in its Middle East policies of support for Israel against the cause of the Palestinians. In the second case study the class will look at the response of the US "war" against terrorism in the light of the "just war" doctrine of Augsburg Confession Article 16 and the defense of the "civil sword" against evil doers in Article 37 of the Anglican 39 Articles of Religion.

In preparation for these case studies, the class members went to the offices of Trinity Episcopal Church, located just a block from the World Trade Center, on the morning of June 19. We got off the subway at Church Street, emerging with the vast cavity where the WTC stood directly on our right, and the fence surrounding St. Paul's Chapel directly on our left. We walked down Church Street through crowds of New York life on our side of the street and the silence of death on the other side of the street. In a few blocks we came to 74 Trinity Place, a 40 story office building.

There we heard a three-hour presentation on the experience of three Trinity staff members, Dr. Courtney Cowert, a former

student of mine when I taught at General in the 2000 Michaelmas Term and now director of grants at Trinity parish, Dr. Frederic Burnham of Trinity Institute, and the Rev. Lyndon F. Harris, a doctoral candidate in ecclesiology on the pastor staff. On the morning of September 11, when the first plane crashed into the WTC, all three were at the offices of the parish on the 21st floor of 74 Trinity Place, where the north windows look out on the site of the WTC. With them was Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Wales, in NYC for some lectures. On that morning he was scheduled to make a video tape on Christian spirituality for Trinity Institute together with a number of Anglican teachers of spirituality.

They went down to the 4th floor studio and there began to learn that the crash was no accident. The police directed them to go with those who gathered for the taping session out into the stair well, but not into the street. While they were in the stair well, the first tower collapsed and the air in the stair well began to be so polluted that breathing became difficult. Fred Burnham said that he and others became convinced that they were going to die from the smoke and fumes and dust. One of the persons who had come for the taping session said to Williams, "If we are going to die, I am glad I am dying with you." Williams embraced her and led them in prayer. Fred said that it occurred to him how good it was to be dying in company with friends and colleagues instead of dying alone.

Some 15 to 20 minutes after they had been directed to the stair well the police began evacuating them from the building. They emerged into a surreal atmosphere of four inches of snow-like dust on the ground and a totally polluted environment. The second tower collapsed as they were trying to make their way south and east away from the WTC, and they were enveloped in a black cloud of smoke, dust, and debris. None of them knew how they survived, but survive they did. Rowan Williams scrapped



his lectures and reflected on his experience, now published by Eerdmans under the title, "Writing in the Dust."

And the next day the staff people were back at St. Paul's Chapel, directly across Church Street from the WTC and a part of Trinity Parish, now involved in the 8 month mission of care for the police, the fire personnel, and the construction (deconstruction) workers at "ground zero." Their presentation about this mission was entitled "9/12."

Following are some random notes that I took as I watched their absorbing slides and listened to their powerful and moving narratives. Fred Burnham began with a quotation from a poem by Leonard Cohen: "The blizzard of the world crossed the threshold and overturned the order of the soul." Fred described how resources and basic organization at St. Paul's began to emerge out of the chaos-like creation! People brought food, clothing, medical supplies. Soon there was a "Broadway Burger Brigade" as students from General Seminary brought a dozen Weber grills and began to make hamburgers on the street outside the entrance to St. Paul's Chapel, a block east of the WTC. In a bit of humor Fred told the story of how a mission of compassion ran afoul of the institutional bureaucracy. The Health Department came and began to close down the impromptu food services for lack of a license. But the police officers needed the food, and simply surrounded the Health Department inspectors and walked them away from the chapel. Eventually restaurants licensed by the Health Department came to the rescue and provided a legal canopy (as well as lots of donated food) for the food operation, which served more than half a million meals over the next 8 months.

Soon everything moved inside the chapel. St. Paul's is the oldest religious building in continuous service on Manhattan Island. But it is just that: a chapel. There is no parish hall,

no undercroft, nothing but altar, pulpit, organ, pews. That space was pressed into service. The newly painted walls began to be covered with greetings and prayers from the nation and the world. A volunteer from the Episcopal University of the South at Sewanee, Tennessee, organized greeting and directional services. There were tables for food, medical supplies, clothing. An Episcopal woman from North Carolina got a manufacturer to send 800 pairs of boots because the heat and debris was destroying the foot wear of the workers. Medical volunteers, including podiatrists, chiropractors, massage therapists, offered their welcome services. Cots were set up for workers to sleep.

Courtney Cowert reported on interviews with five persons in one day. The supervisor of crane operators remembered saying the 23rd Psalm to himself as he first walked to the site. "Life is a gift which we must all give away. The only questions are when and how." A policeman: "God can make neighbors out of strangers." A volunteer: "There is a beauty to living our lives this way. It should be like this every day." As I listened to Courtney narrate the words from her interviews, I noticed how powerful are the fragments (and more) of memorized hymns, liturgy, Bible, and catechism.

Lyndon Harris began his presentation on the ecclesiological character of this mission by quoting Emil Brunner: "The church exists by mission the way a fire exists by burning." In the midst of all of the activity at the chapel, there was Eucharist every day with people coming from all over the building and from the street to commune. The regularly scheduled music concerts were replaced by unscheduled appearances of a great variety of musicians. Lyndon showed slides of violinists, pianists (playing on a superb Steinway), string quartets, etc., playing for volunteers and workers availing themselves of the service provided by the volunteers. Of course the regular

*Sunday services were not available to the parishioners. One of them asked, "When is St. Paul's going to be a church again?" Obviously not realizing that it was never more church than during these 8 months.*

*I asked myself what gifts the Episcopal Church had for just this mission. There is the simple fact that it is THERE, the only Christian buildings right there at Wall Street and the site of the WTC. There is its familiar liturgy, celebrated with Anglican aplomb and "stiff upper lip" in the midst of chaos and works of mercy. There is its national network of establishment types who can mobilize supplies and services. Christians from other traditions and non-Christians joined them in large numbers, and my Episcopal friends are grateful for that. I'm grateful to be in communion with them.*

*Walter Bouman*

*June 23, Pentecost 5*

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## **The Exodus, a Saving Event? Not Really**

Colleagues,

I've been having e-conversation with a dear colleague about Exodus as a saving event. He calls it (and he's hardly alone in this) "the central saving event of the Old Testament." I don't think so and here's a recent letter I composed to tell him that. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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*Dear —My scepticism about the Exodus being a “saving event,” let alone the “central saving event” in the OT, is initially a theological scepticism, then an exegetical one. And, of course, I’m following the Bertram axiom: Biblical hermeneutics is at no point separate from Biblical soteriology.*

*Theologically, who/what got saved from whom/what?*

*I’ll use the standard Crossings matrix for pericope-study to illustrate my scepticism about anything significant enough to be called “theological” salvation in the Exodus. The matrix, as you probably know, uses the tree-metaphor Jesus sometimes used: fruit, trunk, roots. Problem diagnosis goes down from top to bottom—stage 1 fruit (me and my relationship to people and world), stage 2 trunk (me and my relationships to self), stage 3 roots (me and my relationship to God). There’s no genuine healing, no “saving,” that does not save at the roots. Comes then in the Crossings matrix the Gospel’s healing at the roots (stage 4) and subsequent healing for the trunk (stage 5) and finally the fruits (stage 6).*

*The Israelites might say they were saved at the level of a tree’s fruits, stage 1, their de facto yucky life under Egyptian oppression. [Totally parallel in my mind to the Palestinians under current Israeli occupation.] But as far as I can see reading the texts, that’s as far as the rescue got. In Lutheran lingo—it was totally confined to God’s left-hand operations in their daily civil life. God’s care and preservation, but not God’s redemptive salvation.*

*Any salvation at the Stage two level? Any change of heart, any evidence of trusting Yahweh’s (Abrahamic) promise, or just trusting Yahweh period? Nope. Evidence? Their quick turn to the calf, and their constant unfaith throughout the wilderness. No*

salvation there.

How about Stage three? God's de facto outreach in mercy to sinners. Not so if the Sinai covenant signals the terms of the contract God was cutting with them in the exodus-process. Its axiom is theological law—you get what you've got coming to you—straight and strict reciprocity between the deity and the clients, a perfect Hittite suzerainty treaty. Any "saving" Good News in the contract is only for non-sinners ["those who love me and keep my commandments"]. Those who don't, to wit, the whole of the exodus masses, who don't even keep commandment #1 as they demonstrate with the calf, fall under the corollary reciprocity rubric of getting their "iniquities visited to the 3rd and 4th generation of those who reject [=NRSV's softer word for "hate" in the KJV & RSV] me."

To pick up a phrase from a much later Israelite, in Exodus/Sinai God continues to "count trespasses." The [Stage 3] roots of the contract are not changed. Faith (ala Abraham's contract), faith-in-God's-promise, is not in the specs of this contract. It calls for performance: "love me and keep my commandments." No forgiveness of sinners there. No "God reconciling the Israelites unto himself by making Someone [perhaps the Suffering Servant?] to be sin for them, so that they might receive the righteousness of God via THAT ONE."

If folks don't get the "righteousness of God" in the contract, God's saving at Stage 3, where is the saving? Who/what got saved from whom/what?

Apropos of "saving event," Israel still needs saving after Exodus/Sinai. Even more crisply, they need saving FROM the reality of Exodus/Sinai. Which is what Gospel is, already with Abraham. It is the "saving event of trusting God's promise" that saves from the UNSalvation arising from Exodus/Sinai.

*Using Lutheran lingo, Exodus was a left-hand rescue operation. A great gift from God. No question about that. But it was a gift that obligated the rescued, the same sort of gift that we all receive via God's left-hand work in creation. Granted theirs was a freebee "off the charts," but nevertheless not qualitatively different from God's generic gifts of "rain and sunshine on the evil and the good." There is no evidence that anybody's heart, anybody's "God-relationship" [step 2 to step 5 in the Crossings matrix], got changed. Understandably so, since no "new deal" is offered by God at the root. God's right-hand regime of forgiveness for sinners, Israelite sinners, is not in the contract.*

*What about the blood of the Passover Lamb smeared on the doorway? Saving event? Yes, that does rescue those so marked from the Destroyer, but what else changes? There is no forgiveness of sinners linked to the action, no change of heart, no Abraham-style promise associated with it at all. The terms of the contract remain the same: legal performance. In this case a cultic legal requirement that grants immunity, but, note well, only temporary immunity to God's destroying angel. Even so, it's law-and-performance all the way. No Gospel-and-faith here at all. If you want to call it saving, then you are compelled to say, aren't you: obedience to the law saves. Such obedience is then formally articulated in the legislation at Sinai: obedience saves, "love me and keep my commandments." But that's hardly Good News, and surely no "saving event" for sinners.*

*Seems to me that the Letter to the Hebrews, the most "Jewish" book in the N.T., is a vademecum for helping us to see Exodus/Sinai as no saving event at all. "The covenant I made . . . to lead them out of the land of Egypt" is called "faulty." [8:7] How saving is a "faulty" saving event? Smeared blood culticly presented "cannot perfect the conscience of the*

worshipper.”[9:9] What sort of theological rescue is one that leaves consciences unhealed? There is more of the same throughout Hebrews. When it comes to “saving events” in the Israelite story, Hebrews ties it all to God’s promise to Abraham and his association with Melchizedek the mystery man. That’s where Hebrews then hooks OUR great high priest, not to Exodus/Sinai at all.

So back for a moment to Exodus/Sinai. Look at the very stuff of the entire scenario: the cultic requirements for rescue, the destruction of the Egyptians, the rewards-punishments contract at Sinai, their recourse to the calf, Israel’s terror before God at the mountain. Aren’t these finally the nemeses that sinners need to be saved FROM? Cultic requirements, God’s destroying angel, debit-credit relations with God, our own propensity to idolatry, terror when facing God the critic? Isn’t this what Jesus claims to save sinners FROM? I think so. And he does so with the different Divine Regime he offers and then enacts all the way to cross and resurrection. He “fulfills” Exodus/Sinai, because they are finally bad news for sinners, “in his body on the tree.” He fulfills them by getting rid of them.

You’ve heard this tune before. Isn’t it finally the radical difference between law and gospel? The difference between God “counting trespasses” and then recompensing, or God sweet-swapping them to Someone Else so that we might REALLY encounter a “saving event?”

Summa: Exodus saved the Israelites from Pharaoh, their taskmaster. It did not save them from God, their critic. The “central saving” that Israel needed—and we too—it was not. But such central saving does exist. It’s elsewhere.

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# Grabbing at Jesus

*[This piece was inspired by Sunday's gospel lesson, Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26, and the sermon I heard on it by the Rev. Dr. Tom Schoenherr.]*

Every time I take another big step in my life, part of me thinks that I should be able to handle things on my own now. It's not a part of me that gets to the surface of my mind very often, the surface where I'm aware of what I'm thinking. It's certainly not the part of me that is in charge of my theological compass (Handling everything on your own? Go directly to the Small Catechism, do not pass Go, do not collect \$200). But it's the part that says, "You know, you're old enough, educated enough and experienced enough to get on with your life without having to go to Jesus with every little thing. He's busy running the universe, the least you can do, considering all He's done for you, is to get up and get on with it without bugging Him all the time."

So I go about my business for days, weeks, months (?), reading my devotions, doing my ministry, being with my family, living my life without bothering Him about the details. Things usually go along fine for a while as I'm blissfully unaware of this decision I've made (again). I'm praying, I'm worshiping, I'm singing – what else could I possibly need?

But as time passes, I find myself fighting bitterness inside, straining to find the joy of the Lord in what I do and not succeeding. Why is my citizenship loyalty now based on my willingness to consume, to buy and wear red, white and blue Capri pants this summer, carry a flag colored straw purse? Why



do the levels of the institutional church above me do nothing but gate-keep? Why can't other people see life the way I do and help me or, at the least, get out of my way? My innards get tied into tighter and tighter knots until I don't know which way to turn, even though I'm still functioning well on the outside.

Then along comes this woman who had an issue of blood for twelve years. She was desperate, she wanted to be healed and she grabbed at Jesus, grabbed what she needed to become whole. She and I were companions for a long time, but now that I'm old enough, educated enough and experienced enough, I don't need to grab at Him like that anymore. She was desperate, but I've moved beyond desperation.

"When He heard this, He said, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means.'"

It usually takes me a while to learn what this means. It takes a while to be grabbed, once again, by the reality that even in the midst of my education and experience, even as I find myself in leadership positions, I'm still the same person I've always been. No amount of education or experience will bridge the gap between my Creator and me. The Judge still says, "It's not enough."

It takes a while to learn, again, that the old story in the sermon (Mary and Jane are talking about going to church. Jane says she doesn't go because there are so many hypocrites there and Mary says sadly, "Yes, there are." But then she brightens and says, "Of course there's always room for one more!") is for me. Jesus grabs me with His love as I grab the fringe of his cloak. He wants to hear about my hangnails and my hang-ups, he calls to me, watches over me, is waiting for me to grab at Him once again. He alone is the one who has the power in the fringe

of his cloak to heal my bitterness, to soften my heart that has begun to harden in the face of the vagaries of the world and my own sinfulness.

Some of the time, all the education I've had the privilege of receiving stands like strong, silent pillars holding up a mighty edifice, yet obscuring the reason the building was built in the first place. A few verses in Hosea read by the morning's lector can send me off on a long internal jag about how or whether the pastor will use Hosea in the sermon and whether or not she/he will be able to weave the historical/critical realities into the preached word. And I end up missing the psalm altogether as I ruminate.

Most of the time, my experience tells me that sometimes things work out the way I think they ought to and sometimes they don't. Sometimes great ministry gets done and sometimes we totally bomb. I'm too old to keep waiting for that perfect place, perfect moment or perfect circumstance when everything will work out just as we'd planned. My energy begins to wane as I wonder if it's worth doing at all.

All of the time, it is only when I bend down like the hemorrhaging woman and touch the fringe of His cloak, saying to myself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well," do I receive the hope that gives me the joy and the strength to go on.

We don't like to talk about this aspect of our relationship with our Lord. It's too sentimental, too emotional and yet it is in such unguarded moments that we tap into the beauty and the energy that give us what we need to function from day to day. And the reality is that when we have the courage to speak openly about what Jesus means for us in the desperate moments of our lives, we offer each other a great gift. We give to each other

the gift of knowing that we are not alone in our desperate longings and we point to the One, the only One, who can fill that empty space inside with what our Creator always intended to fill us...God's self.

Grabbing at Jesus. It may not be sophisticated, but He offers us wholeness such that we can never find on our own. Go ahead and grab Him. He's more than enough.