

Mission Theology for the 21st Century

Colleagues,

One of you readers tweaked me to stop beating around the bush and start to show and tell what I learned about mission theology during my Spring Semester term (January to May) at the Overseas Ministries Study Center (New Haven, Connecticut). OK, I will, and I'll start with the book review below, which I just completed for the OMSC journal, the International Bulletin of Mission Research. For the journal I was asked to stick to the word limit specified by the editor, and that was restrictive, though wholesome, I'm sure. However, for ThTh, the editor (yours truly) has imposed no such limit—though you readers may often have wished there were one. So this is expanded a bit from the one I sent to the head office. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

MISSION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY.

Edited by Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder.

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On the 125th anniversary of the Society of the Divine Word [Societas Verbi Divini, SVD for short], members from around the world and invited guests gathered to reflect on "Mission in the 21st Century." This book's contents come from the symposium—eleven essays and a concluding statement. Editors

Bevans and Schroeder are SVD missiologists.

Two surprises awaited this reviewer. Surprise #1: the pluralism in these essays. On one end we have Jacob Kavunkal (SVD India) with his claim—backed by citations from both the prophet Amos and the Gospel of John (yes!)—that “God’s salvation reaches all peoples through their own religions.” (p.165) At the other end is Josef Cardinal Tomko, Prefect of the Congregation of the Evangelization of Peoples in Rome [= the Vatican’s prime mission guru] maintaining the “unequivocal biblical” affirmation that “Christ is the only Savior of all . . . there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name . . .” (p.27f.)

Surprise? Not exactly. Pluralism is at home in all the churches today. Rome is no exception. Neither is the SVD.

Surprise #2: “forgiveness of sins” never gets mentioned in these 202 pages. Not even in the essay from the guest Protestant, who even has a special section on “the Word,” do we ever hear that the Divine Word for mission might be: “Be of good cheer. Your sins are forgiven.” So what Divine Word, if not this one, is proposed in these essays as the mission message for the 21st century?

Most often the Good News term is “God’s reign.” Yet what is “God’s reign” if not God’s “new regime” in the Friend of Sinners, a.k.a. forgiveness? The notion of “God’s reign” pervading these essays, and widespread in the Christian world today, doesn’t pay much attention to sin, nor the forgiveness thereof. In Crossings lingo it bypasses D-3, the depth diagnosis, humanity’s conflict with God, the root-problem. Consequently Christ’s forgiveness of sinners, though not denied, is no big deal. If forgiveness once was central to the Good News, it’s now a done deal, and maybe not even necessary to mention in our day.

Instead the agenda for God's reign focuses on humankind's "horizontal" problems (and their name IS legion), our life together in a self-destruct world. In Crossings lingo it's all (and only?) first and second level diagnostic data: personal and structural un-love of the neighbor (D-1) and centripetal human hearts that perpetuate such evil (D-2). But if a sick tree's roots (D-3) aren't healed, the fruits won't be either. Jesus said that.

Both of these so-called surprises signal a new wrestling mat for missiology. It's biblical hermeneutics—how do you read the Bible? And just what is THE Gospel in that Bible? For most of the years that I've been hob-nobbing with missiologists, the big question was not biblical hermeneutics, but cultural hermeneutics: How do you read culture? The primary mission agenda then was to get Gospel wine into the unique wineskins of vastly different particular cultures—and do so without losing the wine or the skins. Culture is still the major motif—though highly refined and nuanced—for crafting the wineskins of the SVD's vision for mission in the 21st century. But the wine, I think, is in danger. "New skins for new wine," was Jesus's counsel, lest the new wine get lost. If the new wine is seeping away, then it may be that the skins proposed for the 21st century are not "new enough."

There has been growing among missiologists a consensus that the Kingdom of God, or "God's reign," is THE Gospel, and Luke 4, Jesus' enigmatic Nazareth sermon on Isaiah 61, is the foundation text. However, neither Jesus himself, nor Luke, ever links "God's reign" to this Isaianic text. Yet that Nazareth sermon has now become the canon within the canon, almost a shibboleth, for "reign of God" missiology.

The biblical hermeneutics for this conclusion are fuzzy at best. All the more so when such "God's reign" missiology gives short

shrift to Jesus' own words about forgiveness of sins in the "Great Commission" in Luke [24:47]. Here he specifies what the reign of God is for missiology, viz., "that repentance and the forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations." Well, is it or isn't it? Just for past centuries? Or for the 21st century as well?

It's a strange hermeneutics that hypes God's reign and ignores the forgiveness of sins. At least for Luke's own canon, mission proposals that sidestep Christ's mission mandate of repentance and forgiveness aren't good enough to promote God's reign for any century. The debate is about biblical hermeneutics. It's all about the Divine Word, how you read the Bible. And we're all involved, for the society of this divine word of forgiveness is the society (lower-case svd) that all Christians are in.

Mosaic and Christic Ethos in the Gospel of John

Edward H. Schroeder

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"The Law was given through Moses: grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." – John 1.17

The Gospel of John contains no ethical teachings as we find it in the synoptics or in Paul – no Sermon on the Mount, or on the

plain, no God and Caesar renderings, no paraenesis (exhortation), no Haustafeln, no references to the Decalogue or its first and second commandment summaries. So “ethical teaching” in the sense of moral legislation, no. But “ethical teaching” as ethical evaluation in practice, as conflict about human ethos, definitely yes.

If, as Paul Ricoeur notes, the entire Fourth Gospel is a “cosmic trial,” then the gospel narrative itself is an event of ethos, the qualitative evaluation of human behavior taking place “in a larger cycle of ideas in a ‘juridical’ turn where we find such notions as envoy, to testify, testimony, to judge, judgment, to accuse, to convince, counselor....It is in the framework of a suit over rights” that the meaning of justification as vindication surfaces, “which derives its coherence from this horizon of the great trial on which all theology of testimony is projected” (Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics of Testimony*, quoting Preiss, *Justification in Johannine Thought*, 140).

The same is true for ethical theology in the Christian vein: evaluative judgments in the earthly trial lay claim to eventual vindication by the judge of the great and final eschatological trial. Christian ethos understands itself as the quality that accrues to human behavior and behavers by virtue of the divine evaluation.

In John’s Gospel that verdict is in dispute right from the start, first of all for Jesus and then for his disciples. Beginning in the prologue the seesaw opposition between contesting and attesting unfolds: “He came to his own home, and his own people received him not” (1.11). Testimony is given “to what we have seen and heard; but you do not receive our testimony” (3.11). In this essay we examine the attested/contested ethos of the disciples. It parallels Jesus’ own ethos but with one difference: his causes theirs.

Exegetes call our attention to the historical circumstances of John's intended audience. These first hearers are living in the post-70 A.D., post-Jamnia situation of Jewish Christians separated from the synagogues of normative Judaism. The twelfth of the eighteen benedictions (*Birkat-ha-minim*) in the synagogue liturgy has left them *aposynagogos* (out of the synagogue) (9.22, 12.42, 16.2). The daily life conflict between these two Jewish religious communities is retrojected, pantomimed, and paradigmmed into Jesus' own trial. The issue is ethos. Which of these two faith communities is right, or which one has the right to claim to be true? True to doing the will and work of God, to keeping the word of God, to keeping the commandments, finally to being true to the scriptures and its law and its Moses? So in their earthly trial, the earthly and eschatological trial of Jesus does a repeat performance.

John's way of stating the Christian claim that Jesus as the Christ changes human ethos is stated in the prologue as follows: "to all who receive him, who believe in his name, he gave the right (*exousia*) to become children of God" (1.12). I translate the Greek term *exousia* as a juridical/ethical term for "rights" instead of the NRSV's rendering "power" to follow through on the Ricoeur/Preiss proposal of the cosmic trial. *Exousia* as used elsewhere by John corroborates this rendering.

The right to be children of God arises in the sinner's encounter with Christ

As the Johannine prologue opens, there are no signals that anyone has such right automatically. In fact, the opposite is signaled. As the Sent One, the Envoy, arrives in the world, the world that was made through him, this world "knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not." The Envoy is "true light," but what he shines into is darkness.

The Envoy has rights to the world and its people. He made every bit of it with no exceptions (1.3). But these rights of the Creator's ownership are contested by the intended receivers. By contesting his claim they signal that they are not children of God. If they once did have the *exousia*, they now do not want it. But some do receive him. Yet, receiving does not signal that they have already been rightful children of God. No, they too are previously right- less, but now they are given the *exousia* to become what they previously were not: "children." And John makes the novelty of this right of procreative passage specific. It is parenting "not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of a male, but of God" (1.13). The right comes by receiving/believing the Sent One. How does that work?

We get an answer by sampling some of the Christ-encounters John offers. John leaves no doubt that people do not arrive on the scene having the *exousia* of children of God (*tekna theou*), call it the *tekna*-cratic ethos. No, all are born of flesh, and flesh stays flesh (3.6). It profits zero (8.63). Everyone "must be born anew" (3.6f.). It is expected that a "teacher of Israel" would understand this (3.10). The Lamb of God is to take away the sin of the world (1.29), and no one is initially exempt from this contra-*tekna*-logical evaluation. All are sinners without exception.

John does not think that this is pessimism. He signals a bit of surprise himself that when the "true light" shines, everything else is by contrast so dark – especially things that were so lucid before, like the "man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews." Doesn't this also qualify John's alleged anti-semitism? Isn't John saying: Even the very best Jews, who are the best people of all ("Abraham's children"), are nevertheless dark by contrast with this Envoy? The best human moral and religious luminaries can't hold a candle to him. And if he is "true light," theirs isn't at all.

No one has the divine paternity by bloodlines, by fleshly birth, even as “Abraham’s descendants.” No one has a priori-*tekna*-legitimacy. In fact, to push the parental metaphor, the folks who do claim it apart from the Christ have an alternate heredity from the one claimed: “born of fornication.....of your father the devil.” Satan’s demonry in John is singularly forensic: he is a courtroom liar “and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies” (8.41-44).

The fundamental untruth that the father of lies passes on to his children is the untruth about themselves. To remain in that untruth is to wind up dead. Hence Satan’s own ethos is that of “murderer.” All are sinners, but they hold that to be untrue about themselves. Though sinners-in-fact, they remain by their denial sinners-in-untruth.

The first ministry of truth that the divine Envoy exercises is to move such sinners-in-fact into being sinners-in-truth. In the full-scale argument about paternity in John 8 this ministry of truth on Jesus’ part fails: “Because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. Which of you convicts me of sin?” For that is the “truth” issue here: Who is sinner? “If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me?” (8.45f.). Their refusal to hear this word of truth about themselves leads to the tragic contra-*tekna* conclusion: “The reason why you do not hear them [these true words of God] is that you are not *of* God” (8.47). Here Jesus’ truth-ministry fails. The intended receivers remain in untruth. They adjudge Jesus to be the liar – at least about them. So they take up stones to throw at him – to close the case and carry out the verdict.

In the immediately following chapter 9 we have a Christ-encounter that leads to a happier conclusion, though the

antagonists of chapter 8 continue alongside the central figure to highlight the contrast. It is the pericope of the "man blind from his birth." Five times this point is made: he was "born" blind. We might think that this was merely a clinical statement from his medical chart, were it not for John's making both in the prologue a matter of rights and his using blindness as a metaphor for sin throughout this pericope. This puts us right back at the center of the debate about ethos "from birth." Who is the sinner? The critics put that value judgment on Jesus (9.24) and in their last word to the newly-sighted man tell him that he was "born in utter sin" (9.34).

Note how the man never disputes his genetic malady. In fact he affirms it. I was "a man born blind." He is blind in fact, and, what's more, "in truth." Human beings are "in truth" what they are if they make no pretense to appear otherwise, but will be nothing other than they in fact are.

We might think it would be folly for a man blind from birth to deny something so undeniable, yet that is John's point about the ethos of the sinners here. For people so committed to God's truth, why deny the divine truth about one's self? At least if they did not see it clearly before, now by contrast with Jesus, grace and truth in person, their difference from him is inescapable. But not if they are blind, blind from birth.

The protagonist here is blind/sinner in fact and "in truth," and already with that his ethos is a considerable distance removed from those who are blind/sinner in fact only. His Christ encounter moved him into the realm of truth, albeit sinner-in-truth. But he now moves even further away from the sinner's initial ethos. For Jesus is not only truth for this sinner. He is also and uniquely grace for him, "grace upon grace" (1.16). Jesus "manifests in him the works of God" (9.3), the prologue-designated work of the "true light" to enlighten every darkened

one (1.9). "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world" (9.5), he says as the healing begins. And he graces this "true" sinner with the gift of sight, of light. Does that mean that he is now a non-sinner? At first it sounds incredible, yet that is the relentless conclusion to the John 9 pericope.

The first ethical move in the process is to become a "sinner in truth." When some of the Pharisees come to Jesus after the event and ask whether they are blind, he says, "If you were blind [=sinner in truth] you would have no sin [by virtue of this encounter with me]; but now that you say, 'We see' [i.e., we are nonsinners], your sin remains." The clinically blind man's sin does not "remain," not only because Jesus opened his eyes, the physical enlightening action, but because after his exclusion from the synagogue Jesus finds him and moves him to the confession, "Lord, I *believe*." With that confession he qualifies for a new ethos: "to all who receive him, who believed in his name, *he gave the right* to become children of God." Children of God are graced nonsinners who have moved from sinner-in-fact, to sinner-in-truth, to graced nonsinner: they hold the *tekna*-cratic right. The deuterocanonical pericope of the adulteress (8.1-11) corroborates the sequence: sinner-in-fact, sinner-in-truth, graced ("neither do I accuse you") nonsinner ("sinner no more").

Werner Elert has observed:

The kind of truth which makes its entry in the person of the sinless Christ
is totally different from the truth sinners dread. Jesus becomes their
associate and friend, he is one of them. In becoming their equal, he makes
them his equal. In the Johannine signs [including this one], he eliminates
the difference between sinners and himself, even becoming "sinner" like

them. Are they then too no longer sinners? It sounds incredible. It could at most be so if the one eliminating the difference were really believable.

John claims to believe it, describing the process in the words: "We beheld

his glory...full of grace and truth." Christ is not only truth in person, but

also grace in person, for by making sinners his equals, they become graced

sinners. But the question still remains whether this verdict that Christ renders

on sinners by becoming their friend, is also God's verdict. Not until we have

clarity here will we have a conclusive answer to the question of consequences

that this action of Christ toward sinners has for their total ethos.

(Elert, *The Christian Ethos*, 187f.)

In Johannine terms John's Jesus claims to give that right to believing sinners. But claims are cheap. Since the claimed right is the "right of children of God," the question arises: Does God concur in this judgment? Does Jesus have the right to extend family rights to anyone, let alone to sinners – and then extend them to such a motley collection of them, the *ochlos*, the riffraff, "the accursed, who do not know the law," whom the law designates *aposynagogos*?

Jesus' own "rights" and thus Jesus' right to extend Tekna-cratic rights

In Jesus' own trial his right to be called "Son of God" is at the center of the suit. John is unrelenting in signaling the

cross ("the hour") as the denouement that verifies Jesus' right to the title. In every instance where John links the term *exousia* to Jesus directly, the right is associated with life and death. And this linkage is not surprising, since John's Gospel treats life and death as juridical (that is, ethical) events and not primarily as medical, biological phenomena. Let us examine these explicit "rights" references to Jesus.

In Jesus' defense for healing the sick man at the sheep gate pool he says, "For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself, and has given him *exousia* [the right] *krisin poiein* [to execute judgment] because he is the Son of man" (5.26f.).

The right claimed by Jesus here is the right of the Son of Man, the right of the final judge at the eschatological judgment day. He claims this right, but by what rights? What authorizes God to turn over the grand finale judgment to the Son – and especially to this one? We might be inclined to think that since he is the Father's son, such transfer of duties is merely a matter of majestic magisterial discretion. Not so. Jesus "earns" this right by what he does in "the hour." Even though as the divine Logos, only Son...in the beginning," he does have "life in himself," that does not yet authorize him to bestow that life (=the right to be children of God) to others who rightfully do not have it. That right needs to be earned by effort, by "doing the work" of the Envoy, if that work truly is the work of God.

Jesus becomes the Son of Man "by rights" by virtue of his own trial. This divine judge is not above the fray; in fact, he is not even above being himself indicted, found guilty, and executed. To be sure, he is then vindicated, but not without the continuing marks of an incriminated death (20.27). John draws these two together: the hour of cross/resurrection is the conclusion of Jesus' trial and simultaneously Jesus' elevation

to the bench of final judgment as the Son of Man, in both cases he is “lifted up.”

There is a double “double-take” here. First of all, the earthly accused one is simultaneously the vindicated eschatological judge. Second, those who entrust their case to this strangely incriminated and vindicated judge get a jump on the final judgment, “heading it off at the pass,” “scooping” it before it happens, and thus hilariously getting the final judgment already behind them.

The future judgment already behind them? “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; s/he does not come into judgment, but has (already) passed from death to life” (5.25). This proleptic bestowal of “right to life” is finally identical with the right of children of God, a right that means biographically “born of God,” “begotten, not made,” tantalizingly similar (or is it even identical?) to the right of life of the only-begotten Son.

Jesus becomes the Son of Man “by rights” by virtue of his own trial.

But how does the earthly accused become thereby the eschatological judge? The next two *exousia* passages provide an answer. In the Good Shepard pericope of chapter 10 Jesus says: “no one takes it [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have *exousia* to lay it down, and I have *exousia* to take it up again; this assignment [*entole*] I have received from my Father.” The divine commission of the Envoy is to do just that, to lay down and take up again his life. That is what makes his dying “right” irrespective of the hanky-panky that may have ensued in the dramatic story line. And that is what makes his resurrection “right” – it is what God sent him to do. But how does that all work to be of benefit for the intended

beneficiaries, in this pericope, the mortally endangered sheep?

John, of course, affirms the beneficial results of Jesus' death. In commenting on the Son of Man's "hour" we hear: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth, and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (12.25). And a few lines later: "For this purpose I have come to this hour" (12.27). "Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this signaling what sort of death he was going to die" (12.31-33). The "Book of Signs" in John concludes with this summary signal.

His death is not a tragic accident. It is central to his assignment. Simultaneously as he is lifted up to be the eschatological judge ahead of time, he is also the dying grain of wheat bearing much fruit, the rights-transfer agent for making others children of God. At times Jesus sounds as if the judge's role is not part of his original assignment. "I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. Whoever rejects me and does not receive my sayings has a judge; the word that I have spoken will be his judge on the last day" (12.47-48). By virtue of being savior he attains the right to be the eschatological judge. Nevertheless, verdicts *ad malam partem* (for the bad part) are not his *opus proprium* (appropriate work) but his *opus alienum* (alien work).

How does his death bestow rights to unchildren to become children? In 17.1-3 he prays: "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him *exousia* over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

Who would want rights to “all flesh”? Bothered as we are with the negative “rights” that each one’s own flesh bestows (“remains flesh,” “profits zero”), who would want rights to any more, let alone to “all flesh?” Already in the prologue that arrangement of rights was telegraphed ahead to us. The *logos* became flesh – our kind of humanity – in order to get rights over all flesh. Right to do what? Judge them? No, that’s not the assignment. Right to give them eternal life. Right to give these unchildren the life and right of God’s own self.

How does the cross actually do that? The final *exousia* passage in John takes us into the courtroom exchange between Jesus and Pilate. “Do you not know that I have *exousia* to release you, and *exousia* to crucify you?” says Pilate. “you would have no *exousia* over me,” answers Jesus, “unless it has been given you from above.” Rights come from the bench. But there is a Bench above Pilate’s bench, and that’s where the “right” to Jesus’ life or death is grounded. And as we heard in chapter 10, that right is one which Jesus himself now exercises, not Pilate at all, even though it is Pilate’s decision that implements the Envoy’s divine assignment.

But what is “right” about the execution death of Jesus? By what right does he die? At the trial John does not dispute the claim of the plaintiffs: “We have a law and by that Law he ought to die, because he has made himself the Son of God.” This claim for the lawfulness of Jesus’ execution needs the interpretive linkage that John provides earlier when Caiaphas, the high priest, addresses the Jewish council: “It is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish.” John comments: “He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the *children of God* who are scattered abroad” (11.50-53). The death of Jesus is legal, and

at the same time saves people from the law's case against them that they should "perish," that they should die their own rightful deaths.

How does John make all that legal doubleness compute? The law (of Moses) gives Pilate the right to pass the death sentence on Jesus. Pilate, of course, does not know this. That is a "right" given him from above. But is Moses for Jesus or against him? That is the debate in the entire Fourth Gospel. The opponents view the either/or as follows: either Moses testifies that Jesus is the Son of God, or Moses testifies that he is a blasphemer deserving of death. John's own answer to that either/or is Yes to both, but with an important nuance: He is indeed the Son of God, the *Logos* of the deity, and in his enfleshed way of solidarity with sinners he does perpetrate blasphemy, but a blessed blasphemy, a contravening of God's own (Mosaic) law about sinners. Jesus' blasphemy is his claim to move sinners into the divine family, right into the Father's lap where according to Moses only the Abrahamic Torah-faithful had any right to be, and even, according to John, previously only the only-begotten One had any genetic rights to be (1.18).

Although Moses in John always testifies for Jesus, Moses is conversely always the accuser of sinners. This fate is made even more lethal when sinners-in-fact set their hope upon Moses (5.45ff.). Sinners-in-truth are therefore not likely to be such "disciples of Moses" (9.28). Yet merely "not hoping in Moses" does not get them out from under Moses' condemnation. Flesh and its bread, even Mosaic bread, leaves you dead in the wilderness (chap. 6). Jesus' partnering with sinners, though a genuine Son of God (a nonsinner) himself, enmeshes him in Moses' deadly criticism upon those whose side he takes. Thus it is paradoxically true that "we have a law [Moses' own fundamental death verdict for sinners], and by that law he ought to die." The blasphemy of Jesus' action is not simply the claim: I am the

Son of God, but the things he does as he claims that title and its rights. His hobnobbing with sinners, and his taking their side in their own controversy with Mosaic criticism and the Mosaic administrators is what is so contrary to the Yahweh of the Mosaic Decalogue who claims not to be friendly toward sinners (Ex 20.5f.). No wonder almost every sign he performs embroils Jesus in juridical argument.

And that juridical realism before the divine bench is what John reads out of Caiaphas' statement although Caiaphas surely meant it otherwise. "The whole nation" will indeed perish, not by Roman military violence but by Mosaic prosecution before the divine court, if there is no extraordinary intervention. Therefore it is indeed "expedient for you that one should die for the people, lest the whole nation perish," to which John adds, "he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the *children of God* [!] who are scattered abroad" (11.50f.). One dies for all, and all are saved, are moved to the new ethos of children of God, a *right* they have *sola fide* (that is, "by believing in him").

This passage reflects John's version of the more familiar Pauline one-for-all solidarity notions (Romans 5 with its Adamic and Christic human solidarity). In diagramming the action taking place at the level of the "Supreme" court, while the action proceeds in the Jerusalem council and before Pilate's court, John in the Gospel does not give us very precise signs. The courtroom scene of Revelation 12 gives a later exposition of this Johannine tradition when it describes how the "accuser" no longer has any rights to accuse Christ-believing sinners.

In accusing the Word-made-flesh (made sinner) at the Jerusalem trial, the cosmic accuser is exercising his necessary rights. In fact, he *has to* do it. He has Mosaic authorization for demanding

the death verdict. Yet the one he is accusing is the Son of the divine majesty, "one with the Father," whom to accuse is to incriminate oneself of the selfsame first commandment blasphemy charge. Thereby the accusing law by which Jesus ought to die is caught signing its own death warrant for rebellion and blasphemy, if the one being accused to death really is the Son of God. If he is not, the law's verdict will stick. If he is, the law's verdict will counterindict the law itself and Jesus will be vindicated.

Easter is his vindication. Easter is the Law's Lord confirming the divine right of the Son- in-the-flesh to bring sinners into the family. Easter exposes the law's forfeited claim to rights over sinners. No surprise then that the first words of the Risen One after the shalom-greeting (i.e., good news to *these* sinners) is their assignment to forgive sins as his envoys with the grim reminder that for whomever they neglect to do it, for those folks sins are "retained." The accuser still has his rights to them.

In carrying out the trial of Jesus all the way to his execution the "ruler of this world" loses his rights. We tend to overdemonize this character in John, I think. Who runs this world? Law runs this world – sometimes lawfully, often not, but when it does work, the law (even the very best law – the law of Moses) is the prince of this world. And in a 1-2-3 sequence of the only times this world's ruler appears in John, the Evangelist signs to us the consequences of Jesus' trial for the rights of the law. (1) In describing "this hour" Jesus says, "Now is the judgment of the world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all to myself" (12.31f.). (2) "I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me [literally, 'He has nothing *on* me']; but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I

love the Father” (14.30f.). And finally, (3) the Paraclete’s threefold assignment to convince/convict the world *re* sin, righteousness, judgment: by virtue of Jesus’ going to the Father “the ruler of this world is judged” (16.8-11).

The cross certifies before the heavenly and eschatological court Jesus’ rights to exempt sinners from the verdict of the accuser. It gives him rights over these sinners, or, in John’s language, “right over all flesh to give eternal life to all.” That right he does not clutch to himself but gives gratis “to all who believe in him.” They were the intended beneficiaries from the very beginning. Believing effects the rights-transfer. Believing in this vindicated Vindicator vindicates the believers already now before the final Supreme court. They trump the other-wise valid accuser by the blood of the Lamb. They are granted the ethos of nonsinner, children of God, and they have it by rights, both by Mosaic rights in the paradoxically legal right/wrong death of Jesus, and even more by family ownership rights of Jesus’ own grace and truth.

In John’s Gospel that human ethos actualizes itself in behaviors that are in this Mosaic world but of the new world of grace and truth. Bilateral agape is one, prayer in Jesus’ name another, witnessing and working a third, and bearing persecution another, to name a few of John’s favorites. But that’s another essay.

Edward H. Schroeder

[MosaicandChristicEthosGospelJohn \(PDF\)](#)

Update from Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem

Colleagues,

The internet provider to Christmas Lutheran Church/ International Center in Bethlehem was down for seven weeks. Here is a message from Rev. Mitri Raheb sent our way on May 22. It includes links to a number of articles on their website. Day before yesterday Mitri followed up with another message reminding us that the siege really continues in spite of media descriptions. Even so . . .

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Dear Friends, Salaam from Bethlehem. Thanks to all of you, who wrote, called and visited us during the 40 days of curfew and occupation. We would like to inform you that we are back online and able to communicate after a long absence due to the Israeli military invasion and occupation of Bethlehem. We were unable neither to tell our story nor to be in contact with you because on Saturday, April 6 at 06:10 AM the Israeli military bombed the main server provider and all telephone lines in the old city of Bethlehem where we are located. Only this past Friday we were able to restore most of our communications.

Since last week we are trying to go back to some normalcy in our daily life and work. The 40 days from Easter Monday to Ascension Thursday, which the first disciples also spent behind

closed doors, seemed to us like 40 years in the desert and were so far the most difficult in our lives. Our struggle is not over yet. The worse might still come. We have learned to take every single day thankfully from the hand of the Lord as if it were the last in our life. Yet, we continue to plan as if our brightest future is yet to come. We will never give up on our town and on the wellness of our community. We will continue to build and rebuild, to train and educate, to empower and to create life in the midst of death. We will continue to call for justice and reconciliation in the midst of rising hate, revenge and retaliation.

As such, we would like to invite you to visit our <http://www.annadwa.org/> updated website, to view our latest pictures and to gain an insight into the experience of these days through some of the reflections of the ICB staff:

1. " [Though war should rise against me...](#)", a sermon on Psalm 27 by Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb
2. " [A detailed report on the damages done to the ICB](#)", by Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb
3. " [The first day back](#)", by Rev. Sandra Olewine
4. " [A Moment of Resurrection](#)", by Rev. Sandra Olewine.
5. " [Die Zerstoerung Bethlehems](#)", by Viola Raheb
6. " [Zwangsexil](#)", by our art coordinator Johannes Zang
7. " [Life stronger than death](#)", by our art coordinator, Faten Anastas-Mitwasi.
8. " [Dar al- Kalima school](#)", a report by the School Principal, Dr. Charlie Haddad
9. " [Living a nightmare: walking as a shield](#)", by our youth coordinator Sami Abu Ghazaleh
10. " [Schooled in America, Seething in the West Bank](#)", Article on our colleague Dr. Nuha Khoury published in the New York Times

We look forward to hearing from you.

Blessings

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May 28

Dear friends,

Greetings from Bethlehem. Just last week we wrote you that we are starting to go back to normal. However, since yesterday morning curfew has been imposed again on Bethlehem. The old town from Christmas Lutheran to the Church of the Nativity was declared “military closed zone”. The Israeli tanks are stationed on the square just outside our church. The whole city is closed, no one is allowed to walk or drive on the streets. Schools are closed as well, including our Dar al-Kalima school. A group of friends from the USA came to be in solidarity & fellowship with us. The following article was written by Suzan Balzer, describing their first two days in Bethlehem.

Blessings

Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb

A Solidarity of Eyes, Ears, Hands and Feet

with the People of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem

By Susan Balzer

Bethlehem, May 27, 2002

We came in solidarity of eyes, ears, hands and feet with the people of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem. So far, we are showing our solidarity by sharing the curfew imposed on Bethlehem early this morning, (May 27, 2002). I woke up shortly before the Moslem call to prayer at 4 a.m. Roosters began to crow. Then seven loud shots reverberated around the hills – warning shots, I learned later, that a new day of curfew is imposed on this city. All the dogs of the city started barking and a child wailed. A car drove slowly past the Bethlehem Star Hotel. I looked out our third floor window, curious, but afraid. I wondered about the wisdom of my coming here now. What about my family? And the congregations that supported our coming?

I remembered the anointing I received my first night in Jerusalem (Was that only three days ago?) and the commissioning David Osborne and I received at Hesston (Kansas) Mennonite Church just one week ago. The refrain of a song our group sang together kept going through my mind: “No storm can shake my inmost calm, while to the Rock I’m clinging. Since love is Lord of heav’n and earth, how can I keep from singing?” (from “My Life Flows On” by Robert Lowry) I didn’t actually sing it last night, but once again I turned my trust over to God to keep me as long as I am meant to be here.

Ten of us have come from America to Bethlehem to listen to our suffering Christian brothers and sisters; to witness the destruction in the town where Jesus was born; and to lend our hands and feet to help in a physical way. Now with a curfew on only our second full day here, we don’t know what will happen

next. Before we came, Gassan Andoni from the Rapprochement Center in Beit Sahour told us that our mission would be worthwhile even if we were turned back upon our arrival at the Tel Aviv airport.

Knowing we will take home much more than we brought here inspires us to keep using our eyes and ears and pondering these things in our hearts. Our group is a collection of Mennonite and Church of the Brethren Christians who answered a call to come here to show Christian solidarity. Dr. Dorothy Jean Weaver, a New Testament professor at Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, Virginia, called the group together. She had been planning with Kevin Clark, Pastor of Big Spring Mennonite Church, Luray, Virginia, to lead a tour of the Holy Land at this time, but had to cancel it April 10 because of the siege at the Church of the Nativity. Having established a loving relationship with people of Christmas Lutheran Church, Dorothy Jean was overwhelmed when she received an e-mail from Rev. Mitri Raheb shortly after the invasion of Bethlehem with the poignant message: "This is coming to let you know that we are still alive."

As the siege persisted well into April, Dorothy Jean called upon people who had a variety of skills and a common passion for peace in the city where the Prince of Peace was born. Another thing the individuals of the group had in common was their ability to travel at short notice. May 23-June 3 was the third 12-day period on the tentative schedule that was to be implemented as soon as Rev. Mitri considered conditions safe enough for our travel. When the 42-day siege finally ended and curfew stopped, Dorothy Jean made quick work of confirming the group members' decisions to participate and making Air Canada reservations for direct flights from Toronto to Tel Aviv.

Meanwhile, we had searched our souls, questioned our family

members and gathered support from church and peace friends. Many of us have received generous support for our travel expenses as well as donations which we brought with us for Christmas Lutheran Church and international center. We are heartened by our safe travels, eventless entry into Israel, and quick passage through the walk-through checkpoint into Bethlehem. The gunfire and tank activity that kept many of us awake on Saturday night was the first ominous warning of things yet to come. But as we learned early Sunday morning that church services would take place as scheduled, we took heart. The joy of coming together to worship our Lord and Savior with our Arabic Christian kin was the highlight of our stay to date. All afternoon we waited to see if we could use our hands and feet as well as our eyes and ears.

Rev. Mitri called us to say that a truckload of new furniture for the international center was coming into the port today and he would like our help to unload it later. After many phone calls and literally hours of waiting, our group, carrying our cameras and a makeshift white flag, walked the two blocks from the hotel to the church. Rev. Mitri patiently, but firmly, negotiated with the Israeli soldiers at the site they had hemmed in with three tanks. Another hour elapsed until they finally said we could go ahead and unload, but were not allowed to move the truck any closer to the church.

The unloading took only a small fraction of the time that the waiting had taken. It felt good after a day of sitting in the hotel to do something physical. The 8 p.m. call to prayer has just sounded. The curfew has not been lifted. We have to trust that the soldiers will let us return to our hotel for the night.

We pray for more opportunities to be in solidarity tomorrow and throughout the week. As Rev. Mitri said as we carried a box of

furniture, "This is experiential tourism." Our Palestinian friends say they don't know what normal life is. We are learning what it is to share in their suffering.

From a Crossings Colleague in Beirut, Lebanon: "How the Israel-Palestine Conflict Looks from Here."

Colleagues,

Art Preisinger and wife Mitzi are in Beirut, Lebanon this semester. They're at Near East School of Theology [NEST] as ELCA Global Mission Volunteers. Art's teaching church history. Mitzi's also doing useful work. Art and I were classmates in seminary days. I asked him for something that I could pass on to the listserve readership. This is what he sent. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

A couple of weeks ago a neighbor from the States sent me an email the Subject of which was "Confused." He was trying to understand why there is so much bitterness toward the United States by Arab countries, why "certain elements in the country

(U.S.) decried the flying of the American flag and the display of the motto 'In God We Trust,' etc.

My neighbor is a good man, generous to a fault. He goes out of his way to help others. He will give you the shirt off his back. I have great respect for him and consider him a good friend. He calls himself a Christian and a patriotic American. I suspect he equates the two. He is a retired military officer, and his thinking about the Middle East crisis is probably how approximately 80% of the American people think about it.

The following answer to his letter is my impression of how the majority of people here in the Middle East view America and American policy:

Dear _____, You note that the September 11 attack was the work of terrorists. And so it was. The media and the administration picked up on that designation and now, it seems, anybody who is deemed an enemy of the U.S. is a "terrorist."

We are engaged in a "war on terrorism." Labels are curious things – repeat them often enough and whether they represent the reality or not, people perceive it to be the reality. Consider what that means: we are involved in an undeclared war (undeclared, since the war is against individuals, not nations), but a war nevertheless. The political payoff is immense: you can never really win this war (will terrorists lay down their anthrax, their pipe bombs, their pilots' licences and come in with their hands up?), and so by its very nature you can prolong it indefinitely.

Folks over here get the impression that the Bush administration is using "terror" and "terrorism" as a rationale for going to war against Iraq in order to oust Saddam Hussein. They think we Americans reserve the right to choose the leaders of other countries. They think that is downright arrogant. Iraq, it is

said, will shortly have nuclear capability unless we stop it. A Muslim respondent at a recent Christian-Muslim dialogue which I attended asked, "Why is it that Israel can have all the weapons it wants, but Iraq cannot, nor can the PLO?" They ask why we accuse Yasser Arafat of brutality and violence, but call Ariel Sharon "a man of peace." They say blood has been on Sharon's hands since 1952, when he committed atrocities under the aegis of Menachim Begin and the Israeli underground Irgun.

You point out that suicide bomber attacks have no respect for women and children. People here would admit to that, but they would also point out that recent Israeli terrorist attacks in the West Bank have no respect for women and children, either. Why does Israel refuse to let U.N. observers go into Jenin, after Amnesty International and other human rights organizations have blown the whistle on Israeli atrocities there? The answer is obvious.

Why did the U.S. now decide to opt out of the new International Criminal Court with the flimsy excuse that "we don't want our military hauled before a foreign tribunal"? Was it because there is talk of putting Sharon in the docket for crimes against humanity?

You say that "a recent poll of Arab nations showed they disagreed with the position of the United States fighting terrorism." First of all, people here ask why should they agree with United States policy. Should they ask "how high?" every time America says "Jump!" Secondly, people here are not likely to be subject to American-Israeli propaganda and they are of the opinion that the way America and Israel are "fighting terrorism" is wrong-headed, counterproductive and simply breeds more terrorism. They ask, "Do you honestly believe that bombing Afghanistan back to the Stone Age, or pulverizing with brute force village after village of occupied territory, is going to

stop terrorism? That only increases the resolve of real terrorists and so-called ones." Sharon is not so stupid as to think his bullying will stop terrorism. It is clear to most people here that the militant Zionists want all of Palestine, and they are willing to sacrifice peace in order to get it. Extreme Zionists, especially those who live in the illegal settlements, have said so unabashedly, up front. Two days ago that became abundantly clear when the Likud party, led by Benjamin Netanyahu, resolved never to allow a Palestinian state to exist. "There," argue the Arabs, "is the proof of the pudding. We knew it all along."

I must emphasize that the anger the Arabs feel toward the United States is an anger directed at the leadership and the Middle East policies of the U.S. government, and not at the American people. We feel as safe here as in a place where someone puts anthrax into letters and pipe bombs into mailboxes.

The real danger for us is not from the Muslims but from the possibility of an invasion by Israel. The supreme irony would be to be killed by a bomb made in America, dropped from a plane made in America. Israel does fly over Lebanon, including Beirut, often; so often, in fact, that the Lebanese pay little attention to it.

We are learning much about Islam, including that elusive word, "Jihad." Jihad does mean "holy war." But war can be defined in many ways, not always as violent physical conflict. But most Americans think of it that way, i.e., as physical conflict. And since it is "holy" there is a religious significance to it. Because of September 11 and bin Laden's pronouncements, panicked people imagine that Islam is bent on destroying its two counterparts, Christianity and Judaism. The anti-Christian persecutions in such places as Nigeria, Sudan, and Indonesia do

not help to counter that perception. Those situations are to be closely watched, even as Muslim leaders here keep reminding us that "Islam is a religion of peace."

You seem to think that the West is completely Christianized and the East Islamicized. I think your mistake is in equating the West with Christianity, and failing to realize that there are Christian Arabs, many of whom are leaving because of Israeli persecution. So in Western eyes, it's an "us" (Christians) vs. "them" (Muslims). The problem is an imbalance of cultures. Islam, like fundamentalist Christianity, recognizes no difference between "church and state." America, however, has a history of the separation of the two, much to the dismay of those Christians who want it the Islamic way: America should be a Christian nation! This has implications for U.S.-Israel relations, because in the Christian millennialist scenario, the state of Israel must be established in preparation for the return of Christ. This is the reason for the support of Israel by Christian Zionists; Christians who, under any other circumstances, would not dream of being bedfellows with Jews.

Another irony is the fact that Israel is a "secular" nation and most of its inhabitants keep up Jewish traditions, not Judaism. Many, like Christmas and Easter Christians, hardly darken the doors of synagogue or temple. Yet these same people are quick to quote the Old Testament about God "giving the land to Jews in perpetuity," thus using a religious justification for a political purpose. And the question arises, "Are contemporary Israelis the bona fide descendants of the Israelites to whom God made this promise?"

Imad Salti is a 22-year-old Palestinian Christian from Beit Jala in the West Bank. Beit Jala is about one kilometer from Bethlehem. Imad is one of my students, and an Arab Christian. He is going to be a pastor. I find it difficult to have much

sympathy for a country whose armed might has wantonly destroyed much of Imad's village, whose tanks point their guns at the home of Imad's mother. Imad has a difficult time getting back home for vacations. And if and when he does, he is confronted by Israeli soldiers who humiliate him, who cause terrible economic hardship for Palestinians, who have driven out much of the Christian Arab population, and oppress those who stay.

I must also say that the Palestinians are not well-received here, or for that matter almost anywhere. In a way, today's Palestinians are yesterday's Jews. Nobody wants them. They have been thrown off their land and in many cases deprived of their livelihood. They are oppressed and marginalized by the very people who themselves were oppressed and marginalized. What a strange turn of events. There is a large Palestinian camp here in Beirut. We have not been inside it, but from the looks of it, as well as from local reports, it is similar to the abysmal townships outside the cities of South Africa. Poverty is a way of life. Then, too, Syria maintains hegemony over Lebanon by supporting Hezbollah, particularly along the so-called Blue Line in South Lebanon, the border between Lebanon and Israel. We were there a couple of weeks ago, no more than a kilometer from the border. One can see the Israeli lookout post on Mt. Hermon and the disputed Shebaa farms.

I close with a personal note: I decry and abhor the suicide bombings of innocent Israeli people, including women and children. I decry and abhor the brutal suppression and massacre of Palestinian people, including women and children.

I have said this before: I think Ariel Sharon, Benjamin Netanyahu, and their cronies are destroying their own country. They have squandered Israel's moral capital, and have left Israel morally bankrupt.

Your friend and neighbor,

Art

The Church's Authority and Homosexuality

Colleagues,

This is the last ThTh posting coming from New Haven, Connecticut. Next Thursday, d.v., Marie and I hope to be home in St. Louis. Our spring semester tour of duty here at the Overseas Ministries Study Center is over. It's a bit too soon for a retrospective summary. Yet today's posting is a piece of it—a report on the collateral work (collateral damage?) I did alongside my official chores at OMSC, this missions thinktank. [For the record: besides teaching, interacting with mission scholars from all over the world here at OMSC, and being a “presence” in the residential community (we're the only Lutherans they've had in years!), I did get two modest paper-pieces done. One's an essay on Luther's mission theology, the other a 40-page study booklet for my seminar “In a World of Faiths, Why Jesus?” Perhaps they can be the grist for postings later this summer.]

Collaterally there were two flights out of town for presentations, a few local Sunday sermons, a Lenten seminar at St. John's Episcopal Church, an ecumenical conversation — “Preaching the Gospel after 9/11” — with a group of Catholics, Lutherans and UCC folks, the hoopla as Yale Divinity School and

the three Eastern Region ELCA seminaries signed an agreement for collaborative theological education, and then most recently my involvement with the New Haven area conference of ELCA clergy. Today's posting arises from this last item.

Homosexuality was the agenda for the ELCA pastors' discussion. I got asked for input. My two-page presentation follows. Yes, I think I'm learning some things I didn't know before. But before my two pages comes a book review. Its author is Christian Batalden Scharen, a young ELCA pastor right next door in New Britain, CT. He's done a major work on homosexuality with specific focus on the ELCA. I'd never heard of it, but I've read it now. And I commend it to you.

What is the linkage, mentioned above, between homosexuality and the church's authority? ThTh 203 & 204 show that Jesus contrasted "Gentile authority over" (Matt. 20) with his own "authority under" and commends the latter while forbidding the former to his followers. Scharen examines the ELCA's model of authority as it deals with homosexuality. He doesn't use my over/under metaphors, but with his scholarly tools he illuminates the clockworks of a church bureaucracy as "authority over." Read on.

Christian Batalden Scharen

MARRIED IN THE SIGHT OF GOD. THEOLOGY, ETHICS AND CHURCH DEBATE OVER HOMOSEXUALITY.

Lanham, MD: Univ. Press of America, 2000, xxiv, 171 pp. paper.

Scharen uses analytical tools proposed by Max Weber and Michel Foucault for seeing what's really going on in bureaucratic structures and applies them to the ELCA's response to the homosexuality hot-potato. And he does so brilliantly, I think,

though I am mostly an outsider to highbrow critical social theory. He proposes in his constructive alternative to the ELCA policy a “middle way” between the tradition of what allegedly “we Lutherans have always said,” and the lived-experience alternatives of today’s American sexual mores.

Scharen does “archaeology and genealogy” (code terms for Foucault’s analytical tools) of the near-shibboleth terms in ELCA rhetoric on sexual issues: “the orders of creation” and the “heterosexual structures of God’s creation.” He traces their origins to early statements from two of the bodies that merged to make up the ELCA, namely, the Lutheran Church in America and the American Lutheran Church.

[Strangely, it seems to me, he makes no reference to the LCMS during those years, where the same shibboleths were in vogue, not for addressing homosexuality (no US Lutherans were talking about that) but for denying women access to the pastoral office. In those days the ALC, the LCA, and Missouri did indeed interact. Maybe the youngsters don’t know that. LCMS president J.A.O. Preus even appointed me to represent Missouri in one such tri-Lutheran consultation about orders of creation. Strange that Scharen’s social critical archaeology and genealogy didn’t unearth that interaction. I would bet that the “orders of creation” mantra originally came from Missouri.]

We learn how the language to warn women away from pastoral ministry “was dusted off in the 1980s and 1990s to censure homosexuality.” Using the tools mentioned above, Scharen comes to this verdict: “While the ELCA portrays its theology of marriage and related policies as embodying God’s intention for human relationships, in fact the ELCA quickly adopted this theology in an effort to ensure institutional stability, doing unjustifiable harm to many persons in the process.”

Here's the outline:

Chapter 1. The tools of Weber and Foucault and their promise for this investigation.

Chapter 2. Luther's threefold revolution in his theology of marriage and its value for today.

Chapter 3. How Luther was used by the predecessor bodies of the ELCA, beginning with the revival of US Lutheran social ethics shortly after WW II.

Chapter 4 "turns to genealogical questions, [viz.,] ... how the theology of marriage [chapter 3] provided the basis for the ELCA's response to a crisis over the ordination of 'openly gay' seminarians just as the ELCA came into being." The ELCA's basic text for that policy is the "Vision and Expectations" document, the iron hand, some say, in the certification process for ELCA clergy. "The process ... clearly developed ... in order to control the clergy population, especially in ways to keep gay and lesbian candidates ... out of the ministry."

Chapter 5 concludes with the author's alternative proposal, drawing on "resources in Luther's work as well as in the work of previous Lutheran statements on marriage and sexuality." These resources "are sufficient to fashion a sexual ethic that fully welcomes gay and lesbian Christians while also upholding key essentials of the church's historic position on marriage – a position both faithful to the tradition and to the contemporary moment."

I think he pulls it off. But he could do so even more forcefully if he were to see Luther's new hermeneutics for reading the Bible, and thus for reading the world, as the grounding for Luther's "new view" of marriage. Another assist could come from moving the "orders" discussion away from "orders of creation" to

Luther's own vocabulary of the "Creator's ordainings." Both of which are central for the theses appended below, my presentation May 9 to the local ELCA clergy gathering here in New Haven, Connecticut.

Ed Schroeder

Input for New Haven CT Lutheran Pastoral Conference

May 9, 2002

1. My input today is not a liberal view of homosexuality in contrast to the conservative one we heard at our last meeting. My experience in such discussions is that both liberal and conservative Christians often ground their convictions on other foundations. They KNOW it is right (or wrong) even if there were no word of Scripture on the subject. Even so, the debate among Christians is on How you read the Bible. It's hermeneutics.
2. Instead of a liberal view, I want to offer a consciously crafted Lutheran hermeneutics for addressing the issue. I call it "Lutheran" in that it is the one Luther said was his own, and the one the Confessors at Augsburg (1530) articulated as they faced an alternate hermeneutic in the scholastic theology they confronted. It's the law-promise hermeneutic. [See Luther's "breakthrough" statement cited in ThTh 203 & 204 and its parallel in the prolegomena statements of Apology IV in the Lutheran Confessions.]
3. The alternative was scholastic hermeneutics, "reading the Bible as law," said the Reformers. Scholastic theology reads the Bible as a codex of teaching. The whole Bible is God revealing to us what God wants us to know – and what we wouldn't/couldn't know on our own. Thus there was "no qualitative difference between Moses and Christ," as Luther says in his breakthrough statement. The entire Bible is God's own canon for what we are to believe, how we are to behave, how to worship, etc.

4. The new reformation hermeneutic entailed a different view of what the Bible as a whole was. Not a codex of God's specs for human life, not a scholastic textbook of things to learn. Instead it is God's diagnosis and prognosis of humankind in God's world. Today we might say it's a patient's hospital chart. With Dx and Rx entries. Not do's and don'ts, but X-ray readings and therapy proposals.
5. From the Law/Promise hermeneutic for reading the scriptures comes a corollary hermeneutic for reading the world: God's left-hand and God's right-hand operations. Same God, but two very different works in the world.
6. God's LH = God at work in the Old Creation, the "secular" world, in medieval language. But secular is not "godless," as the term is often used today. Instead it is God at work in the old "saeculum," the old creation. It is distinguished from the new creation, what "God in Christ" is up to. Same God, but qualitatively different operations. Fairness vs. forgiveness.
7. Sex is secular, an item of God's work in the old creation, God's creation-action carried out for eons without any linkage to Christ. God "manages" that segment of creation, in the same way that God manages all of the old creation, via "law," the fundamental axiom of which is fairness, debit/credit equity – the balance scales of justice. There are structures in the old creation, God's secular world, to carry out God's management. They are God's "C2-S2" – as Bob Bertram liked to say, punning on R2-D2 – the "Creator's Critical Support Structures." Each of those four terms is important. It's the Creator on the scene with structures operating to carry out both his criticism and his support of the old creation he has fashioned. Expressed in terms of "law," the C2-S2s enact God's law of preservation, God's law of recompense.
8. God has LH agents authorized for this C2-S2 work. The Body

of Christ is not one of them. It has a different calling, a different jurisdiction. So “the church” has dubious warrant in entering this field for pronouncements. At root this is Caesar’s realm. “Render unto Caesar...” is also a statement from Jesus about who has jurisdiction in the secular realm. He does that elsewhere as well in the gospels. The ELCA’s sexuality study has scant warrant for being “church” business.

9. At our last meeting we were instructed from Robert Gagnon’s book [The Bible and Homosexual Practice – Texts and Hermeneutics]. Gagnon is gaining popularity in the ELCA among the folks who know that homosexuality is wrong. At least one ELCA synod featured him a few weeks ago, and later this year the LUTHERAN FORUM folks are featuring him as their keynote speaker for a big get-together in Kansas City. That is not good news – in more ways than one. Gagnon claims no Lutheran heritage, and he shows that to be true. He has no clue about Lutheran hermeneutics – nor of the theology of the cross, nor of hidden/revealed God, the building blocks of our heritage. Augsburg-conscious Lutherans need to instruct Gagnon, not be instructed by him.
10. Gagnon reads the Bible with scholastic hermeneutics, the same hermeneutics of those who declared the Augsburg Confessors heretics. Those scholastics critiqued the Augsburg Confessors for “ignoring the Bible” – especially in those places where the Bible clearly commends “works.” Their hermeneutic reads the Bible as a codex, a canon of God’s teaching – what to believe, how to behave, how to worship. Apology IV calls that hermeneutic destructive of the Gospel. If that’s right, then Gagnon is wrong. “Augsburg” hermeneutics reads the Bible as God’s X-ray pictures and God’s therapy for the patients. In its particulars it’s a “patient chart.”

11. Thus Luther can say that Leviticus – all of Leviticus – is irrelevant for Christ-followers. It's the chart of some other patient. It's no more relevant for a Christian than the chart of the person lying next to you in the hospital. ML's word for that was "Juden SachsenSpiegel." Civil ordinances that had jurisdiction for Jews, but with no jurisdiction in Saxony.
12. Another item: Gagnon's notion of sin ignores the new definition for sin that came with Jesus. "Sin is that they do not believe in me," says Jesus in John. Or in Paul's words: "Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." He seems to have no clue on this. Or that with the coming of Jesus anything cosmic has changed.
13. What about Paul? Even if the key terms Paul uses in "those" passages were "perfectly clear" (and it is hard to make that case), even so, the Augsburg Confessors (Art.28) also apply a "patient-chart" perspective to the rules and regulations laid down by the apostles. "Thus even the apostles ordained many things that were changed by time, and they did not set them down as though they could not be changed." (Tappert, 283) The Confessors' overarching rubrics are: "not to burden Christian conscience" and "to preserve Christian freedom," and above all (when revising the "rules") "one must consider what the perpetual aim of the Gospel is."
14. Paul was wrong about women – that they were created by God to be subordinate to males. He thought that God's Left Hand operated that way, though in the new creation women were not inferior, he said. Paul was also wrong about chattel slavery. He thought God's old creation worked that way, that people could own people as property, although in the new creation chattel slavery was passe'. If Paul actually did understand homosexuality as an "abomination" (Gagnon's favored term) in God's old creation, he could

have been wrong here too. Namely, that homos and heteros are placed by God into the C2-S2's – different but equal, just as men and women, slaves and masters are different, but equal. If Paul's view of "old creation" is subject to change concerning women and chattel slaves, then homosexuals might be on the same list. They do have a common bond with women and slaves in that they were, and/or are still are, the oppressed in many societies.

15. The language of "orders of creation" is mish-mashed by many, including Lutherans, nowadays. Luther's term was "Schoepfer-ordnungen," not "Schoepfungs-ordnungen." His term is "the Creator's ordainings," not "the orders of creation." When he used this expression he never meant some original patterns/structures set down in Genesis 1-3, structures that then were "set" and unchangeable. Luther saw creation always changing. The "structures" of C2-S2 are historical, they change, even though the creator's critique and support continue within them. God's continuing creation does not replicate what has always been there before. What ML meant by the "Creator's ordainings" can be seen in his Small Catechism explanation of the First Article of the Apostles Creed. [Look it up.] The Creator's ordainings are the specific locales/relationships in which God has "ordained" me to live in the unique creation act whereby "God made me." "Ordnung" functions as a participle – God's ordaining. It is not God's organization chart with boxes placed at fixed spots on the sheet, and us in the boxes. Rather it is God placing me on a baseball field, where God says: "You, Ed play second base. And you, Sally, are the pitcher." Etc. And even here, these ordainings are not unchangeable. God's work in creation is a process, a work in progress. Though ML was hardly a process theologian, he was "process" about creation. It changes. The Augsburg

Confessors were of the same opinion – even apostolic rules could be revised because things change.

16. From this perspective on the Creator's orderings/ordainings, it follows that a person "wired different" in sexual magnetism is put into creation by God, and thus "ordained" to live as God's human being with that sexual endowment. There are many variations in homosexual wiring, as Pastor Bill Consiglio showed us last time we met. Across the board there are differences. Lutheran creation theology's first hunch is to see them as God's ordainings.
17. It is God's "secular" agents, not Christ's church, who are authorized by God to regulate this left-hand world of God, to be at work carrying out God's law of preservation and equity recompense, including equal civil rights. All Christians, of course, are also God's left-hand agents. They were that before they were baptized. They remain left-handers after baptism. Christians never cease to have "secular" callings – from God! Yes, they are "church." But their God-given work in the world is not "church" work. It's "world work." Though additionally animated in those callings by God's RH promise, "Go in peace," they "serve the Lord" in his LH world in the only way that will work in that world, the way God works there: left-handedly.
18. In a heterosexual world (well, mostly), homosexuality is an anomaly. But it's present elsewhere besides in the human species. Human beings are similar to ("samt" is Luther's word in the catechism, "linked together with") other living creatures. And anomalies abound throughout creation. The Hubble telescope brings us new ones from way out there, and so do the creation investigators who work closer to home in the minuscule world. Why God does this is a question to be answered only in the eschato, and we don't need it answered in order to be Christ's disciples

in a homo/hetero world.

19. The Christian “take” on the whole topic is to be God’s LH agents in caring for the old creation, for its preservation and equity justice in our sexually chaotic world, for folks “wired different” as well as folks “wired same.” With fellow Christ-confessors in the new creation they also extend the right hand, commending one another to live out our sexual lives as we do all other segments of our lives – taking up our cross and following. Wherever “different” folks are treated as pariahs – as they are both in society and in Christian churches – we have a clear word from Christ: “It shall not be so among you.” This may well be a minority opinion. But the theology of the cross has always been such a minority opinion not just in the world, but also throughout the church’s own history. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Addendum:

Paul Rowold (Semineex ’78), ELCA pastor in Montana, with many links to Lutherans in Palestine, sent this:

*I spoke with both Najua and Mitri Raheb [pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church, Bethlehem] this morning (Monday, May 13). Here is a synopsis of their comments:***Najua:** “People here are pessimistic about our future. Our 40 days and 40 nights took a lot out of us. For the first 2 days I got dizzy when I went out into the streets. It was a shock. The girls are in school already today. They will extend the school year until June 15 to try to complete the academic year, but I think they should have let them have some time to go out to play in the sunshine for several days first. Tala cried for 2 hours when she brought home so much homework on the first day back. It was very hot today. It was still winter when the Israelis put us in prison.

They stole Spring from us too! Everyone is working so hard to repair Bethlehem as quickly as possible. We all expect the Israelis to return in 10 days or so. We repair, not knowing how long our repairs will remain. We had worship services yesterday, and it was so good to be together again. Viola and Mitri's mother returned to their apartment, across the street from Nativity Church. We feared that the Israeli soldiers would have destroyed everything, but, thank God, only the doors and the windows had been kicked in and broken."

Mitri: *"At worship yesterday there were even some Jewish peace activists. It was excellent worship. They asked me to translate my sermon and post it on the website. It should be there in a couple days. The work by the electric, water, and street crews has been outstanding. So there is also some optimism mixed with our continuing fear of the Israelis returning. We are all afraid of our vulnerability to them. Maybe it is more urgency than optimism. But your prayers have been so important to us! We will be asking for your help to repair and rebuild, to partner with us even more closely in the days to come. The decisions by the Israelis to oppose the creation of a State of Palestine are the most recent blow to Peace. We hope that our sisters and brothers in the USA will reject such a dangerous path for all of us. Please greet all who continue to pray with us for a true and just Peace."*

Richard John Neuhaus, A

Mystery No More [Part 2]

[Just as I was getting ready to post ThTh 204, this came through from the Crossings office in St. Louis: "Will Herzfeld. Went to Africa. Shortly after return to USA was found unconscious. Diagnosed with cerebral malaria. Next 24 hours critical. Ask for prayer." We're doing so and ask you to do so too.]

Colleagues, In the April 2002 issue of FIRST THINGS Editor-in-Chief Richard John Neuhaus gives us what the ancients called an "apologia pro vita sua." Roughly translated: "what I did with my life and why I did it." RJN's own title for the article is: "How I Became the Catholic I Was." In last week's Thursday Theology (#203) I sought to interpret his words.

One of you readers, claiming to be a RJN shirt-tail relative, told me: "Don't be too hard on RJN. Remember, after childhood in Canada, he grew up in Texas!" I don't intend to be "hard" on RJN at all. This is not an expose'. ThTh 203 and this 204 portray my own Aha! after reading his apologia, namely, the congruence between the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod's brand of "catholicism" he grew up in (also my own) and the Roman Catholicism where he's now landed. Seems to me that the "catholicism" in both the LCMS and RC of RJN's biography has a common qualitative element. The difference between the two is quantitative. "More" and "fuller" are RJN's own terms for where he now is. The quality of each brand of catholicism was the same.

So what is that quality, that common substance of generic "catholicism," when you take away the adjectives Missouri or Roman? My proposal: It is a specific model of authority and of truth, and then of obedience to that authority and truth. Authority is top-down. Its first concern is to specify "the whole of truth" for Christian faith and life and then to call

for obedience to that truth and authority. The “whole of truth” is the laundry list of truths (plural), and in the catholic blueprint—Missouri or Roman—these truths are linked to oughts: what you ought to believe, how you ought to behave, ought to worship—possibly a few more. That’s the Missouri catholicism I grew up in. That’s today’s Roman version as RJN portrays it.

For ThTh 204 I want to pursue this thesis in RJN’s own review of his life from growing up in the LCMS to joining the Roman church. For some of us who also grew up Missouri, but didn’t swim the Tiber, it was the “Augsburg Aha!” that made the difference, that gave us a third option between those two catholicisms. That Aha! for some of us survivors of Missouri is expressed in Luther’s words: “When I discovered the difference, that God’s law is one thing, and God’s Gospel something else—that was my break-through.” [Tabletalk #5518] There is no reference to any such dramatic break with Missouri (or any qualitative break at all) in RJN’s apologia.

1. Growing up “Missouri.” Even though he was born in Canada, RJN grew up “Missouri.” His father was pastor of the LCMS church in Pembroke, Ontario. From his father he learned the faith. “I was not inclined to doubt what my Dad taught. After all, he had the Bible, Martin Luther, and the St. Louis faculty on his side. And he was indisputably authoritative in manner. Not for nothing during his days at the seminary was he called ‘Pope Neuhaus.’” In his early years RJN was a happy Missourian. He tells of those years in remembered conversation with Roman Catholic playmates across the street, “my best friends . . . the Spooner brothers.” There was agreement on “grace” and RJN thought the “grace ALONE” in his Lutheran catechism was not worth arguing about. “We both knew we had a Magisterium” [=official authority for deciding the truth]—for the Spooner boys the Pope, for

RJN the St. Louis Seminary faculty. Then comes this telling line: "We both knew that we were to keep the commandments and try to please God in all we did."

I too grew up thinking that was the essence of the faith. Only later did I get "saved" from that legalism to faith in the Gospel. Nowhere in the rest of his article does RJN register any later Aha! about the false gospel in that common commitment he shared with his RC pals.

When it came to "where we differed, we were right and they were wrong." Although some of those differences were "very confusing, they didn't bear too much thinking about." He concludes his childhood retrospective with this: "I would in time come to understand that the question is that of authority, and it must be thought about very carefully indeed."

Some comments about the "Augsburg Aha!" and authority.

Another of you readers urged me not to be so hard on "authority," RJN's central concern. You told me: "I've had a few ahas in my life. One of them centered on authority. I resented it and almost always reacted negatively to it. Then one day I recognized that authority has its origin in author and I liked authors. From there I moved to the question, 'Who authors me? Who writes my story? To whom do I belong?' The answer is, 'He who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven, was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary and was made man, etc.'

I write because I value the words gospel and promise. I also value authority. It's a good word. And it's a word that makes it possible frequently to get to the cutting issues of life. It makes the gospel a saving authority.

It rescues us from ourselves and sets us into the kingdom and under the King."

Sounds good. But that's only half of it. There is authority A and authority B. So says Jesus, most frequently in the Gospel of Matthew: Herodian authority and Davidic authority. Authority "over," and authority "under." These are not two different ways of exercising the same sort of authority—one overt and oppressive, the other nice-guy and subtle. But all of the Herodian types are authority "over"—even if I'm "nice guy"—where I'm in charge and you're there to obey me.

Christ's kind is "authority under," spelled out in the classic Matt. 20 text. He stands in the underling position—slave and servant of all—and puts us in the "over" location so that he serves us, upholds us, finally "giving his life a ransom" for us all. Yes, he's in charge, but not from on top. It's a different sort of authority from Herod's; the colleague cited above was talking about this different one. Yet Herodian authority exists—even as God-authorized and thus valid in the old creation. But it also invades the church, Christ's new creation, despite his caveat: "Not so among you." Recall the LCMS war in the 1970s, a battle about which authority was valid in the church.

All the authority references in RJN's apologia sound like "authority over" items. In his words: "Truth commands, and authority has to do with the authorship, the origins, of commanding truth. By what authority? By whose authority? There are no more important questions for the right ordering of our lives and ministries. Otherwise, in our preaching, teaching, and entire ministry we are just making it up as we go along, and, by acting in God's

name, taking His name in vain."

For RJN the only alternative to "command authority" is "making up as we go along," and subsequently taking God's name in vain. He seems not to know the Gospel's "authority under" as another option. "Command" authority calls for command-obedience: "here's what to believe, how to live, how to worship; now go and do so." In Melanchthon's language at Augsburg the key verb of command authority is "require." By contrast the key verb of suffering servant authority is "offer," as in "to give his life a ransom, etc." The sort of "obedience" fitting for an offer is not "do what you were told to do," since an "offer" is no command at all. "Obedience" to a gift, to an offer, is to trust the giver and hang on to what's offered. Very different authority, very different obedience.

In my LCMS childhood I learned church authority to be what Matthew designates as the Herodian kind. So-and-so is in charge, and here's what you're supposed to do, believe, practice, think. RJN too grew up under that sort of authority in his LCMS years. In moving to Rome he did not escape the model. Instead he opted for a bigger and better authority, more and fuller—but still the Herodian kind.

Bigger and better Herodian authority does not lead to Davidic "authority under," the Gospel's upside-down authority, the authority invoked by those who cry: "Son of David, have mercy on me." What makes Jesus authoritative is not his clout, nor his credentials—all the way back to Moses, to Abraham, to Adam—but the concrete Davidic-mercy he offers. If you still desire credentials for this, then they are his cross and

resurrection—given to and for us.

Again RJN: “From my boyhood intuitions as an ecclesial Christian, it seemed self-evident that, if God intended to reveal any definite truths for the benefit of humankind, and if Jesus intended a continuing community of discipleship, then some reliable means would be provided for the preservation and transmission of such truths through the centuries. Catholics believe that God did provide such reliable means by giving the apostles and their successors, the bishops, authority to teach in His name and by promising to be with them forever.”

Summa: no extrinsic “authority over,” even if it were credentialed all the way back to Peter, can verify, can “authorize,” the Gospel. No Pope, nor any St. Louis seminary faculty either. Either the Gospel, when offered, convinces you of its validity “for you” on its own authority, the “under” authority of the suffering servant, or nothing will. No command authority can make it more credible. Jesus jolts us with those words in Matthew about command authority: “It shall not be so among you.” Command authority is contra gospel. So said the original Augsburg confessors. The church’s authority is a consequence of the Gospel’s “authority under.” It is not vice versa. RJN seems not to have seen or heard this in his study of the Lutheran Confessions.

2. Which Brings us to RJN’s memories of his seminary days. After a born-again experience in his high school years [was that in Texas?] and subsequent “anguished uncertainty” in following that path, he returned to his Lutheran home base and found what he longed for when he entered Concordia Seminary, St. Louis: “the synthesis of piety, clear reason and ecclesial authority in the person

and teaching of Professor Arthur Carl Piepkorn.”

He continues: “Piepkorn was a man of disciplined prayer and profound erudition, and was deeply engaged in the liturgical renewal and the beginnings of Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue. At St. Louis he taught the Lutheran confessional writings of the sixteenth century, which he insistently called ‘the symbolical books of the Church of the Augsburg Confession.’ . . . They represented a way of being catholic as the heirs of a Reformation that was intended to be a movement of reform within and for the one Church of Christ.

“. . . The accent was on continuity, not discontinuity. Perhaps the sixteenth century break was necessary—although that was never emphasized—but certainly the Lutheran Reformation. . . had no delusions about being a new beginning, a so-called rediscovery of the gospel. . . . Lutheranism was not a new beginning but another chapter in the history of the one Church. The Church is not a theological school of thought, or a society formed by allegiance to theological formulas—not even formulas such as ‘justification by faith’. . . . The goal was to fulfill the promise of the Lutheran Reformation by bringing its gifts into full communion with the Great Tradition that is most fully and rightly ordered through time in the Roman Catholic Church.

“In this understanding, the conclusion of the Augsburg Confession of 1530 was taken to be normative. There the signers declare: ‘Only those things have been recounted which it seemed necessary to say in order that it may be understood that nothing has been received among us, in doctrine or in ceremonies, that is contrary to Scripture or to the church catholic.’

“For us Piepkornians, everything was to be held accountable to that claim . . . of the Augsburg Confession to have received nothing contrary to Scripture or to the Catholic Church.”

So much for RJN’s take on the Augsburg Confession. If he had any Augsburg Aha!, it was this: The AC and the RC are simpatico. Justification by faith, a “formula,” was no Aha! for him. Possibly it was a truth to be believed, but nothing that called for his “allegiance.” [Footnote. Some years long ago I mentored a Roman priest who had crossed the Tiber in the other direction. On his way to a Lutheran pastorate he joined me with a few others to study the Lutheran confessions. When we got to the “faith alone” of justification, he was near ecstasy—talk about an Augsburg Aha!—and he could not comprehend why the “old” Lutherans in the class signalled no such euphoria.] Was there any Aha! about “faith alone” for RJN in the AC? Seems not. On the contrary, he says it is a “delusion” to see the AC as affirming a “rediscovery of the gospel.”

I too had Piepkorn at the sem for the Lutheran Confessions. I graduated from the St. Louis seminary the year before RJN entered. Regardless of Piepkorn’s personal opinion about the claim, he made it perfectly clear to our class that the Augsburg Confessors were indeed affirming an Aha! about the Gospel that they had not known when they were good Roman Catholics. But Piepkorn had his own angle on the Luth. Confessions. When 20 years later I became his colleague in the Department of Systematic Theology at St. Louis, I soon learned that there were three ways that the Lutheran confessions were taught at Concordia Seminary in the early 1970s. Some taught the Luth. Conf. using 17th century Lutheran Orthodoxy as their set of lenses. Some used Luther’s law-

gospel “breakthrough” as their hermeneutic for the confessions. Piepkorn did neither. He read the confessions canonically. They were the canon for what was Lutheran and what was not. More than once in staff meetings he would tweak us law/gospel colleagues by saying that our hermeneutic was “one” option, but not the only one, for confessional Lutherans.

RJN: “But the Lutheran chapter in the history of the Church did occasion schism.... In my judgment, the division was tragic but not necessary. There was and is no truth that requires division from the pillar and bulwark of truth.”

Here’s RJN’s other key word, truth. Notice the notion of truth here. There are many individual truths that make up “the whole of truth” for Christian faith. No “one” of the many—even justification by faith alone—ever “requires division from the pillar and bulwark of truth,” viz., the authoritative church of Rome. Truth is a collection of truths. The better the guarantor, the better access we have to “the whole of truth.” If the church should ever propose a truth that is actually false, as the Augsburgers said about scholastic teaching on salvation, RJN counsels: just wait. You may not be able to trust the “false” truth, but you can trust the “pillar and bulwark of truth” to eventually get it right. Not so, said the Augsburgers: You can’t tell a dying man to wait until the church decides if semi-pelagianism or faith-in-Christ alone is what he may hang his heart on.

When the Reformers talk about “the truth of the Gospel,” this isn’t one truth among many. It’s not a “true statement” at all. It’s the divine offer, a promise to be trusted: God being faithful to his promise in the

crucified and risen Christ, and saying "It's for you." "The whole of truth" IS the Gospel. The Augsburg Confessors found this made perfectly clear already in the prologue of the Gospel of St. John (RJN's patron saint, he says!). "The law [what to believe, how to behave, how to worship] was given through Moses; grace and truth came by Jesus Christ." John himself spells out the life-and-death difference between Moses and Christ throughout his Gospel. And at the end when Pilate asks Jesus: What is truth? he's asking a Moses-question. He doesn't have a clue about the "truth of the Gospel," the Good News standing right in front of him.

Standing behind these understandings of truth and authority in RJN's apologia is his value judgment that the unity of the church, namely, the unity of the Roman church, takes precedence over the truth of the Gospel. The Augsburgers also wrestled with this and finally confessed the opposite: The unity of the church is subordinate to the truth of the Gospel. The Gospel is the guarantor for the church's unity, not vice versa. Just plain false is RJN's portraying the Reformers as the ones who split from the church. Who excommunicated whom? Just who are the sectarians? Jaroslav Pelikan—whom RJN likes to quote—taught us "back at the sem" in the fifties—that with the 19th century decree on papal infallibility (which RJN also likes) "the Roman church became a sect. For there was no longer any structural possibility within the church for calling the Bishop of Rome to account, for putting the pontiff under the Gospel's own discipline."

3. As for the days since the seminary 40 years ago—"And so it was that for thirty years as a Lutheran pastor [LCMS, AELC (I think) and finally ELCA], thinker, and writer..., I worked for what I incessantly called 'the healing of the

breach of the sixteenth century between Rome and the Reformation.’ For a long time there seemed to be believable, albeit painfully slow, movement toward that goal.” Now and then there were hopeful signs, but “these hopeful signs . . . were not to last.” So in 1990 he swam the Tiber.

But he himself says it was a short swim. In his move from “St. John’s Lutheran Church in Pembroke, Ontario . . . to be received into full communion by John Cardinal O’Connor in his residence chapel of St. John the Evangelist, . . . the continuities are ever so much more striking than the discontinuities.” No bridge-burning event, just greater fullness. “My communion with Christ’s Church is now the fuller.” “I became a Catholic in order to be more fully what I was and who I was as a Lutheran.” In a flashback to childhood he says; “I am sure that I as a boy thought – not very seriously, certainly not obsessively – but I thought about being a Catholic. It seemed that, of all the good things we had, they had more. Catholicism was more.” In O’Connor’s chapel his “boyhood intuitions” were finally “full”filled. He received the “more” he’d been longing for.

“How I Became the Catholic I Was” = how I moved from LCMS catholicism to the “more” of Roman catholicism. Common at both ends of RJN’s journey is a notion of truth, authority and obedience, none of them, so far as I can detect, grounded in THE Gospel. For RJN the Augsburg Aha! was not on his itinerary–neither at the beginning, nor in the middle, nor at the end.

Seems to me that the same generic catholicism–concerning truth, authority and obedience–is regnant, not only officially in Rome, but also de facto in many Christian denominations today,

all across the spectrum from conservative to liberal, USA Lutheranism (LCMS and ELCA) included. One thing's needful, an Augsburg Aha! via whatever means the Spirit might offer it to us.

*Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder*

Richard John Neuhaus, A Mystery No More

Colleagues,

Richard John Neuhaus [hereafter RJN] has been a conundrum—especially so to many of his fellow Lutherans in North America when he “swam the Tiber” twelve years ago and became a Roman Catholic. But he has unscrambled the puzzle for the perplexed in the lead article of “his” journal FIRST THINGS, April 2002 [also available at its website, www.firstthings.com]. Its title: “How I Became the Catholic I Was.”

Growing up in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod [LCMS] he already was an “ecclesial Christian,” he says. And what does that mean? “For the ecclesial Christian, faith in Christ and faith in the Church are not two acts of faith but one.” Already in the LCMS, as he now looks back, he sees “a Christian of lower-case catholic sensibilities being led, step by step, to upper-case Catholic allegiance.” So in retrospect his move to Rome was no quantum leap. From the riverbank on which he stood the Tiber was not very wide. His article makes that perfectly

clear.

But his article reveals even more than what he seeks to clarify, I suspect. Namely, aspects of the before and after that he himself may not yet have noticed. My thesis is: RJN grew up in a LCMS that was itself “Roman” catholic, but not “Augsburg” catholic, namely, grounded in the catholicism of the Augsburg Confession. I know, for I grew up in the same LCMS that RJN did.

Here’s one clue: word count. In his essay we find “truth” (23 times), “authority” (15), “gospel” (2), “promise” (5). Central to his growing up in Missouri and his move to Rome are truth and authority. Though the LCMS then and now shakes a scolding finger at Rome, Missouri is “Roman” in its agenda. It’s all about truth and the authority to back up that truth. Gospel and promise are, of course, part of the truth, but the BIG question is “the whole of truth,” RJN’s favored phrase, and finding an infallible authority to back it up. Swimming the Tiber for RJN was a short swim. He only had to paddle from an inadequate “papal” authority to a bigger one that finally covered all the bases.

Granted, word counts are not compelling arguments. But they are pointers. Especially so when you see how the words are used—which terms are overarching, which subordinate. The words that I hoped to find overarching of the four listed above—as you readers can guess—are gospel and promise. But they are scarce. Yet just because they are scarce in RJN’s rhetoric wouldn’t mean they are not valued. Yet note how they are valued. Here are the two Gospel references: “No one knows the Gospel except from the church” and “certainly the Lutheran Reformation . . . had no delusions about being a new beginning, a so-called rediscovery of the gospel.” That’s all we get about Gospel in becoming the Catholic I was.

The first reference subordinates gospel to church, to the

church's authority for what the gospel is. The authority-holder is superior, gospel beneath it. The second is a historical judgment about the Reformation, even "certainly" [RJN is seldom short on chutzpah]. It might be correct, yet it contradicts Luther's own words. "When I discovered the distinction that the law is one thing, and the Gospel something else—that was my break-through." [Tabletalk #5518] You wonder whom to believe.

More important is that we never learn from RJN what this gospel is. Clearly not in these two mentionings of the term, and not elsewhere in what he says. Apparently in "becoming the catholic I always was," there was no Gospel "Aha!" ever along the way. For those of us who also grew up in the LCMS—and did have such an "aha" about the Gospel somewhere along the way—that seems strange. But if his move out of Missouri into Rome—with a few stopping points in between—was itself a seamless robe, as he says, we'll have to believe him. And it makes sense. If the Christian truth is seen as what to believe, how to behave, how to pray—all of them "ought" items—then the question is inescapable: Says who? The authority issue is an ultimate concern. So we were taught in the LCMS where RJN (and I too) grew up. So says Rome today. The move from the LCMS's Bible authority (interpreted correctly by "the St. Louis Seminary faculty," as RJN often says) to the Roman magisterium (all bases covered and connection to Peter as validation) is a short swim. No Olympic gold for such a feat.

And the key Reformation term "promise" gets brought in under authority too. In the rhetoric of the Lutheran Reformers gospel and promise are synonyms. What makes gospel "good" and "new" is that it is God's promise of mercy in the crucified & risen Jesus. The promising Christ fulfills God's ancient promise to the Hebrews and offers an ongoing promise for the upbeat futures of those who trust it. So say the Reformers, claiming that the scriptures say nothing else than that.

RJN's five references to promise never touch such "good and new" substance. Here are the instances:

1. "The goal [for Lutheran Christians is] to fulfill the PROMISE of the Lutheran Reformation by bringing its gifts into full communion with the Great Tradition that is most fully and rightly ordered through time in the Roman Catholic Church." Is that about authority or what? And the real "promise" central to the Lutheran Reformation gets bypassed.
2. "[T]he Church through time and the contemporary Church universal, to which Christ PROMISED the Spirit's guidance," can be trusted to proclaim the truth.
3. "Infallibility . . . is a word that frightens many, but I don't think it should. It means that the Church is indefectible, that we have God's PROMISE that He will never allow the Church to definitively defect from the truth, to fall into apostasy. . . . The Holy Spirit will preserve the Church against using its full authority to require its members to assent to what is false. Without that assurance, the truth of revelation would not be preserved in recognizable form. . . . To obey the truth we must be able to recognize the truth."
4. When there is dispute within the church "you wait, in firm communion with the Catholic Church and in firm confidence that the Holy Spirit will, as PROMISED, clarify the matter in due course. The point is that apostolic doctrine cannot be maintained over time without apostolic ministry, meaning ministry that is both apostolic in its origins and apostolic in its governing authority."
5. "Along the way to [the church's] eschatological fullness—which is a frequently jagged, confusing, and conflicted way—it is PROMISED to the Church that she will not, she will not irretrievably, lose the way."

Comment: never does “promise” point to the Good News of a crucified and risen Messiah. The final four references are to Christ’s assurance that he will not desert his church. Yes, that’s genuine NT theology But note what RJN does with that good-news word: Christ will never desert the Church of Rome. Therefore (a BIG therefore) you can trust the ROMAN Church never to “use its full authority to require its members to assent to what is false.” Instead the Church of Rome has “full authority” to “recognize the truth” and to call us “to obey the truth.”

As logic that’s a patent non sequitur. Yet even more chilling is the complete absence of any Gospel-grounding (the non-negotiable of Augsburg catholicism) for what the truth is and also for what constitutes the church’s authority. But that is so not only in the Roman Catholicism to which RJN moved, it was the stage setting of the LCMS where he grew up. And where I grew up too. The issue is believing the truth. So we were taught. That is the center of faith. Faith is “assent” to the truth. Yes, trust is also in the mix. But specifically trusting the crucified and risen Messiah as God’s promise to us was not central to what faith was all about. Nor is it central in the LCMS childhood RJN describes in considerable detail. Salvation comes by faith, i.e., by believing the truth. Those who believe the full truth (which we in Missouri knew we had) were assured of salvation. Those who did not (i.e., all other denominations—and folks from other religions for sure) were not saved. Our authority was the Bible, which told us all the truths to be believed. Our synodical catechism showed us what these truths were. We believed them—or tried as hard as we could to believe them—and could be (almost) confident of heaven.

The work of Christ was one of the truths to be believed—surely the most important one—but one among many even if it were *primum inter pares*.

Has RJN really left Missouri? I don't think so. How I became the Catholic I Was = How I found a bigger and better LCMS. Or less snippy: How I became the ROMAN Catholic I already was, but never an AUGSBURG Catholic.

[Next time, d.v., I want to pursue this thesis in RJN's own review of his LCMS childhood, his student years at Concordia Seminary (St. Louis) in the late 1950s, his pastorates in Missouri and the ELCA, and his present assessment of the Roman church. I hear some of you asking: Why continue this probe? One reason for doing so is that RJN's ecclesial history is the ecclesial history of many of us—at least up to the shores of the Tiber. I want to argue that it's not wise to plunge into that water once you have had an "Augsburg Aha!" That seems not to have happened to RJN. Nor does he seem to notice that the Augsburg Aha is what got the original Augsburg Confessors exiled beyond the Tiber—not by their choice, but by the anathema of the "indefectible" church of Rome. Once you've had the Aha, swimming back across the Tiber has little attraction. But if you've never had the Aha, the siren call from the other side can mesmerize. More next time.]

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

A Tribute to Irmgard Koch

This past Friday, the matriarch of the Crossings community went on to her glory. Irmgard Koch, beloved teacher and friend to so many, was part of Crossings from the very

beginning. She took every class, pressed Bob and Ed to invent more courses so she could continue taking them and even coined the phrase “God-sized problem” for D-3 in the Crossings matrix. Irm and I were roommates on our trip to Asia ten years old this spring. I was thirty-something, Irm was 89. She was always ready to take off for whatever adventure was next: visiting former students in Hong Kong, climbing the Great Wall in the pouring rain, touring a royal palace in Seoul, Korea.

In the last few years when I visited Irm at LaCledde Groves, there were times when her conversation wandered and I had a hard time following where she was going. But then, as if a veil would lift, she’d make a comment or ask me a question that seemed to come straight from the Holy Spirit’s mouth. No matter what the situation, no matter what the time or place, Irmgard gave us the best of herself and the best of her Lord.

Joining me today in this tribute to Irm are three other members of the Crossings community. Sherman Lee and Jim Squire were both fellow travelers to Asia with Irm and me (and, of course, Ed and Marie Schroeder). Vivian Hauser was a fellow student with Irm in Crossings classes, but also had been a high school student in Irm’s English classes at Lutheran South. All of us wish to express our appreciation to our Lord for allowing us to be part of Irmgard’s life.

Robin Morgan

At my office I keep a photo that unintentionally is a conversation starter. It is a picture of six people who toured Asia (10 years ago this next weekend) for several weeks on a

Crossings “junket”, that is, a series of meetings with locals and expatriates on the topic of ministry in daily life. Pictured in front of a Korean hostel are Ed and Marie Schroeder, Jim Squire, Robin Morgan, myself, and Irmgard Koch, who is usually the conversation starter at my office, for as I list the biographies of the photo subjects, the universal reactions are “she was 89 when she took that trip!?!” and “that’s the way I want to be when I’m 89.” The extremely modest Irm would be aghast at such reactions, for she never wanted attention for her longevity nor accomplishments; after all, there are five other photo subjects not singled out for their ages. But Irm stands out in the photo for another reason: her pink hat, quite eye-catching, quite stylish. There’s a long story behind the hat, but in short Irm suffered a minor head injury on the first full day in Asia that required traveling to a hospital with no Korean language skills, and that to help cover the bandage, Irm sported a pink sun hat. A few days later while visiting an historical Korean farming village (like historic Jamestown), we noticed each school group color-coded itself – some had red t-shirts, others green bandanas, and in particular, one group of eight year-old girls had pink hats, exactly like Irm’s. From a distance, a grown American woman was indistinguishable from a group of Korean schoolgirls!

This is the way I remember Irm the most: in the pink hat. She was the consummate teacher, always guiding the mind, intellect and soul and simultaneously the enthusiastic student, seeking and searching through life with the wide eyes of a child. She had/has the faith of a child, of a beloved child, of a blessed child, a child of God, knowing and loving Jesus.

And in a photo at my office, she continues to spread the Good News, being a conversation starter that opens the doors for conversations that go beyond the realm of “work”, allowing for yet uncharted possibilities of weaving faith and daily life.

Sherman Lee

[To get a look at Irm in the pink hat you can go to <http://members.aol.com/jamess1889/fareast.html>]

Irmgard always had positive things to say about my writing. I'm sorry to say I've lost touch with her the past few years. But from the many years of Crossings courses and get togethers, not to mention an adventure in Asia, I saw someone who never stopped being a teacher. In fact, she could teach and lift one's spirits at the same time. She was very unassuming, almost to a fault, and yet never shrank from expressing a considered opinion when it was called for.

We used to take on heady stuff in that quaint little classroom at Webster University on Saturday mornings, including confronting God's terrible condemnation of sinners, and yet she was an integral part of making those classes so enjoyable. Of course, she had Great Connections, as we all learned about so meaningfully around that old wood table. The place and everything in it looked ancient, and yet thanks to Jesus the "sweet-swapper", the room was filled with Good News. What a marvelous example for me to re-appropriate in my ministry: a frail-looking vessel in which God's Holy Spirit flourished and comforted all who were touched by Irmgard Koch.

Jim Squire

The Koch Book
You must have thought some days wasted,
Reading books and parsing phrases,
Adolescents blankly staring,
Shakespeare's words beyond their caring.

*Let me tell you, dear Miss Koch,
Not all we learned was in the book.
We may have missed some minor cases,
Forgotten authors, dates, birthplaces,*

*But what we learned to read was you,
Whose sweet delight filtered through
Those poets words, those honored dramas,
Encouraged us through teen-age traumas.*

*You taught the light yon window breaking
And Portia's mercy never straining,
But what we learned was love of learning,
Joy in life, a gentle yearning.*

*Though you have no Pulitzer, no Caldecott award,
The joy of work well done is surely your reward,
For dear Miss Koch, you wrote a book
On students—living pages.
We witness to your teacher's heart
We sing your Maker's praises.*

Vivian Hauser

Jesus Through Jewish Eyes

Colleagues,

Someone asked: Why don't you send us any of the stuff you're doing at the Overseas Ministries Study Center this semester? I have been working on mission themes. One product is an

expanded essay on Luther's preaching on the so-called Great Commission. Another is a 34-page study book for my seminar running here this week. Today's ThTh #201 is a few pages from that seminar study book. FIRST is the outline of the week-long seminar.

SECOND is my book review handed to students in preparation for yesterday's meeting at "Simchat Yisrael" the Messianic Jewish synagogue in West Haven, the town next door. ["Messianic Jewish" here means: "Our congregation believes that Jesus is the Messiah."]

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

1. ITEM 1

Overseas Ministry Study Center 2001-2002 Study Program April 15-19, 2002 "In a World of Faiths, Why Jesus?"

Seminar Description:

Today's world is "awash in a sea of faiths." So where does Jesus fit in amidst all those options? Why not New Age? Or Moses? Or Muhammad? Or the Buddha? Or the many "other gospels" available today? Christians claim that Good News, something "good" and something "new," came into our world in Jesus. Is that still true vis-a-vis today's "sea of faiths"? This week we'll find out.

Session 1 – April 15 Monday – 2:00 p.m.

What answer did the New Testament writers give when Jews and Greeks asked that question in N.T. times? What was “good and new” compared with the Jewish and Greek alternatives?

Session 2 – April 16 Tuesday – 9:30 a.m.

The Reformation as a controversy within the Christian church about “Why Jesus?” Luther’s answer and its implications for mission.

Session 3 – April 16 Tuesday – 2:00 p.m.

Why Jesus for a Muslim?

What’s “good,” what’s “new”? Reflections on David Kerr’s week-long seminar about Islam just completed at OMSC. A look at the answers given by Christians who have come from this tradition.

Session 4 – April 17 Wednesday – 9:30 a.m.

Why Jesus for a Hindu?

What’s “good,” what’s “new”? An examination of answers given by Christians who have come from this tradition.

Session 5 – April 17 Wednesday – 2:00 p.m.

Why Jesus for the Jewish People?

What’s “good,” what’s “new”? Conversation with Tony Eaton, Rabbi of Simchat Ysrael, A Messianic [= Jesus is the Messiah] Jewish Synagogue, at his place in West Haven, CT.

Session 6 – April 18 Thursday – 9:30 a.m.

Why Jesus for a Buddhist?

What’s “good,” what’s “new”? A conversation with James Phillips, retired OMSC staffer, Missionary in Korea, engaged in dialogue with Buddhists.

Session 7 – April 18 Thursday p.m. – 2:00 p.m.

Why Jesus vis-a-vis some "other gospels" in America today? Two Samples: Creation Spirituality and the religion of "God Bless America."

Session 8 – April 19 Friday – 9:00 a.m.

Strategies for Christian witness in today's world "awash in a sea of faiths."

2. ITEM 2 – A book review

***Jesus Through Jewish Eyes.
Rabbis and Scholars Engage an Ancient Brother
in a New Conversation.
Edited by Beatrice Bruteau
Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books
2001. xvi, 191 pp., paper. \$20.00***

Nineteen voices from American Judaism, some of them "big names," talk to us about Jesus. Here's the editor's own summary: "The responses are varied. Some contributors are academics and give us historical and theological views. Some are congregational rabbis who speak out of their experience with people whose lives are affected by some of these issues. Some share quite personal feelings about Jesus. Most of them still have difficulty 'leaving Christianity out of it' when discussing Jesus. Some offer views that they hope will constitute a common ground with Christians. Many begin by reminding us of what has been done to the Jewish people because of Jesus. A few remark that there is no call for them to be interested in him at all; he doesn't add anything that they don't already have. Others see him as a teacher to be honored within the Jewish fold." (viii)

Common ground among all is on two items: 1) Jesus is not

THE Messiah (though perhaps “a” Messiah) since no peaceable kingdom arrived with him and our hell-in-a-handbasket world persists, and 2) calling Jesus God is a flat out no-no. Yet even here comes one exception. A spokesman for “contemplative Judaism” sees the divinity ascribed to Jesus as true of us all. So he urges us to “Christ-consciousness, the awareness that we are each and all manifestations of the One True Reality.” Where does he find this Jesus? In the Gospel of John, the gospel most Jewish writers cannot tolerate for its relentless critique of “the Jews.” Yet John’s Jesus speaks the truth: “the ‘I’ and the I AM are one.” (p.171)

Going for the jugular, the same writer says: “As a Jew I do not believe in original sin and have no need of a Messiah’s redemption.” (169) None of the other nineteen say it that crisply, but it is there. Sin is ignoring God’s Torah. Salvation is Torah-faithfulness. Jesus was Torah-faithful, not anti-Jewish at all. He came to fulfill the Torah, not abolish it. He started no new religion.

Soteriology is indeed the jugular in Jewish-Christian conversation. What really is needed for salvation? What do the Hebrew scriptures themselves say? That’s the question—totally ignored in these chapters—we need to pursue. One could just take the Psalter and ask: what’s needed for salvation? Just take Psalm 90 with its grim diagnosis of our sickness, sickness unto death. Psalm 90 proclaims that we must deal with God’s wrath, which “sweeps us away.” When God is our deadly critic, criticizing us “to death,” how can we be rescued? Will Torah-faithfulness do it? Not at all. Even in the so-called “Torah-psalms”—with all the good words about the Torah—Torah-faithfulness does not save sinners. “In thy

righteousness, O Lord [not my Torah-faithfulness], deliver me” –that is the major message for salvation in the Psalms. So I suggest: Christians should propose the Hebrew scriptures as the texts for continuing conversation with Jews. We Christians hesitate to do that, of course, since it’s “their” Bible. But if they are telling us what they see in “our” Gospels, we should return the favor.

Nevertheless there are other voices in American Judaism besides the authors in this book. Here’s one. Years ago a St. Louis rabbi—call him Arnie—did some graduate work at our Lutheran seminary. One day he told us: “I’m a minority voice within American Judaism. I think the Suffering Servant texts of Isaiah, not the Mosaic Torah, are the center of the Hebrew scriptures. Isaiah diagnoses the human problem—of Jews and gentiles—for what it really is. He proposes the Suffering Servant as God’s rescue for all. As I then look at the four Gospels, there’s only one conclusion: Jesus is that Suffering Servant. But I don’t say this very loudly to my own congregation.”

Imagine him as dialogue partner, both with Christians and the writers of this book. Is Torah good news or not? When Jesus says (John 5): “Moses is your accuser, on whom you set your hope,” is he reading Torah right? Not that Moses is “bad,” but for SINNERS, is Moses good news, or bad news? What do the Hebrew texts actually say? Isn’t that where the conversation must focus? If God’s Torah is indeed the sinner’s accuser, then Jesus “fulfills the Torah,” not by following its legislation, but by assuming its condemnation. He “fulfills the law” on Good Friday. Easter is God’s thumbs-up on his (Isaianic) Torah-faithfulness. Isaiah calls that Good News for us. Arnie thought so too. “The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of

us all By his stripes we are healed."

How to read the HEBREW scriptures—read them aright—that is the ultimate JESUS-question.

Just how good is the theology of GOD BLESS AMERICA?

Colleagues,

This posting consists of two responses to the omnipresent mantra in US national theology for these past 7 months: God bless America. The first is from Gary Dixon, an associate minister from downunder in the Lutheran Church of Australia. The second one, brought to my attention by Steve Hitchcock, comes from a recent issue of The Other Side. Peace & Joy!

Ed

Dear Ed, I've been meaning to write to you for a couple of weeks regarding this.....but I honestly have to say thank you, thank you, thank you!

From the emails that I've been getting from American friends and other reports from various sources I was beginning to think that all Christian Americans had tucked their bibles and convictions under their arms and launched into some sort of

self-righteous crusade.

From our perspective here in Australia it appears that anybody and anything that threatens the lifestyle of the richest country in the world is likely to be threatened – if not literally pounded to dust – by that richest country, all in the name of democracy and freedom.

My youth were asking many pointed questions about the situation. They were possibly over-reacting a little and accusing George Bush of being a terrorist. I put together this analogy to try to explain it to them. It takes just a couple of minutes to read:

There is a town where there is a very rich – obscenely rich – man living in a huge mansion with acres of gardens around him and every possible luxury at his fingertips. His immediate family and even his staff and servants live a pretty comfortable life. Surrounding his estate live some of his cousins. They aren't as rich as he is, but are still very comfortable compared to the people in the slums. The slums are on the other side of town. Far enough away that the rich man doesn't have to see or smell them. Over there the people live lives that seem almost hopeless. Their children are sick and dying for lack of basic food and medicine, their housing is poor, education is almost non-existent and there's an all pervading sense of helplessness. They could never, ever conceive of getting out of the situation that they were in.

The problem is that most of these guys not only work for the rich man but owe him so much money that they'll never even start to repay the debt they owe even after working for their entire lives.

And a strange thing is that the rich man is not simply content with this situation, but regards it as his right to

be so far above the slum dwellers in every possible way. He points to his opulence as a sign of God's blessing. He's convinced that it's his divine right to be where and who he is. His richness, his technical expertise, the way that he treats his family and friends, all prove that he is where he is because God intended it that way. It's patently obvious to him that he and his family are simply more important and more valuable than other people. His wealth proves it.

(This in spite of the fact that the rich man's ancestors used to be very poor themselves, and actually fought a war a couple of hundred years ago to free themselves from what they saw as a hopeless situation for them!)

Then one of the slum dwellers suddenly snaps. He's just watched yet another of his relatives slowly die from a preventable disease. The medicine exists to treat the condition, but it may as well have been on the moon for all the good it was. Only the rich man or his cousins could possibly afford it.

Hopelessness overwhelms the slum dweller. Logic and any sense of perspective go out of the window. His mind starts to focus, evilly. He slowly and meticulously starts to plan. He recruits a young friend who is feeling the same way, and they plan together.

Early one morning the young man sneaks over the walls of the rich man's estate with a bomb attached to his body. He climbs into a room where some of the rich man's innocent children are playing and detonates that bomb. The bomber and three children are killed. It's a horrible situation. A tragic waste of life.

It causes all parents everywhere to empathise and to hold their own children a little tighter and to wonder about

what's ahead, about what's "out there" that's going to affect them and theirs.

At the same time they wait with baited breath for the rich man's reaction.

Is it possible – even remotely – that the tragic loss of three of his treasured children will cause the rich man to reflect a little on what life was like for the suicide bomber? Will he begin to grasp, even through his own grief and horror, what it would be like to watch many of his children – many more than three – die slowly and horribly? Will he begin to relate to the fact that down in the slums over thirty children – all of them precious to their parents – die of starvation or diarrhoea or measles every single day?

Is it possible that this terrible tragedy in the rich man's life will make him wake up to the horror of the situation that exists in his town? A situation that, if not created by him, is actively supported and maintained by him to his own advantage. Could it possibly happen that his conscience is pricked and he sees the extent of his overweening arrogance and pride and actually repents of it?

It seems not.

The rich man is filled with a sense of righteous vengeance. His reaction is to take a fleet of bulldozers to the other side of town – to the slums – and demolish half of them. A place that was already filthy and hopeless is totally destroyed. Many people flee the slums and ask for help. Some appeal to the rich man's cousins for refuge, but they lock them up or turn them away. They're very suspicious of the refugees and accuse them of bringing their problems on themselves.

The rich man's obsession is fuelled by the fact that he has information that there is a mastermind behind the murder of his children. He's going to let nothing stop him from finding that murderer. He makes carefully crafted, emotion filled speeches to rally his immediate family and staff to his cause. His cousins join in his crusade. Their interests are very much tied to his, and they feel threatened too.

The situation is constantly in the news. The rich man, after all, owns all the media, and expresses his horror through that media. Who ever hears the voice of the poor man?

Now we've reached a situation where the rich man has reduced the slums to rubble. And he's so caught up in the passion of his revenge that he's looking to other towns, other slum areas to crush as well.

An irony of the situation is that he's increased his spending on bulldozers and other destructive equipment to the point where it far exceeds all the debts that the slum dwellers owe him. He could write off all of their debt and provide abundant food for them and adequate medicine, health care, education and other infrastructure for far less than he's spending on bulldozers and the people to operate them.

If he were to do this, how far might such an action go towards diffusing the situation to the point where minds wouldn't snap and lead people to do horrible, destructive, evil things to the rich man's family?

But his pride won't let him do that. His ego gets in the way. His taste for revenge is strong. His over-developed sense of his own value drives him on. Far from repenting of his pride and selfishness, he actually invokes God to help him in his battle, clinging to the notion that he is especially blessed by God and therefore has the right to protect himself as he

sees fit.

And the world waits.

Where do we go from here?

Anyway, thanks again for your encouraging article.

Sincerely in Christ,

Gary Dixon

Perth, Western Australia

MIXED BLESSING, by Ched Myers. "Reprinted with permission from The Other Side, January-February 2001. For subscriptions or more information, visit www.theotherside.org or call 1-800-700-9280." In these difficult days of warmaking, the phrase "God bless America" has become a patriotic litmus test. As the slogan continues to fill political speeches and public discourse, I've become convinced that it invites theological investigation. So when a Baptist friend in North Carolina asked me about the biblical background of the phrase, I went right to work.

I should admit from the start that, of all the nationalistic mantras circulating currently, I find this phrase to be the most odious. There is something shrilly insistent about it. Its use of the imperative mood seems so presumptuously directive, in contrast to, say, the more traditionally religious "optative mood" ("May we receive Your blessing!").

Indeed, the results of my search for the use of the imperative in the Bible were revealing. I found that in the Hebrew Bible, the imperative "Bless!" occurs only thirty out of the several

hundred times the verb barak generally appears. Of those thirty occurrences, the majority are liturgical exhortations to “bless the Lord,” mostly in the Psalms (see, for example, Ps. 66:8, 96:2, 104:1). In other words, the act of blessing is most often directed toward heaven, not solicited from it.

Only four times in the entire Hebrew scriptural tradition do we find requests in the imperative for divine blessing. In one case God instructs it – but only after the people vouch that they have been obedient (Deut. 26:15). Moses, as part of his farewell litany on Mount Nebo, petitions God to bless the tribe of Levi (Deut. 33:11). And King David twice invokes God’s blessing, once for himself (2 Sam. 7:29) and once for the people (Ps. 28:9).

These four examples are as close as the Bible ever comes to the billboards and bumper stickers of our present moment – a pretty thin theological foundation indeed. And unlike the current cant, the Bible always situates the request in a specifically prayerful or liturgical context.

Even more interesting – and problematic for the patriots – is the evidence from the New Testament. Of the forty-one appearances of the Greek verb eulogeo (literally “speaking a good word”), only twice do we find it in the imperative mood. In neither case does it involve God. It does, however, involve us – and our enemies. In Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain, he urges his disciples to “Bless those who curse you” (Luke 6:28). These instructions are later echoed by the apostle Paul: “Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse” (Rom. 12:14).

This remarkable scriptural testimony represents a decidedly mixed blessing for U.S. churches right now. Indeed, in the days following September 11, most of our churches have been busy endorsing the national demand for divine favor. Few have had

the courage to exhort a “blessing of enemies” in the teeth of surging patriotism and war fever.

My Baptist friend wrote that “God bless America” seems to him like “an entitlement claim, an assertion of righteousness if not hubris, a call for our tribal god to defeat their tribal god.” He wondered if the correct approach ought not rather to be “entreaty language, suggesting humility, beseeching, even begging.”

I believe he is exactly right. But the U.S. presumption of God’s blessing is deeply rooted in our national ideology of Manifest Destiny. As theology, it is heretical – but it certainly proves compelling as political rhetoric in the theater of wartime. (I would hasten to add that the same is true for a Muslim militant’s assumption that Allah is on the side of his jihad.)

The roots of the English word bless are also curiously informative. The term derives from the Old English bledsian, meaning to consecrate, usually with blood. Are our national calls for God’s blessing – particularly when uttered from presidential or Pentagon pulpits while retaliatory bombs fall on Afghanistan – somehow euphemistic for an ancient desire for blood-vengeance? If so, then our demands upon the deity, like those of the mujahedeen, are truly “missing the mark” – a central metaphor in the biblical tradition for “sin.”

I hate to rain on the patriotic parade that so many of my fellow Christians in the United States have joined. But it appears that as far as Jesus and Paul are concerned, the only blessing we should be soliciting right now is our own “good word” directed toward our enemies.