Colleagues,

There were giants in the earth—also in our own days. And one more has fallen, Timothy Lull. Tim was an internationally renowned and much published Luther scholar and president of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary (Berkeley, California) when he died last month at only 60 years of age. We pass on to you Richard Koenig’s sermon from the memorial service for Tim held two weeks ago in the New England Synod of the ELCA. Richard E. Koenig is an ELCA pastor (ret.), living in Massachusetts. Koenig was campus pastor when Lull was a student at Williams College, Williamstown, Mass, and later his colleague in the ministry of the New England Synod of the ELCA beginning in 1972. Following Lull’s departure from New England, the two continued collaborating on various theological projects. The last such joint venture was Lull’s convocation lectures on Luther for the New England Synod in the fall of 2002. For those wishing to respond Koenig’s e-address is RKo4551788@cs.com

Peace & Joy!
The ThTh Desk

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**In Memoriam**

**Timothy Frank Lull**

**John 21: 15-19**

*(Sermon preached at Grace Lutheran Church, Needham, Mass., June 11, 2003)*
Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, especially you, Mary Carlton, Tim’s beloved life partner and other members of Tim’s immediate family.

The Word of God on which this sermon in memory of our dear brother, pastor, friend, teacher Timothy Lull is based is the Gospel chosen for this day, the final words of the Risen Christ as recorded in John’s Gospel.

1. We are gathered here this morning to remember Timothy Frank Lull and give thanks to God for “giving us him to know and to love as a companion in our pilgrimage on earth,” as is said in the Burial Service. And difficult that is. He was such an amazing person, so full of life, of deep faith, dazzling scholarship, profound insights, delightful humor, incredible energy, infectious enthusiasm and unquenchable hope, whose compassion ran as far as his interests. Encounters with Tim were always interesting. You never knew what he would come up with or what new project he was undertaking. In all my life I have never known anyone whose instructions for his funeral service would begin with a request that at the collation afterwards only a quality brand of coffee be served. But that was Tim. He was one theologian who was fun to be with. When Christopher Lull called me with the news late the night Tim died I, like all of you, was stunned. I couldn’t believe. I still find it difficult to grasp. His departure has left us all feeling empty. He was to preach my funeral sermon, not I his. Nevertheless,
“dennoch,” as Tim’s teacher and conversation partner Martin Luther would say, we give thanks. In the mystery of God’s leading it was on June 11, 1972, in this very church that Tim was ordained into the Holy Ministry of Word and Sacrament of the Lutheran Church in America. He lists his vocation as one of the special gifts he thanks God for in the remarkable personal confession of faith he left us. It is that vocation and the way Timothy carried it out that I would lift up today as the ground for our thanksgiving as well as a source of renewal and strength for all Christians and fellow ministers of the Gospel with Tim.

2. In the Gospel for today the Risen Christ three times asks Peter “Do you love me?” The questions are painful for Peter as the one who had denied the Lord and deserted him. But the Lord puts them to Peter not to cause him pain but to rehabilitate him, restore him once again to the circle of his 12 disciples and make him a leader of apostolic mission. He had been called as a disciple on the shores of Galilee. Now he is recalled at the same place. But note what the Lord sees as the principal qualification for his call. It is his unqualified and undying love for the Lord Jesus. At one time he had said to Jesus, Depart from me for I am a sinful man, O Lord, but Jesus did not depart but drew Peter to himself and held to him in forgiving love. Peter never forgot it. It is no wonder that the Epistle that bears Peter’s name has this message for first century Christians in Asia Minor: “Although you have not seen him, you love him, and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy . . . . (1:8)"

3. I am tempted to say that Timothy Lull could have written
those lines. In the sparkling conversations one had with him, one frequently heard testimony to his unabashed love for his Lord. It was a love engendered in him by the kind of home into which he was born, the son of Raymond and Ruth Lull, two devout Lutheran parents; a love that was taught him in the ministry of his home church, a congregation representing the faith and piety of the old Ohio Synod of the American Lutheran Church; and its pastor; a love instilled in him by the devoted Sunday School teachers to whom he often paid tribute; a love that he derived from Luther as Luther taught it in passages like the Explanation of the Second Article of the Creed in the Small Catechism. Tim did not speak of this love frivolously or in the manner of a cliche. It was foundational to his life and to his vocation. It carried him as a pastor. It continued on in his vocation as teacher of theology. He could master vast stretches of academic theology with ease. (The speed with which the man read dazzled me.) Yet his work was never mere academic exercise done in detachment from his personal faith—or the church! You can see his love for the Lord Jesus in the hymns, Scriptures, and prayers of this, the Service he himself drew up. Now that he has died, God is holding him up to us, all five-feet-two-inches of him, as one whom the Spirit led to say: Lord, you know that I love you. And when the word came to follow him to become a minister of the Gospel, he was one who responded yes as a pardoned sinner who loved that Lord.

4. Upon the Apostle Peter’s rehabilitation and re-vocation, the Lord confers upon him special responsibility to shepherd the flock of God. Of course this passage became a battlefield for Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians in the sorry history of the Church. We don’t hear much about this controversy today, which is a
blessing. That allows us to think of Peter’s ministry with less distraction. What the Lord says to Peter here leads us to recall what he says to Peter at the last Supper in Luke 22. There Jesus forecasts his betrayal and death. The disciples are confused and protest. Jesus tells them ominously that Satan will sift them like wheat. Then Jesus turns directly to Peter and says:

“Simon, Simon, I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail, and you, when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers. (22:31)”

Strengthen your brothers? What did the Lord mean? Surely his words portended the time of persecution and discouragement that were to beset the early Christians and put them in desperate need of encouragement and hope. And encouragement and hope are what Peter gave them. His Epistle is known as the Epistle of Hope:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead . . . . In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials. (1:3, 6)”

Again and again 1 Peter rings the changes on the theme of hope, hope for the brotherhood, as the KJ version has it in 2:17, in the NRSV, the family of believers, the Church. Peter is an apostle of hope to the Church.

5. A messenger of hope for the Church? Can anyone here fail to recognize Timothy Lull in that description? How he loved the Church, specifically and concretely, the Lutheran Church. Many of us found and still find it
difficult to transfer our love for the branch of the Lutheran church in which we grew up to the ELCA. Who of us would say he or she loves the ELCA? The question might give us pause. Not Tim. His home was the old American Lutheran Church, but he was at home in whatever new configuration the Lutheran Church gave him to live and serve in. He loved the brotherhood, the family of believers. It seems that everyone he met in it became an instant friend. At times when I became discouraged or fearful about the Church and its future, I would call Tim. His take on events was never platitudinous or superficial. He saw the difficulties, yet never was ready to give up on the Church. I believe he never lost confidence in the Church because he never lost confidence in the Church’s Lord and his promises.

His trait of hopeful realism was evident from the start of his ministry here in Needham. After he left to teach systematics at Philadelphia, from time to time he returned to speak to us, always as an apostle of hope. In 1993 the New England Lutheran Clergy Association invited Tim up from Philadelphia to address us on “American Lutheranism’s Calling in the Present Crisis.” (The title has a familiar sound to it, doesn’t it?) Later he went around the Church with a message on “The Vocation of Lutheranism” in which he calmly looked at the possibility of a smaller Lutheran church, yet a church ever and even more vigorous and fruitful in mission. He came to us last year again to speak on Luther. He portrayed for us a resilient Luther who followed severe trials with incredible bursts of creative energy. From his study of Luther Tim fashioned the vision of a resilient Lutheran Church, the title of the series he was writing for The Lutheran magazine. Rather than finding Luther a wooden hero and Lutheranism an ethnic artifact and its
confessions historical baggage, to be trashed, ignored, or discarded, he saw Lutheranism in possession of “the ability to bounce back even from very severe troubles,” drawing on its powerful themes like Law and Gospel, the theology of the Cross, the doctrine of the two kingdoms, along with justification by faith. Tim is the sufficient model for what our Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson has called for us to be: faithful yet changing.

7. Tim’s Lutheranism provided him with the center for his ministry. In 1981 I asked Tim to write an article for PARTNERS magazine which I was editing at the time. We discussed a problem that we both felt was plaguing the church as it faced vigorous challenges by Fundamentalist forms of Christianity on the right and radical revisions of Christian faith by churches on the left or translations of the Gospel into various forms of therapy in attempts to make the Gospel “relevant.” Among the ranks of the clergy there seemed to be confusion over what we were finally about. In his article Tim wrote:

“In these days when so many religious groups have learned to be assertive, I am often challenged as to whether I have any real center to my ministry. . . . Yes, there is a center. I am chiefly a minister of Word and Sacrament. I am one who above all else is charged to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all who receive it. I am a bringer of forgiveness. And I know where that vision of my ministry comes from. Its major source is my own life experience within the Lutheran Church . . . .[from] the Augsburg Confession . . . . [and] Luther.” . . . People may not be asking for forgiveness . . . . But it is what we have. And it is clear to me that we have nothing better--and perhaps nothing else--to offer to the pain of the world in our day.”
The forgiveness of sins. Not an undifferentiated or abstract “God’s love,” or even “introducing people to Jesus Christ.” Those terms by themselves do not cut it. God’s love, yes, but love as grace from God for the undeserving. Jesus Christ, yes, but Christ as the one who suffered and died on the cross for the forgiveness of sins of a humankind that has gone astray (1 Peter 2:24 and 25).

8. The mysterious scene of Peter’s rehabilitation ends on a shocking note. What will Peter get in return for his love, for his willingness to follow Christ, for his shepherding of the flock, for his strengthening of his brothers? He is to be taken prisoner. No longer allowed to go where he wills to the churches of Asia Minor. No longer to preach. Be led away to be put to death. He was crucified, tradition has it, head down because he did not think he was worthy to be crucified in the same position as his Lord. Some Lord! It is an appalling scene. Yet, the text says, Jesus says this to Peter “to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.” Death by crucifixion a way to glorify God?

9. It’s a baffling, sometimes terrifying, God we have to believe in. Although not taken and made a martyr, Tim died a nasty death, cut down at the peak of his career. What a way to be dealt with! One could make a case that as horrifying as Peter’s death was, there was a glory to it. It was a death made as the result of a confession of faith in Christ before the world. But Tim’s death came as the result of a blood clot, in a hospital, practically alone. Did Tim glorify God in that death? Yes, says the Scripture and Christian tradition. The death of every faithful believer in whatever form it occurs glorifies God. For in the believer’s death, faith triumphs over
death as it claims a portion in God’s deed in the raising of Jesus Christ, the inheritance that is imperishable, and undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for us, as 1 Peter declares. That is why Christians can greet death as did Tim. Look at this Liturgy. There is no whining or hand-wringing. There is only joy, a joy born of confidence that by the amazing grace of God a poor sinner would be granted the joy of seeing God face to face. Once again Tim’s word would be Luther’s word, “dennoch,” nevertheless, I will continue to believe and set my hope in Christ in spite of all. And God is glorified.

10. Timothy Lull’s life and work summon us to give thanks to God and elicit from us thanksgiving to God for all that he was for us and all that he continues to give us in his legacy as a person, pastor and professor. Nathan Soderblom [Patriarch of the 20th century Lundensian school of Luther scholarship] once said that Christians are to be people who make it easier for other people to believe in God. Timothy Lull’s life and work make it easier for us to believe and trust God, centered as they were in Christ and the promise of God. Timothy Lull’s life and work challenge us all, especially pastors, to live by our confession, to let our ministries flow from it, to be loyal to it in a time of testing as we are going through, to articulate the forgiving grace of God clearly and convincingly, to lift the hungry heart and maximize the grace of God in the face of sin and sorrow.

11. “O God, it is a fearful thing to see the human soul take wing,” wrote Lord Byron. And that is true as we see it from the outside, as it were. Death cannot be prettified or painted over by human contrivance. But seen from the perspective of the Risen Christ we can speak even of that fearful moment differently. One of the greatest hymns from our Lutheran heritage, “Jerusalem, Thou City Fair
and High,” speaks our hope as it pictures the soul of the Christian in these beautiful lines of the third stanza. By grace we can imagine Tim’s sudden passing this way:

A moment’s space, and gently, wondrously,
Released from earthly ties,
Elijah’s chariot bears her up to thee,
Through all these lower skies
To yonder shining regions
While down to meet her comes
The blessed angel legions
And bid her welcome home.

Thus it was, we are sure, for Timothy Lull. Rest well, brother Tim, confessor and teacher of the Church, and thank you. Thank you, Mary Carlton, for sharing him with us. Thank you, dear Lord Jesus Christ. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Richard E. Koenig

ELCA Publication on Homosexuality – Short on Promise, Long on Law

Colleagues,
This week’s offering is a book review by TIMOTHY HOYER. Timothy is a graduate of Christ Seminary-Seminex. He now
happily serves as pastor at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Lakewood, New York. His email address, if you want to respond to him, is gloriadei@alltel.net. Peace & Joy!
The ThTh desk

Faithful Conversation: Christian Perspectives on Homosexuality
Edited by James M. Childs Jr.,
Published by Fortress Press, Minneapolis 2003 132 pp., $7.20

What constitutes a “Christian perspective?” Even more, what makes any Christian perspective a “Lutheran perspective,” which this book claims to offer? There is no agreed-upon answer among Lutherans today on this. The several writers in this book make that perfectly clear because of their differing perspectives.

The Lutheran Confessions propose a specific “perspective” for church life and theology. Perspectives are stand-points. When you stand here, you see this. Stand over there and look at the same thing and you will see something else. A Lutheran perspective is a statement saying, “Here I stand” when one looks at the Bible, at the world, and at God. In Lutheran code words that original Lutheran perspective was bifocal, a “Law and Promise” perspective.

That bifocal Lutheran perspective has two perspectives by which we are to view God. They are the same two perspectives by which God views us! The first perspective is Law; the second is the Gospel’s promise.
The perspective of the Law makes us see our disobedience to God and God’s wrath against us. The Law is never a moral code by which we please God. The Law is there so that no human has an excuse before God.

Thanks be to God there is also now the perspective of the Promise, the good news that “we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God regards and reckons this faith as righteousness” (Augsburg Confession, Article 4).

The book “Faithful Conversation” says that it gives a Christian perspective, which, of course, means the perspective of the Promise of Christ. However, that Promise, which can be summarized as “justification by faith in Christ alone,” is named a few times but never used. Worse, the Promise of Christ is destroyed by making it the same view as the Law.

The forward states, “All of these authors are seeking to be faithful to the witness of Scripture” (p. vii). What is that witness? For Lutherans, the witness of Scripture also has two perspectives—Law and Promise. Only by reading Scripture with the perspective of Law and Promise can the Scriptures witness to the defining event of Christ AND be heard as good news that gives us faith, the benefits of Christ, and comforts our conscience. But that perspective of Law and Promise is melted into the right-sounding phrase of “the witness of Scripture” throughout the book. When the Law and Promise are melted together into “the witness of Scripture,” both Law and Promise are lost and some weak alloy is formed, an alloy that can be called morality. The Law is lost as that which makes us guilty before God. Instead it becomes a guide that we are to try and follow with Christ’s help. God’s wrath is lost because God is
now seen as trying to help us do our best by giving us Christ. The Promise is lost as that which has saved us from God’s wrath and that frees us from the Law’s accusation. Instead, the Promise-maker is changed into someone who helps us do our best to please God by obeying the Law.

When we read “Only God’s Holy Spirit joins righteousness and mercy in Christ Jesus” (p. viii), that may look like a Christian perspective, but it does not clearly proclaim that our righteousness before God is faith in Christ. Therefore it fails to give us the Promise, which is the only Christian perspective.

The introduction talks of being faithful. “First of all, our discourse must be faithful to the mission of the church to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to all the world” (p. 1). That gospel of Jesus Christ is not defined. Without that defining moment actually proclaimed, that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake we are forgiven (AC 4), then the gospel of Jesus Christ remains unheard, and unheard it cannot give the faith which God regards as righteousness.

The introduction tries again to speak of faithfulness. “Second, faithfulness means faithfulness to the Scripture, the Word of God, through whom we meet the Word, Jesus, the Christ, who is the grand finale of God’s revelation in history” (p. 1). Faithfulness to the Scripture, in Lutheran language, is to rightly distinguish between the Law and Promise so that the benefits of Christ are clearly heard and faith can hold them. That kind of faithful perspective is never told to the reader. Also, this second attempt does not make Jesus Christ good news, only a revelation, as if Jesus was only a clearer view of how God wants us to behave better. That makes Jesus a morality
teacher, not a mediator and propitiator on our behalf before God.

“Being faithful, then, means maintaining continuity with Christian teaching in general and with our Lutheran theology in particular” (p.2). Christian teaching, so varied throughout the centuries and so diverse presently, is usually equated with values, which is again, morality, not Promise. Lutheran theology can be presented as legalism or Biblicism instead of as Promise. That is the perspective on page three, “So Scripture and tradition bulk larger than the rest, for they are the repositories of authority in the church’s teaching.” To say that Scripture is authority, without referring to the good news that faith in Christ alone is our righteousness before God, leaves out the very message that makes Scripture an authority.

Childs, on page four, writes, “the two basic doctrines of the Bible are the Law and the Gospel, which flower fully in the person and work of the Christ. Given this orientation to the Bible, it is clear that the paramount themes of Lutheran theology drawn from the Scripture, will, in turn, guide Lutherans in their approach to understanding the Bible.” Law and Gospel (Promise) are not two “doctrines.” Instead Law and Promise are the two distinct perspectives that Lutherans use to read the Bible. And to put Law and Promise together in Christ does not keep them distinct as one of the first witnesses to Christ does, “The law was given through Moses, grace and truth through Jesus Christ” (John 1.17). Without keeping them distinct, the good news of Christ as our righteousness cannot be proclaimed clearly in order to give us faith.

Then the “premier doctrine of justification by grace through faith” (p. 5) is mentioned. But immediately justification is said to be derived from the correlation of law and gospel. By no means is justification derived from a mixing or an equaling
of law and gospel. Justification is through faith in Christ alone. The Law cannot be correlated to the Promise any more than death can be correlated to life. Law and Promise are not being kept distinct, so that the real Christian perspective of Christ as our righteousness is lost like a pair of misplaced reading glasses.

“Culture is the lens through which God’s revelatory message is viewed and understood” (p. 6). That revelatory message of God comes in two perspectives—Law and Promise—and cannot be lumped together. Childs has again mingled Law and Promise so that God’s message is muddied. The mud is said to be made clear by calling the mud “norms.” Norms are general rules and people like rules because by them they think they can do what is right to God. So with his mud of norms, Childs continues with, “We fear that without agreed-upon norms all will be relative to different cultural biases and prejudices” (p. 7). The norms here refer only to rules or customs and make no reference to the Christian norm of righteousness by faith in Christ alone. When Christ is given as the perspective by which God views us, then other norms should not be followed because then Christ is no longer being trusted to lead us. He is made unnecessary and we lose the benefit of his cross and the benefit of consciences that have peace with God.

Childs continues to play in the mud. “Placing the vexing issues of the day in the framework of meaning and values at the core of the Christian faith is central to the church’s engagement in moral deliberation” (p. 9). That sentence equates the Christian core with meaning and values, as if a Christian perspective is morality. When the Christian core is morality, then the Christian life becomes how to live right according to certain prescribed morals, often labeled “Christian values.” People are urged to live trusting that their conformity to those rules is how they are doing what God wants, as in “It’s the Christian
thing to do.” Thus, trust is placed in people’s actions and not in Christ. Consciences are agitated by not knowing for sure what God’s will is, as the two sides on any issue prove. Consciences are also troubled by not conforming completely to those values or by not knowing if they have done enough. To put Christ as the only value God desires gives all the honor to Christ, makes Christ’s suffering for us good news, and then consciences can be at rest with God because of what Christ has done for all people. That is why Luther and the Reformers insist that the Christian core is that we are right with God “by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake we are forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us” (Augsburg Confession, Article 4).

To say “and how the moral principles derived from our faith should be applied” (p. 12) makes Christianity another legal system instead of something new and good given to us by the suffering of Christ for our benefit.

The center of a “Christian perspective” is God’s promise in Christ. There is absolutely no Christian perspective of God’s promise in Christ in the forward and introduction to the book. That absence of Promise continues in the first author’s essay. Powell on “The Bible and Homosexuality” begins with a mention of justification by faith in Christ alone but ends up with only condemning questions. In Powell’s list of principles for interpretation of Scripture on page twenty, Powell adds justification by faith in Christ as just one of several points more important than other points. Thus, he starts using phrases such as, “The Bible indicates” (p. 29). That makes the Bible an authority without the Christian perspective, without the Gospel of justification by faith in Christ as witnessed to by Scripture. Powell urges, “the church must think carefully about whether it really wants to require people to live in a manner
that its Scriptures and its confessions maintain is displeasing to God” (p. 31). To “please God” is a big theme in Lutheran theology and in all people’s lives. God has proved that the only way to please God is to have faith in Christ as the one who makes us pleasing to God. God has proved this by raising Christ from the dead! That is the view the Law and Promise perspective gives us. Powell’s urging statement uses Scripture and the confessions as rule books, rules that have to be followed in order for people to be pleasing to God. That is a complete forsaking of faith in Christ as the only way to be pleasing (justified) to God.

Powell keeps using terms such as “Scriptural teaching,” and “The goal is to be faithful to all of Scripture” (p. 37). Scripture is here again being made to be an authority without the Lutheran perspective of distinguishing Law and Promise, which is necessary so that the Gospel’s own witness to Christ as the one who suffered for us to make us right with God is clearly heard. At his conclusion, Powell asks his two big questions that are completely without the Christian perspective of Promise, for they have no reference to Christ and give no honor to Christ. “For me, the question becomes: Do we require homosexual people to sacrifice the experience of sharing life intimately with a partner in order to fulfill God’s standards of holiness as perfectly as possible? Or do we allow a merciful exception to those standards in the belief that God would not want such sacrifices imposed on people in burdensome and harsh ways” (p.38). “The question, rather, ought to be ‘How can I please God, whom I love and want to serve?’” (p. 39). The question of “How can I please God?” is the salvation question, not a question about morality or what is right to God. To be concerned about pleasing God through morality was what the Reformers denounced in the Augsburg Confession. If morality pleases God then Christ is not needed, his death and rising as
the pleasing act of God become unnecessary, and Christ then died for nothing.

The perspective of the second author, James Nestingen, “The Lutheran Reformation and Homosexual Practice,” is better. But it could be even better yet. Nestingen defines sin very well. “The desire to justify the self, to gain control of the sources of life and bend them to personal purpose, to become one’s own project determining one’s own significance and value” (p. 44) is the opposite of being justified by Christ. It is trusting another instead of Christ for righteousness before God.

The next step for Nestingen is the Two Kingdoms, but he has the death and resurrection of Jesus regaining God’s rule over people so that people are not ruled by sin, death, and the devil. Nestingen has not prognosed his own diagnosis that “the law works wrath” (p. 43), as in God’s wrath against us. The death and resurrection of Jesus overturn God’s own judgment of death against us. That puts the kingdom of God’s law in its proper place, the place of not only order, “making the provisions necessary to approximate justice and peace,” (p. 45), but to preserve and protect people so that the promise of Christ by his death and rising can overturn God’s judgment of death for all people. Nestingen’s omission of the law’s purpose to preserve and protect people so that the Gospel can be given them results in his implication that the law “still has a word about the shape of life” (p. 47). He had just quoted Romans 14.23, “Anything that does not proceed from faith is sin.” Yet he wants the law to shape the lives of Christians. He wants Christians to follow the law instead of following Christ. This is called the Third Use of the Law, a use that the Law cannot perform because of its accusatory nature that God gave it to hold us all accountable and guilty to God. The Third Use of the Law fails the Lutheran hermeneutic of distinguishing between Law and Promise because the Third Use of the Law is not based
on Christ, makes Christ’s death mean nothing, and it gives no comfort to consciences and instead troubles them. So Nestingen’s Christian freedom is limited to the Law’s ordering of society. He describes that in having tenderness break “through the hostilities that have divided people, for example, or in a quiet reassurance granted amid suffering” (p 55). He has Christians working in the realm of the law, bringing order, but neglects to give them the freedom to make people right with God through Christ, which is the real Christian freedom.

Thus Nestingen concludes by echoing Wolfhart Pannenberg that “a church that rejects the traditional teaching on homosexual practice can neither be evangelical nor Lutheran, no matter what it calls itself” (p.57) That conclusion makes the church of Christ and its traditional teachings to be only a moral dictator that people must follow as the means of righteousness instead of faith in Christ. The Reformers also practiced the Law and Promise perspective on “traditional teaching” in Augsburg Confession 28. They said that certain traditional teachings, actions, ways of life, “new fasts, new ceremonies, new monastic orders, and the like were invented daily. They were fervently and strictly promoted, as if such things were a necessary service of God whereby people earned grace if they observed them or committed a great sin if they did not. Many harmful errors in the church have resulted from this. In the first place, the grace of Christ and the teaching concerning faith are thereby obscured. The gospel holds these things up to us with great earnestness and strongly insists that everyone regard the merit of Christ as sublime and precious and know that faith in Christ is to be esteemed far above all works. For this reason, St. Paul fought vehemently against the Law of Moses and against human tradition so that we should learn that we do not become righteous before God by our works but that it is only through faith in Christ that we obtain grace for
Christ’s sake” (Augsburg Confession, Article 28.2-5). The Reformers insisted that what makes people and their behavior right with God is the Gospel of Christ. To make a person’s righteousness dependent upon following traditional teaching makes Christ unneeded and just burdens consciences and causes them to despair of ever being right with God. That is not the Gospel’s mercy but the Law’s condemnation.

The third essay by Martha Stortz, “Rethinking Christian Sexuality: Baptized into the Body of Christ,” though it talks of baptism, uses Scripture only as a law book. “Scripture guides us in what to do and what not to do” (p. 61). “Sometimes biblical counsel requires that we examine the contours of a parable and shape our own lives accordingly” (p. 61). Here Scripture is being used without its connection to the gospel of Christ being our righteousness by his suffering for us. Scripture is being used as an authority or guide or counsel as if it had authority on its own without the gospel. Stolz uses baptism into Christ as our new identity, that we are owned by Christ, but she does not differentiate between ownership by Christ’s mercy and ownership by God, even God’s grace in the law.

Richard Perry Jr. and Jose Rodriquez use culture as that which reflects “their condition in life” (p. 81). “Culture serves as a way of organizing the world” (p. 83). “Culture, we suggest, is a meaning-giving system created by a particular group of people that expresses, forms, and transmits, in culturally specific forms, how the people and all living things are connected to God” (p. 83). That is the same as Nestingen’s law is for order and provision. In Lutheran hermeneutics, culture is totally in the realm of Law. So whenever discussing culture that distinction must be kept clear to be done in the Lutheran way of giving glory to Christ and comforting consciences. Perry and Rodriguez do not make that distinction between Law and
Gospel when they correlate Christ and culture: “Christ and culture are authorities the Christian is called to obey” (p.84). “We can all agree, as Christians, that universal ethical wisdom is shared through the Ten Commandments, biblical proverbs, the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Sermon on the Mount, and stories about biblical heroes and heroines” (p. 85). Here the two authors have made Christ another guru of ethical wisdom, and so have crassly not kept Law and Promise distinct. They have made Law, as in culture, the means of righteousness, which is only the work of the Promise. Christ’s death and rising are not even mentioned, are of no consequence, and are not good news for us in how we are connected to God. Christ connects us to God in mercy, mercy for disbelievers who use culture to justify our lives, as Perry and Rodriguez do.

Lastly, even in the Authors’ Forum, the use of Scripture as only Law is stated several times, “the great majority of people in the ELCA want to do the will of God on this matter. They want to know what the Bible does say” (p.129). “As Lutherans our authority does not lie in our experiences or the experience of others but in Holy Scripture, the Word of God” (p.132). The will of God is seen as Law, right behavior, and in no way is the will of God seen as mercy given through the death and rising of Christ as how we are justified and so please God and do God’s will. To believe in Christ as the one whom God has sent is how we do the works of God, as the gospel writer John says (6.29).

The “Christian Perspective” is completely missing in “Faithful Conversation: Christian Perspectives on Homosexuality” because it views Scripture as Law and ignores the Promise, which is the real Christian perspective. To recommend the Law as people’s perspective on God makes them guilty and condemned and so is of no comfort. Only that which gives peace to the conscience is gospel. People are comforted
and given peace with God when the Promise is proclaimed: We are right with God by grace, for Christ’s sake, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. That is finally the only Christian perspective, for it is based on Christ whom God raised from the dead for us.

Timothy Hoyer

Timothy Hoyer is a graduate of Christ Seminary-Seminex. He now happily serves as pastor at Gloria Dei Lutheran Church in Lakewood, New York. His email address, if you want to respond to him, is gloridadei@alltel.net

Reader Response to the Wine/Wineskins of Contemporary Worship

ThTh #261 comes from SHERMAN LEE. Sherm is a long-time Crossings veteran, both as student and workshop facilitator. By day he is an information technology architect for a financial services firm; by night he is husband, father of two, amateur musician, tinkerer, student of pop culture, and has a keen interest in wherever the abstract meets the concrete, that is, where the rubber meets the road.
Ed,

As always, I appreciate your insight and comments. Your analysis reflects what you do best: applying the litmus test for Gospel content.

Keeping in mind the limitations of analyzing a phenomenon from afar – that is, a story presented through the eyes and ears of a reporter, whose words were then filtered by an editor – the phenomenon is still ripe for study.

It is not interesting just to see church organizations trying to cultivate their congregations – this is an age-old problem. It is however fascinating to see attempt at growth on such a scale in an age of declining (mainstream Protestant) attendance/participation. It is mass (pun intended?) marketing and seems awkward – desperate times call for desperate measures?

Does growth become simply a numbers game to the exclusion of the Gospel?

There is nothing inherently wrong with these “new” measures/methods. Different people resonate with different styles, of worship, of music, of praise and prayer, of communicating. But these ways of attracting and sustaining interest and participation address only the question of HOW.

The more salient question is of WHAT: what is being presented/shared at such services? At best, it’s the Gospel; at worst, hopefully none of it fosters/sustains destructive behaviors.

Theologically, the worst case scenario is if the church advertises Gospel but then falls short and presents something
else — like candy-coated Law or just candy-coated feel-good platitudes. The biggest growth success story in the world means nothing if the consumers are being sold a bill of goods (or good news).

But I would submit that many a (traditional) congregation does this on a regular basis but with lower notoriety and much lower growth (and possibly even decline). Sometimes I wonder if the Gospel is propagated not because of the church-as-institution but rather in spite of it.

The afore-mentioned litmus test is actually the journalist’s question of WHY! Why do (should) we even bother gathering, be it at high church or at mega-church? Because of the WHY God-in-Jesus died for us on the cross and WHY he rose for us — for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever trusts in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

It beats me how anyone, be it a journalist or a marketer, could omit such a fantastic WHY, but they do. Everyone loves a mystery or a drama, gets hooked by whodunit, but it is always unsatisfying without understanding WHY. And in this case, the WHY is not only curiosity-sating but heartening, uplifting, pull-you-from-the-depths kind of good news!

Maybe, just maybe, the “Gospel-deficient services” play a role as well. I did not grow up “churched” but among my most “religious” lifetime moments came during my annual secular-Christmas tradition of watching “A Charlie Brown Christmas” in which Linus quotes the Lukan Christmas story. Amidst the din of holiday marketing, Linus speaks simply and directly about the angel bringing good tidings of glad joy, of God coming into the world for us. Contrast this with another childhood favorite — Davey and Goliath — which was full of morality but low on Gospel. Even then, as an unchurched teenager, I was able to
sniff out not only goodness and morality, but also of Gospel, of promise, of God’s gift.

It would be years before I developed the theological awareness to more fully appreciate its meaning — by going to Luke and other texts and reading with my heart, not just watching a 30 minute holiday special each year. For me, the initial draw was being part of a mass audience and wondering about the messages both Godly and secular and then scratching my head about the motivation to so openly quote Scripture, and why underscore that particular passage in the Charlie Brown special. And along my journey I was baptized as an adult and have spent much time in trying to spread this Good News in a diversity of forms and forums.

I’ve kind of wandered from my original intent which was to state that no one should judge worship services by their trappings, but rather by their content. It’s no secret that I not only enjoy different musical settings and styles (from traditional to folk to reggae to…) for worship but that I like to participate as a musician as well. But I’m not an “either-or” kind of person — I appreciate diversity in most things but mostly I marvel that the universal message of God’s promise and promise fulfilled can come in so many forms — as long as that message is The One being transmitted in the myriad of presented forms.

Shalom!
Sherman Lee

PS — Obviously I was touched by your last column — both the topic and your take on it. It stirred in me many of the touchpoints in my spiritual journey — adult convert, mass media savvy, gospel-content of any form/forum, diversity of musical styles.
RESPONSE TO THTH 259: ANOTHER GOSPEL LITMUS-TEST FOR ANOTHER LUTHERAN MEGA-PHENOMENON

I composed my response to ThTh 258 mostly to ensure that critical analysis did not condemn any worship based solely on its “wineskin.” And again Ed, you raised the crucial (pun intended) issue regarding contemporary worship: “Where is THE Gospel in all this?”

Another Quantity vs. Quality Challenge

I have not experienced any Lutheran Mega-Church first-hand and therefore cannot speak even naively of the ELCA Mega-Church phenomenon, nor its St. Louis “mini-me” cousin as described in your analysis. (Is it just me or does “mega-church” sound so much like “McChurch?”) But I can cite additional data that may offer another perspective of current church movements facing quantity vs. quality issues, and possibly, hope for the Gospel-centeredness of the Church.

As I type this response I am listening to the advance release of the music for the 2003 ELCA Youth Gathering (late July in Atlanta) entitled “Do Life! Ubuntu I am because we are. We are because Christ is.” (For more information, please refer to http://www.elca.org/youth/gathering.html.) ELCA Youth Gatherings are near and dear to my heart; immediately after my baptism, I began serving as a youth counselor for 13 years, and have attended all such Gatherings (starting in 1988) as a chaperone and volunteer. As a late bloomin’ Christian, I have had to play catch up to all aspects of church going, including separating out the cultural aspects from the theological. As an Asian-American in the midwest, I have proudly adopted the
German- and Scandinavian-American Lutheran church culture – because that is the dominant local cultural church pattern. It’s fun to understand and be part of the “in-jokes” that Garrison Keillor tells about the Lutheran Church. But that is a secondary concern – the Gospel is what matters. And the Gospel speaks to far more than just those of German and Scandinavian descent.

The ELCA Youth Gatherings have been a product of the ELCA merger, and in the two main predecessor ELCA church bodies, there were different youth ministry cultures with differing philosophies on how best to serve youth. I’m no expert on the predecessor youth ministries nor have I been privy to the transition process, but the evolution of the triennial gathering has not been without a few bumps. These Gatherings have been at the ELCA forefront of how to make Christ relevant to today’s youth – and a huge part of the Gatherings has been the choice of music – wineskin and wine.

WHAT OF NEW WINESKINS?

This is tough road for the ELCA, or any mainstream Protestant church. For all the talk of the “medium making the message” consider this paradoxical co-evolution: in the artistic side of the current music scene, the main goal is to be new, different and hip; the business side immediately mimics and cashes in on the new sound and the artistic side responds by devising newer, different-er and hipper – and so on and so on. And mainstream churches are even further behind than the business side of the music scene.

And what do young people want to hear? What “gen” are we up to – from baby boomers to baby busters to Gen X to Gen Y to whatever? Do the young people know or even care that they are part of the post-me generation? Do they want to hear organs and strings and brass, or do they want to hear guitars and drums
and amplifiers? What should a Gathering expect when they commission original music and contract with songleaders and musicians? These are among the questions that the ELCA-as-merged-entity has had to deal with since 1988.

They are no easy answers to these questions – and ironically the challenge has only increased since 1988 when the initial Gathering attracted about 20,000 participants – and the most recent one hosted in St. Louis (2000) was divided into two five day sessions in order to accommodate a larger total attendance greater than 37,000. (These numbers are far from exact and are from my own recollections.) The audience grows (quantity) but what about the quality (Gospel litmus test)? In addition, teenagers experiment in everything, including and especially musical tastes. Who’s to say which “contemporary” style can attract the entire audience, or even how does one calculate the modern musical lowest common denominator? And in calculating that lowest common denominator, what of the youth most comfortable with the “non-emotive-sit-in-your-pew-without-moving-let-alone-standing-and-clapping-style?”

The best that any organization can do is to offer and invite, just as God-in-Christ offers true wine and bread, and invites us to share in the Holy Feast, to exchange our badness for Divine Goodness. This year, the advance release of Gathering music offers a panoply of rhythms and styles, from African to Gospel to rap to neo-baroque/traditional to hip-hop. Again, these are only wineskins but they are an important part of God’s invitation – they can and do access emotional portals – and the Gathering is offering a palette of “different strokes for different folks.”

**AND WHAT OF THE WINE?**

Check out the song list ([http://www.elca.org/youth/tag-songs-list.html](http://www.elca.org/youth/tag-songs-list.html)) and lyrics
The usage of “We/Us/Our” far outnumbers the usage of “I/Me/My” but the first person singular does appear several times. But as you look for yourself, even the first person singular in the lyrics reflects Ed’s reminder of Luther/Elert: “It’s really not that complicated. The Good News is not what we are doing for or about God, but what ‘God in Christ’ is doing to, for, with us—in past, present, and future tenses. ‘Christ HAS died. Christ IS risen. Christ WILL come again.’”

Here are some sample lyrics from a rap song, “Do Life”:

Bishop Tutu says it like this  
The man on the cross gave us a big kiss  
Yeah Christ flung his arms out open wide  
For everyone and everything, makes me teary-eyed  
‘Cause it’s about unity, community, it’s harmony and humanity, like divinity, like the trinity,  
Yo, can’t you see it’s about you and me  
‘Bout life and living right where you’re at  
‘Bout friends and neighbors and folks like that  
‘Bout everybody getting their fair shake  
‘Bout giving more than you take  
‘Cause God’s reaching out, not holding back  
He’s calling for a spiritual love attack  
It’s time to join the cosmic embrace  
And start spreading God’s love all over this place

There is a strong reason for Gospel-centered theology in the musical liturgy and worship songs: the theme of the Gathering. I had the great blessing to hear Archbishop Desmond Tutu speak at the St. Louis ELCA Gathering, and he provides the theological foundation for this year’s event. Taking the first few paragraphs from the Gathering’s webpage on theme
DO LIFE! UBUNTU I AM BECAUSE WE ARE. WE ARE BECAUSE CHRIST IS. The theme for the 2003 Gathering is Do Life! Ubuntu. “Ubuntu” comes from the Bantu group of languages spoken in sub-Saharan Africa. It literally means “humanity.” It is a gift from the African culture to our North American Christian culture, for through the lens of ubuntu we can see a way to do life in such a way that God is glorified in and through our very humanness.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu embraced ubuntu and shaped a theology around it in rebuttal to the Christian faith taught in his South African context of apartheid that said one’s skin color was an indicator of one’s value as a human being. Tutu pointed to the person of Jesus through whose ministry, death and resurrection God claimed all people as valuable in God’s sight. It is in and through this community of the claimed, that we find our identity and worth as humans.

In Tutu’s worldview, in order to understand yourself, you do it through someone else. This is difficult for Western Christians to grasp. We may even resist it. We have been socialized into and through a worldview where personhood centers on the lone individual whose essential characteristic is that of self-determination. Our very faith is often tied to this reverence of individuality.

Youth are especially aware of the pressures to achieve, stand out in the crowd, be unique, succeed, prosper and to make something of themselves. In contrast to this, the African view of a person comes through interdependence with others. For Tutu, the practice of ubuntu grows out of God’s relationship with us in Christ Jesus, who sets us free from sin, thereby making it possible to know each other. Our true human identity,
he says, comes only through absolute dependence on God and neighbor, even when that neighbor is named enemy or stranger or uncool or old, or... (you fill in the blanks).

In baptism we are brought into a community that shapes who we are. It is in that community that we learn how to think, walk, speak, behave and how to be human together on this earth. The way we understand and view life and community is through the life of Jesus Christ whose sacrifice on the cross reconciled all people to God. We invite you to join the community of faith at the Gathering and learn through the lens of ubuntu how to “do life”... to imagine another way of living abundantly together.

This theology may not cleanly follow the Crossings model, that is, of the problems in our relationship with others, with ourselves and with God (and God’s problem with us – change of subject!); then God providing the solution on the Cross to heal God’s relationship with us and therefore overflowing with goodness as to see us through our relationships with ourselves and then also with others. If anything, Ubuntu theology defers our self-relationships to our relationships with others – it absolutely smacks down any possibility for me-ness without the context of we-ness. Regardless, the Gospel-litmus test is positive: we are nothing without the God-in-Jesus on the Cross for us. This is True Wine for us when we accept this holy, healing invitation – and the wineskins, although important in fanning out that invitation – are secondary.

In fact, The Wine is so powerful that it makes and/or adopts its own wineskins. This year will be the first time I will not attend the Gathering in person. But I will be participating vicariously – through our local youth, before and after the event – with the Gathering music as incorporated in our local
worship – and also in a new wineskin: streaming live video of the Gathering via the Internet in real-time, that is, as it occurs in Atlanta we can see and hear what our youth are experiencing. (See http://www.elca.org/gathering/med-strm.html) I look forward to hearing the Gospel as it is offered to tens of thousands of impressionable, hungry-for-substance, searching-for-meaning-in-a-post-9/11-world young (and not so young) people, as it is presented to them in a myriad of ways – wineskins made worthy by The Wine. I hope you (and all who read this response) look forward to this as well, with hope in Christ, for Christ’s church and for the world.

Shalom!
Sherman Lee
sherman.lee@usa.net

Schroeder Summer Sabbatical

Colleagues, Today’s ThTh posting is number 260. That is 5 times 52 Thursdays–5 full years of ThTh. I don’t remember that we missed any Thursday, but it could have been. Five full years suggest that it’s time to take a time out, especially for a guy who’s been retired for a decade already. So I propose NOT to write anything for ThTh for the next three months. It’ll be hard to desist. But encouragement to do so has come–of all places!–from Teresa of Avila. Imagine that. In morning devotions at our breakfast table recently one of her prayers was designated for the day. Here it is.

Lord, you know that day by day I am getting older–and one day I’ll simply be old.
Protect me from the compulsion to HAVE TO say something on every occasion.
Save me from the great passion to straighten out the affairs of others.
Teach me to be reflective and helpful, but not yearning to be in charge.
Teach me the marvelous wisdom that I might be wrong.
Keep me as lovable as you possibly can.

When I prayed that out loud—it was my turn—Marie looked at me. But I’d already gotten the message. “Teresa’s talking about me.”

Ergo, three months self-imposed silence with ThTh postings. Well, sortuv.

Silence from EHS, but still postings (maybe) for most of the Thursdays of summer 2003 in the northern hemisphere—June, July, August. All from other theologians. Anticipated are a couple of book reviews from co-editor Robin Morgan, a Tim Hoyer review of the ELCA’s “preliminary study” on homosexuality [“not Lutheran, despite its claim”], some responses to recent ThTh postings on looking for the Gospel in “Entertainment Evangelism,” possibly some words from Chris Hedges, author of “War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning,” and some articles from the “Ed Schroeder Festschrift.” And what, pray tell, you ask, is that? It’s a desktop-published book presented to me by Crossings colleagues on my retirement as honcho at the Crossings office exactly ten years ago. All 20 of these Festschrift tributes are gems. We’ll use as many as we can in the coming weeks. The Festschrift was not widely distributed, so most of you have seen none of it.

One of the longer pieces we hope to post—most likely in segments—is Bob Bertram’s “Theses on Revelation. Crossing a Modern Theme with its Biblical Original” of September 1993. The almost-finished book by the same title was still in his computer
when he died last March. There is a good possibility that we can coax it out of the computer and into the hands of a willing publisher. We’re working on it—as well as on a couple more of his book-length manuscripts hiding on the hard disc.

But I digress.

Input from others is the intended fare for the next 12 Thursdays. Deo volente I’ll be back in September. In the meantime I’ll be working on praying Teresa’s prayer and seeing where God leads me. If the results are communicable, I’ll tell you in September. If not, I’ll tell you that too.

Besides the good counsel from blessed Teresa, there is also the counsel of my spouse of 48 years:

Ed has been somewhat of a Jeremiah in many of these Thursday Theologies (I know. I’m the proof-reader), and sometimes his words sound like Lamentations. It brings to mind one of the most startling verses I came across in my daily Bible reading some time ago, namely Lamentations 3:20f. Jeremiah has been going on for page after page about his troubles and afflictions, like v.17, “my soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is.” And then all of a sudden comes this gem: “But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” In, with and under everything Ed writes is this certainty, sealed by the cross of Christ. He’ll never get over it. I thought you’d like to know. Marie.

[Ed here again.] With these two feminist theologians as counselors I’ll surely be a more edified Ed at summer’s end.

And now in closing, one more thing. This Crossings listservice survives by contributions. Crunch the numbers for yourself. Five
years for 52 weeks equals 260. To suggest a dollar per posting would be brazen. Some may not have been worth a buck. But there were others. How about 25-cents each—or at least a dime? Place to send your 5th anniversary contribution is The Crossings Community, PO Box 7011, Chesterfield MO 63006-7011.

Peace & Joy,
Ed Schroeder