

Confessing the faith on Christmas Day in the Morning

Colleagues, A ThTh subscriber from the other side of the world ("other side," that is, from where I live in St. Louis, Missouri USA) sent me recently the text of a new creedal statement his Protestant denomination is working on. He asked for my comment. In the course of doing so I wound up confecting my own thoughts about "new" creeds.

Basically I'm content with the ones I've inherited—Apostolic, Nicene, and even the Athanasian with its warts and wrinkles. More specifically I'm happy with Luther's Small Catechism and its "What does this mean?" for the three articles of the Apostles' Creed. And in 46 yrs of teaching I've sought to get students happy too about his succinct explanations—in nickel words—of what the faith is all about.

Here's what I hear him saying—

In the first article: I'm God's creature. It's all gift. So is everything else. These gifts obligate. But I'm seriously in arrears in fulfilling these obligations. [Ergo, help needed.]

[And there is help.]

Second article: Core confession is: "Jesus Christ is my Lord." Lord means owner. But I'm entangled with alien owners—in, with and under all those unfulfilled obligations. The consequences are lethal. Christ's work is ownership-transfer, to bring us back to the original owner of the first article. His biographical data spell out what it took to make that happen. With this result—as the old catechism translation said—"so that I may be HIS OWN." The consequences of that transaction are good news indeed.

[So how does this help get to folks in later millennia?]

Third article: The Holy Spirit's job is to keep the ownership-transfer going. To get—and keep—sinners Christ-connected. Then follow the specs for how the Holy Spirit does this. Venue for this Christ-connecting is the community called church. The core action for what constitutes the “Christian” church is the offer of the forgiveness of sins. When trusted, that forgiveness generates the life that lasts.

Just for fun, I'll paste in ML's own text, so you can see for yourself. Text is the one I memorized in parochial school way back in the previous millennium.

LUTHER'S SMALL CATECHISM. Part II

The Creed as the head of the family should teach it in a simple way to his household.

The First Article: Creation

“I believe in God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth.”

What does this mean?

I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that he has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still preserves them; also clothing and shoes, meat and drink, house and home, wife and children, fields, cattle, and all my goods; that He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life; that He defends me against all danger, and guards and protects me from all evil; and all this purely out of fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me; for all which it is my duty [Ed: poor translation here. The German says: “I am already in arrears in my obligation to . . .” I.e., I need help! Thank God for the 2nd article.] to thank and

praise, to serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true.

The Second Article: Redemption

“And in Jesus Christ, his only son, our Lord: who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried: he descended into hell, the third day he rose from the dead, he ascended into heaven, and is seated on the right hand of God, the Father almighty, whence he shall come to judge the living and the dead.”

What does this mean?

Answer: I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death, that I may be his own, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as he is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.

The Third Article: Sanctification

“I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.”

What does this mean?

Answer: I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in true faith; even as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.

In this Christian church he daily and richly forgives sins to me and all believers, and will at the Last Day raise up me and all the dead, and give unto me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true.

Back to the new creed proposed from the other side of the world. Those folks started with the second article about Christ. That was a tease. But, why not? Why not go for the jugular in the opening statement—necessitating Christ. They also had a concluding 4th paragraph. So I followed their lead when I conjured up what follows. I don't imagine that they will adopt my credo. Even though Luther's explanations are more succinct, I want to follow in his train. You decide.

A statement of faith:

1. Like St. Paul in Athens (Acts 17) we live today on a new Mars Hill in a "sea of faiths."

Gods, sacred and secular, abound.

We believe in Jesus. We call him "Christ," our rescuer.

Fully human as we are, yet unlike us, he was God-in-our-flesh being merciful to us.

That mercy brought him to the cross, his great exchange with sinners:

our sin going to his account (and death as the consequence) with his righteousness to our account (and life that lasts as the consequence).

His resurrection, so we claim, is God's own "OK" for his dealings with us in mercy, and our grounds for hope in every valley of the shadow of death we meet.

We trust him for this Good News, the very grounds for a whole new creation.

2. Because of Christ, we call God "Father."

God Father is creator—of us and all that exists.

To exist at all is a gift. To be a creature is to be a receiver.

As our creator God rightfully is also our evaluator, our critic [Gen. 1-3].

Though we are marvelously gifted as God's creatures, our response to the Giver is woefully deficient.

Apart from Christ the whole human race is in trouble with God the creator.

Yet in Christ we know God to be for us, as Christ was for us.

Because of Jesus, the one he called Father is "our Father."

Thus our primal prayer is addressed to Our Father for our lives and for the welfare of the whole creation.

3. We confess the Holy Spirit as the power of God-in-Christ now "loose" in God's creation.

"The Triune God" is our way of speaking of God as Gospel.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit is "the Good News about God."

The Holy Spirit in this Trinity "takes what is Christ's" and offers it to the world.

Agents for that Spirit's work are the ones who call Christ Lord, themselves the product of the Holy Spirit's offer.

As the community of Christ-connected people – sinners, yet saints – we live from Gospel and sacraments, drawing on the Holy Scriptures to keep our faith focused on Christ and our lives focused on the world.

4. We trust that we belong to God, children of that Father, his Son our brother, whose "own" we are, constantly on the receiving end of the Holying Spirit.

The "care and redemption of all that God has made" we understand to be our primal calling(s).

Our hope centers on Christ's promise that this calling is God's own plan for the world.

We believe that God offers this Gospel to the whole world,

also on today's Mars Hill where other gospels abound.
We do not claim that ours is the best.
Rather our claim is that it is Good News, an offer both
"good" and "new" that we too had never heard before.
Nor have we heard it elsewhere.
We seek to extend the offer to others. We stake our lives
on it.

Peace & Joy this Christmas Day!
Ed Schroeder

Third Use of the Law—One More Time

Colleagues, It wasn't long after Luther's death that his students started arguing about what the Meister had said about God's law. Specifically its role in the life of the "regenerate," folks now trusting Christ as Lord and Master. Actually the debate began before Luther died, but it blossomed post mortem.

Bob Bertram, similarly Meister for many of us, died but nine months ago. And it's happening again among his students. Not so much focused on what did Bob REALLY teach us, but all the way back to the 16th century—in Luther's theology and in that of the Lutheran Confessions of that era. What was the Reformer's own original take on the Law's place in the life of Christ-trusters? Or even farther back, a millennium and a half, can St. Paul be

taken literally when he says Gal. 5:1f (in the indicative mood): “Freedom from the law is the very goal of Christ’s setting us free.” And then (in the imperative mood, a “grace-imperative”) “Stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to the law’s yoke of slavery.”

In Lutheran lingo this is a debate about the “Third Use of the Law.” Why number 3? Because Reformation-era Lutherans all agreed that God’s law does TWO jobs for sure.

1. God’s law preserves a fallen creation from total dissolution by restraining evil-doers with carrot-and-stick regulations. In Latin that was “usus politicus,” the law’s role in civil society.
2. God’s law exposes the reality of human sinfulness. In Latin that was “usus theologicus,” the law’s role in “driving us to Christ.” And then came
3. the law’s role of giving ethical guidance for the regenerate, “born-anew” Christians. To which some of Luther’s students said yes, and others no.

In the catechetical instruction I received in parochial school (1936-44) from Schwan’s exposition of Luther’s Small Catechism (Copyright 1912, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO) this triad was spelled out as follows:

“What purposes does the Law, then, serve?

First, it checks, in a measure, the coarse outbursts of sin, and thereby helps to maintain outward discipline and decency in the world. (A curb)

Secondly, and chiefly, it teaches man the due knowledge of his sin. (A mirror)

Thirdly, it leads the regenerate to know what are truly good works. (A rule)”

In Lutheran lingo, this catechism taught “the third use of the law.”

I learned it, but I later learned not to teach it. For Gospel-grounded reasons. And that has been my conviction, lo, these many years. See below.

Back to the Reformation era—

The Lutherans after Luther wrestled with this 3rd use, whether or not God’s law “leads the regenerate . . . to good works” as Schwan’s catechism claimed.

Some took St. Paul’s caveat cited above literally and concluded that the “law should never be preached to believers.” They reasoned: If Paul says we’re free from the law because of Christ, then the law has no one to talk to when you are addressing Christ-trusters. Call that position #1 Their critics labelled them “anti-nomians” (=against the law. “Nomos” = Greek word for law) and that has been the dirty word in Lutheran vocabulary for such folks ever since.

Others said: No, God’s law is immutable and is always to be commended to everyone, also to Christians as God’s will for how to live their lives. It belongs in the pulpit to be preached to Christian. Call that Position #2.

Folks with Position #3 held that position #1 is correct in what it says (no law preached to the regenerate), but it doesn’t cover the waterfront. How so? No Christian you bump into on the street—or even in church—is ever “just” regenerate. In our daily lived experience as Christians we know there is a Doppelgaenger, a sinner-self, lurking within, and THAT sinner-self—like all sinner selves—is the one that God’s law addresses. Both in use #1 and use #2—curb and mirror. So God’s law is to be preached to the sinner-self in every Christian. So it’s properly spoken from

the pulpit to the Christian assembly. Isn't this what Luther meant, so said these third-positioners, with his axiom that Christians are not simply "righteous" period, but that in reality this side of the grave they are "simultaneously righteous and sinners" [simul justus et peccator] even though these terms are contradictory opposites. Alongside my new self in Christ there is my Old Adam—both of them biographically active, and both called Ed Schroeder. Ditto for Old Eves too.

The debate among 16th century Lutherans was "settled" (well, sortuv) in 1577 with the publication of the Formula of Concord, the last document in the Book of Concord, the collection of Lutheran Confessions. But that didn't lay the issue to rest, for the article on "third use," # 6 in the Formula, is ambiguous. So the hassle continues. Even to the point of whether FC 6 is, or is not, ambiguous. I think it is. See below.

Some of my Crossings colleagues—like me, Bertram's students—ask whether I'm not on the slippery slope to antinomianism—especially with the stuff I promote in these ThTh postings. In preparation for an upcoming Crossings conference I've put my thoughts down on paper. Something like this:

I. Antinomianism. Thesis: Antinomian I am not.

- 1. I hold and teach a pro-nomian theology. Even a "three-use-nomian" (sic!) understanding of God's law. But my "third use" word is a tease. It comes with this twist, that the law does indeed do job #1, the curb, and job #2, the mirror task indicated above, but in its THIRD task it is not addressed to the regenerate. The third task is done to sinners. Beyond curb and rule the law literally "mortifies" sinners. In its "3rd use" God's law is the sinner's executioner. At every funeral we are witness to this third use of God's law.*

2. All three uses in my teaching are the 3 uses GOD (N.B.) makes of God's law in dealing with sinners—and sinners only. Talk about “uses” of God's law for Lutherans are not uses WE make, but how God uses God's law. There are no such three-uses by God of God's law—no uses of any kind whatsoever—on humans new-created in Christ Jesus. By definition. “Christ is the end of the law for righteous believers.” (Rom. 10:4) The end of all three of its uses. In Christ-created new creatures what is there that needs curbing, what needs critiqueing, what needs rules?
3. So antinomian I am not. The American culture I live in IS patently antinomian. I continue to be a voice (perhaps in the wilderness) contra such antinomianism. Primary evidence for America's antinomianism is the refusal within FROGBA (folk religion of God bless America) to hear God the critic with God's judicial accusation: “You have been weighed and found wanting, and there is hell to pay.” And on the individual level American religion is patently Pelagian. We are able to go a long way in saving ourselves, and “nice guy” God never gets severe enough to be our serious critic. Even our deadly critic? Ah, come on
4. I am constantly beating the drum for the law's first use—preserving creation, and curbing its destruction—in my drumbeat for a Lutheran theology in today's sexuality discussions. It is the foundation of my utterances. So antinomian I am not on that topic. Au contraire!
5. Fundamental for me as prolegomena for all “use” talk is that we're discussing the uses GOD makes of God's law. So that is what needs to be

substantiated in all talk about “uses” of God’s law. Namely, what are the sufficient grounds for affirming that God “uses” God’s law for this or that purpose?

6. Summary. God’s three uses of God’s law on sinners is FIRST use: God-as-governor using his law to manage his fractured and fractious creation. SECOND use: God-as-prosecuting attorney: “Thou shalt not, and thou hast indeed” THIRD use: God-as-judge/executioner: a “use,” an event, we witness at every funeral, as God terminates sinners.

Antinomian I am not.

II. Concerning the ambiguity of Formula of Concord, Article 6:I learned from my mentor, Werner Elert, the following: “FC 6 starts with Melanchthon’s “yes” to the law’s 3rd use and ends with Luther’s “no.” And they are not the same.” That is my conviction still. I think this is “perfectly clear” in the FC 6 text.

III. Concerning Luther’s “positive” treatment of the 10 commandments:>From Elert I also learned this on the decalogue in Luther’s LC: “We agree with Luther [Tappert 407:310] as he concludes his explanation of the 10th commandment: ‘This commandment remains, like all the rest, one that constantly accuses us and shows just how upright we really are in God’s sight.’ How can one possibly generate the fruits of faith, of the new life in Christ, from this accusing Word of God?”

IV. If not Moses and the law, then who or what is the “ethical coach” for Christ-trusters?That’s a separate topic, but the key components are all over the New Testament. And the fundamental answer is the name before the hyphenated-term above. Christ himself.

Here are some of the NT code words: Christ as Lord. Christ as Master (different from the Lord term). Following Christ. Being led by the Spirit. Fruits of the Spirit. Mind of Christ. New Creation. New Obedience. Freedom. Love. Faith. Prayer. Then the dozens and dozens of “grace imperatives,” clearly distinct from the law’s imperatives, throughout the NT, especially in the epistles. In Lutheran jargon, all this is the “second use” of the Gospel. It follows after the Gospel’s first “use” of connecting sinners to Christ, and thereby to God as Father (no longer critic). In the Crossings paradigm for text study, this ethical turf is “step 6,” the new fruits growing from the new creation (step 5) rooted in the crucified and risen Christ of step 4.

But that’s a whole other essay. Half a book, in fact, in Elert’s own classic on Christian Ethics. After Part I “Ethos Under Law,” comes his Part II “Ethos Under Grace.” That grace-ethos takes 200 pages in his 1949 first edition. No surprise, I think it’s good stuff. Not exactly a stocking-stuffer. But it is what Christmas is all about – glad tidings, great joy!

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

Jaroslav Pelikan and Roland Bainton—Just before Christmas

Colleagues,

D.v., on December 17, next Wednesday, Jaroslav Jan Pelikan will celebrate his 80th birthday. One of the super-whiz-kids to grow up in the Missouri Synod—in its “Slovak District”—Pelikan is now a member of the Russian-rooted “Orthodox Church in America.” That move to Orthodoxy was really no surprise. He always was a Slavophile. I know. He was my teacher at three different schools, Valparaiso University, Concordia Seminary and (for a summer school course) the Lutheran Seminary in Maywood, Illinois. Those were the years 1948-55. [A generation later he was daughter Gail’s teacher when she was at Yale University.] When “Jary,” as I too was invited to call him, made his official move into Russian orthodoxy not too long ago, he told Bob Bertram, classmate and buddy from all the way back to prep school days at Ft. Wayne, Indiana: “Bob, I thought it was about time that I became ‘de jure’ what I already was ‘de facto.’”

Even so, a bunch of us, Jary’s students from the days when he was our Lutheran guru, were planning to gather at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, next week to honor our mentor. He was cheered by the prospect and we were working out the details when he received another invitation. To wit, the Russian Orthodox Metropolitan in Moscow summoned Jary to Mother Russia for his 4-score birthday party. Additional perk was that Jary would thus also be present for the launching on that date of the Russian edition of his 5-volume magnum opus on the “The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine.” Slavophilia won; Lutheran nostalgia couldn’t hold a candle.

Perhaps an even more “magnum” work, from his earlier Lutheran years, is the 55-volume American edition of Luther’s Works. Jary edited this mega-long-term-project along with Helmut Lehmann, translated many of the volumes himself and wrote the companion volume with its classic chapter on Luther’s hermeneutics. I can still hear him in the classroom rattling off the axiom of some German professor that “Manchmal hat Luther die Schrift

furchtbar, aber doch fruchtbar, missverstanden." [Sometimes Luther misunderstood the scriptures frightfully, but yet fruitfully.]

Segue from Pelikan to Bainton

Last week Marie and I took from the shelf, as we regularly do in Advent, our ancient copy of Roland Bainton's "The Martin Luther Christmas Book." Inside was scribbled that I'd bought it at the Valpo bookstore in 1948, the year it was printed. That was my sophomore year, fall semester, which was also my first encounter with Jary. It was in a history course called "Renaissance and Reformation." He had this fresh-from-the-farm boy reading the wildest stuff. He introduced us to Roland Bainton and recommended that we buy Bainton's gem as a Christmas present. I did, and handed it off to my parents so they could wrap it up and give it back to me for Christmas.

Most of my exposure to Jary at Valparaiso University was in classes in philosophy. I scrubbed pre-med after my first college year and started aiming at the seminary. Valpo had no pre-sem program so I opted for a philosophy major. Jary taught in both the history and philosophy departments. At VU in those days real theology was being done in the philosophy department, not the religion dept. Teaching philosophy along with Jary were Bob Bertram and Dick Luecke. Hotshots all, still in their twenties, all recent seminary graduates of Concordia Seminary, all doing their doctorates at the Univ. of Chicago and moonlighting at Valpo to keep the wolf from the door. [Though at Valpo salaries that too took some philosophizing, I bet.] It was probably these three profs—as now in my own anecdotage I do my retrospective—who "converted" me to theology. It could simply have been hero-worship: I wanted to be like them! So I had to head to the seminary.

When I showed up at Concordia Seminary in 1950, Jary, now a full 26 years old, had just joined the faculty there. So once more he was my teacher. We sem students—all men, of course, in Missouri—were not always respectful even to super teachers as Jary was. But Jary wasn't too far away from his own student days at that place in the early forties. He knew how to cope. I remember one occasion when the bell had rung to end the class period and Jary was still in the middle of a paragraph. We started to shuffle and get up from our seats. Quote Jary: "Gentleman [we were always called that, tho the evidence was sparse], please wait a moment. I have a few more pearls to cast."

Jary was active in the "culture-hour" enrichment items at "the sem" at that time. He took a bunch of us through Dante's "Divine Comedy" one semester. And, of course, Slavic stuff, like Dostoyevsky's "Crime and Punishment" another time. Last January (brrr!) Marie and I stood at Dostoyevsky's grave in St. Petersburg. I remembered Jary—and Sonja too, the Christ-figure prostitute (sic!) in that classic of sin and redemption.

[I've often wondered if Dostoyevsky ever read Luther. His Sonja has been my example for making plausible ML's teasing thesis: "If it were possible to commit adultery in faith, it would not be sin." So I wonder: did Fyodor know Martin? Possibly even this thesis from a set Luther wrote for an academic debate? Jary's probably the only one who would know.]

Enough already. Who says nostalgia ain't what it used to be?

Whether or not Jary ever sees this, I know there is a multitude who join me in gratitude to the Manged Messiah for Jaroslav Jan Pelikan. May our Lord sustain him "ad multos annos."

Now—finally—to Bainton.

Herewith some excerpts from The Martin Luther Christmas Book, tr. and arr. by Roland H. Bainton. Philadelphia, Muhlenberg Press, c1948, 76pp.—This is for us the hardest point, not so much to believe that He is the son of the Virgin and God himself, as to believe that this Son of God is ours.

—The birth of Christ was timed to coincide with the Emperor's census because God wanted to teach us the duty of obedience even to a heathen government. [Furchtbar, aber fruchtbar?]

—Joseph had thought, "When we get to Bethlehem, we shall be among relatives and can borrow everything." A fine idea that was!

—What could Mary possibly have used as diapers? Some garment she could spare, perhaps her veil— certainly not Joseph's breeches. For they are a relic on display at the cathedral in Aachen.

—Look upon the Baby Jesus. Divinity may terrify us. Inexpressible majesty will crush us. That is why Christ took on our humanity, save for sin, that he should not terrify us but rather that with love and favor he should console and confirm.

—To me there is no greater consolation given to us than this, that Christ became a human child, a babe, playing in the lap and at the breasts of his most gracious mother. Who is there whom this sight would not comfort? Now is overcome the power of sin, death, hell, conscience, and guilt, if you come to this gurgling Babe and believe that he is come, not to judge you, but to save.

And then creme-de-la-creme on the book's last page Bainton gives us his own Christmas present, his translation of Luther's

Christmas carol "Vom Himmel Hoch," From Heaven High:

Angel:

>From heaven high I come to earth. I bring you tidings of great mirth.

This mirth is such a wondrous thing that I must tell you all and sing. A little child for you this morn has from a chosen maid been born,

A little child so tender, sweet, that you should skip upon your feet.

He is the Christ, our God indeed, who saves you all in every need.

He will himself your Saviour be. From all wrong doing make you free.

He brings you every one to bliss. The heavenly Father sees to this.

You shall be here with us on high. Here shall you live and never die.

Look now, you children, at the sign, a manger cradle far from fine.

A tiny baby you will see. Upholder of the world is he.

Children:

How glad we'll be if it is so! With all the shepherds let us go To see what God for us has done in sending us his own dear Son.

Look, look, my heart, and let me peek. Whom in the manger do you seek?

Who is that lovely little one? The Baby Jesus, God's own Son.

Be welcome, Lord; be now our guest. By you poor sinners have been blessed.

In nakedness and cold you lie. How can I thank you – how can I?

O Lord, who made and molded all, how did you come to be so small

That you should lie upon dry grass, the fodder of the ox and ass?

And if the world were twice as wide, with gold and precious jewels inside,

Still such a cradle would not do to hold a babe as great as you.

The velvet and the silken ruff, for these the hay is good enough.

Here lies a prince and Lord of all, a king within an ass's stall.

You wanted so to make me know that you had let all great things go.

You had a palace in the sky; you left it there for such as I.

O dear Lord Jesus, for your head now will I make the softest bed.

The chamber where this bed shall be is in my heart, inside of me.

I can play the whole day long. I'll dance and sing for you a song,

A soft and soothing lullaby, so sweet that you will never cry.

All:

To God who sent his only Son be glory, laud, and honor done.

Let all the choir of heaven rejoice, the new ring in with heart and voice.

Yours in just that Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

P.S. CROSSINGS IN SINGAPORE Marie and I have just accepted an invitation, brokered by the ELCA, to assist the Lutheran Church in Singapore with their "Continuing Education for Pastors" beginning in February 2004. We don't know what all that means. We're just at the beginning. We understand that it could be for several months. Details are still being worked out, but we've said yes. .PARTNERING As we've done before, we're extending the tincup to you folks on the listserve asking for assistance. The big-ticket purchases are airfare and a laptop (we have none)—preferably with Powerpoint, or its Mac equivalent. That's somewhere in the neighborhood of 5 or 6K U.S. dollars. The LCS will provide housing and we can cover our daily expenses.

So we invite you to partner with us on these big ticket items—and if you accept the invitation—to send a check to Crossings, Box 7011, Chesterfield MO 63006-7011. Mark it "Crossings in Singapore." Such gifts are tax-deductible in the USA.

Faith Place

Dear Folks, Below is a compilation of two pieces about Faith Place, the new mission that we're developing in the city of St. Louis. The first part is a theological reflection I wrote the day after Christ the King Sunday. The second and shorter part is a weblog entry I wrote the following week. Between the two I think you'll get a flavor for what's happening at Faith Place. If you want to contact us our email is faithplace@hotmail.com, the blog's address is www.faithplace.blogspot.com and our snail mail is P.O. Box 2008, St. Louis, MO 63158.

In the last month, so much has happened at Faith Place that I really can't give you a good description of our life together in a page or so. The kids' program has transmogrified a couple of times as we work to find the best way to do ministry with the neighborhood kids who've showed up at our door. Our first worship service was good, the second one was a disaster, the third was wonderful. Some kids are asking to be baptized, some are calling me names that I won't repeat here and sometimes it's the same kids doing both. The choir is singing, the choir is acting horribly, the choir is singing and leading worship. It's been a real roller coaster. Yesterday was Christ the King Sunday. I know some people do not believe that using this image is helpful in our world today. The triumphalistic, even militaristic overtones do nothing to further the cause of peace and justice where they are so desperately needed across the globe. But the image rang true for me yesterday as the devotion I was reading encouraged me to look, really look, at the scene between Pilate and Jesus. Pilate had the obvious authority in the situation: the one with the palace office, the armed guards, the empire's backing. Jesus was a king in chains.

Last week the St. Louis Post Dispatch ran a series of articles about the Joyce Meyer ministries that are based in the St. Louis area. It's a multi-million dollar, international operation that reaches people all over the world with Joyce's down to earth preaching style that is based in "name it and claim it" theology. She's very up front about telling people how to live their lives being obedient to God. She says that if you're obedient to God's will, you will prosper. A triumphalistic Christ the King Sunday, although I don't think she's particularly liturgical, is probably right up her alley.

I've watched Joyce a few times and her preaching is appealing. She doesn't pull any punches and she's very honest about her own struggles and her past. The thing that really bothers me is

what happens when you “name it and claim it” and it still doesn’t come to pass (Just for the record, I was in a ministry, long ago and far away, that espoused this theology, so I know whereof I speak). What happens if you “name it and claim it”, but it still doesn’t come to pass? It’s your fault, you weren’t believing, you weren’t being obedient somehow. That kind of theology is a house of cards that can collapse at any moment if one card gets pulled from its place. If everything depends on your believing, you lose everything when you discover that your believing doesn’t always get the job done. In such a crisis moment, one temptation is to turn away from God in anger. The other temptation is to fall into despair because you couldn’t believe.

In building this new ministry at the corner of Jefferson and Shenandoah, I would already be in a rage at God or the pit of despair if I thought that the whole ministry hinged on my believing. There is no blueprint for this work and it’s a matter of trial and error over and over again as we reach out to the neighborhood. I see people being moved by the ministry, I see people clambering to get in the door when we’re open, but the randomness of the situation does drive me to distraction from time to time. Saturday I was bemoaning the fact that I can’t find a “methodological foothold”, some basic way of functioning that will be valid in all the different situations I encounter. I said to the person who was so graciously listening to me whine that everything we do feels like we’re trying to walk in quicksand, where is the bedrock?

No doubt you’ve all picked up on my next thought before I did. It took me saying out loud, “Where is the rock I can stand on?” to bring me back to my King in chains. Ah yes, there He is, He’s been here all along, I’ve just been too agitated to notice. It’s not about me trusting that my believing will bring the circumstances into some harmonious alignment, but that as I

trust Him, He gives me the strength, the joy and the peace, to continue following Him into circumstances that are often chaotic. Not all the situations in our lives can be solved by pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps, whether through hard work or believing. There are circumstances which we may never understand nor be able to affect the way we may have originally hoped to do, but He calls us to follow Him nonetheless.

An amazing reality I have come to experience in my own life these past few months that never stood out in such bold relief before, is that even in the midst of the pain of trying to find my way in the dark, there has been enormous joy. It's not the happiness of success per se, though we have had some amazing successes, too. It's that sense of being where I'm called to be and doing what I'm called to do, which carries me forward, following Him, regardless of where we're going.

Wednesday evening was wonderful. About thirty people were at the worship service, almost all Faith Place folks and we were in the new worship space. We've still got a lot of work to do to get the space the way we want it, but I think having a permanent chapel is very important to our growth.

The three children who wanted to be baptized were present. Unfortunately, their older sister got sent home in the middle of the service because her behavior was so awful. Their mother did not show up even though she and I had talked the day before and I had specifically asked her to come for dinner/worship and even though they just live at the other end of the block.

Since I figured this might be the case, I revamped the baptismal service a bit. I excluded the parts about parents' and sponsors' responsibilities and highlighted the reality that these young people are being brought into the community. In

fact, I started a new tradition, at least for Faith Place, called Hands of Peace. After baptizing each of them and us all clapping to acknowledge their inclusion into the community, we all gathered around them and laid "hands of peace" on them while I prayed about the significance of this change in their lives individually and our lives collectively as a community. We gave them each a cross and a children's Bible that had been inscribed.

Though we all know that baptism is about what God through Christ did for us, not what we do ourselves, I have the feeling that this event will have an impact on them on a day to day level. They belong now. They have a place where they are welcomed and treated with respect. I don't know what kind of outcome this will have for Faith Place, but I think it will be significant.

One of the girls who was baptized came up to me before the service and gave me an artificial rose she must have gotten at the convenience store. It is a single pink rose bud with a little teddy bear attached to the stem. One of the other staff members said that I should have seen my face. She also said that I was getting through to these kids more than I realize in the midst of all the chaos. As you can imagine, I was really touched.

It's been a good Thanksgiving weekend. God is abundantly blessing this ministry.

**Because of the King in Chains,
Robin Morgan**

Martin Marty's SPEAKING OF TRUST. A Review.

Colleagues,

Today's ThTh 285 comes from the hand of Albert J. Jabs, retired (well, not really) professor, Allen University and Limestone College, Columbia, SC. Al and I have some common bonds. We're both graduates of Valparaiso University. Both septuagenarians born in November, though he just entered the 70s turf. Both with family roots going back to the German Lutherans who once lived in what is now Poland. Al has been a member of the Crossings board for several terms. The context of his teaching career has been "black" academic institutions. No surprise then, that when Bob Bertram invited him to join the Crossings board, Bob introduced him at his first meeting as a pale-skinned "black street preacher." As you'll soon see. Al is irrepressible, and thus un-editable. So I pass him on to you straight-~~rap~~ and all. Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder

A book review by Al Jabs

*Marty, Martin. SPEAKING OF TRUST – Conversing with Luther about the Sermon on the Mount. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003
159 Pages*

THINKING TRUST AFTER THE 9/11 THRUST

Jesus promises us with eternal hope in the Sermon on The Mount. These promises are both timely and timeless. The world lies to us and gives us false promises...and we have to deal with the wounds. It has always been paradoxical that Our Lord started to write (John 8:6) and may not have finished the line in the sand. Martin Luther and Martin Marty together may have written more than any other writers in Christian history. Indeed it is a formidable but exciting task to review such a book as Dr. Marty's recent work on trust, which may well be the most interactive volume of the 50 plus penned from his active hand ... and, with the lethal possibilities of today, perhaps one of the most important ever in Christian history.

When Pastor Marty flew into South Carolina, soon after 9/11, he was no crusader, but in his own words "a seeker." As he addressed the University of South Carolina audience on the general American religious situation, he came across as a mediator, a searcher and seeker for the causes of 9/11. He projected a peacemaker image attempting to fathom the mystery of the suicide attacks. With all of his writings on history, Marty was content to rest in God's grace until the fog had dissipated. The mixed crowd did not hear a crusader speech. There was a thoughtfulness ... hey, maybe a whisper of repentance rather than revenge/retribution ... and that could get even Dr. Martin Marty in trouble notwithstanding his Swiss background. Trust was written all over this top American religious historian. Yet, there is more about trust in this little volume. Read the book.

The world, in the minds of many, has changed forever as a result of 9/11. What can we really, deep down, believe? Thinking trust in a mistrustful and forgetful age is the heart of the small volume which can be read in a couple of sittings. The book is a mesmerizing work because it invites you to continue the conversation initiated by Jesus, and carried on by

Luther, which is additionally passed on to Marty, who wants to convey the conversation on to you, dear reader, and to your friends, for Marty emphasizes that even the Apostle Paul and Professor Luther did not think they had much faith until they started to explain the Solus Christus and Sola Fide spirit which activated their very active lives. Now, this is where the water hits the wheel, because Marty takes the conversation and crosses the Promise in many of the crossings of our busy, buffeted, and battered age. There is a strong invitation, and Marty, in an engaging, winsome manner takes the words to the hurts of the hours. There is healing in these helpful Promises. Read the book.

If one reflects on the brief day of life, some of us who are reading these lines have been graced by God for seventy years. Marty, who is nearing four score, knows the bleakness of losing a loved one, as he movingly describes his own plaintive pleas before hope and promise come. In the life and death of our own son for thirteen days, and the car deaths of my brother Ernie and daughter Jennie, and for many readers, your own crosses, an immediate bond is formed. What an antidote for the justice/injustice coming at us through the media/mail venues and dying of each day which comes as a kind of numbing/dumbing down through the tube.

The book is healing because it takes the immortal words of Jesus and takes that power and promise through the lens of Luther, and more importantly, reinforces Jesus as a walking and talking brother who comes with me and you in our class room ghetto, family concerns, community anxieties, and global angst. Marty brings it all into the intimacy of our living room and it is better medicine than Dr. Phil, "Today," and all the other "trust gurus" who have their own immediate promises to sell in an age of amnesiacs. Read the book, and look for the real Promise, but it has to be shared.

Trust and mistrust were and are key themes of this book. The Beatitudes are there and they are the most important words we can read. If we line up with the world, that is where our trust and hopes are. Last night, as I heard my own son, Commander Eric—currently attending the National War College—lecture on global terrorism as a possible generational enemy, my thoughts went back to the significance of trust in an age of growing mistrust and spreading hate ideology. How can radical Islam be confronted by the Sermon on the Mount? We trust that Jesus Christ has broken the back of sin, death, and the devil. This is Resurrection power that must be translated into each of our own orbits.

Marty could have given a little more depth on the battle with terrorism, but that is for the reader to do. Marty as a faithful pastor, for over half a century knows the value of that key word...trust...and I would agree, that this is what the book is all about. The dynamics of trust and mistrust cannot be adequately explained without the Sermon on the Mount, and that is what Marty attempts to do with interactive conversation. Anyone, in the pulpit or pew, can carry these promises to the hidden agendas of life, so that insulation and isolation, encouraged by the addictive powers all around us, do not have the last word.

Marty can be as tough as nails when he digs into the horrors of history or the 160,000 Christians who die under persecution in any given year. This remarkable book is local and global in meeting needs for all in any season of life. Repeat, the accusing voices do not have the last word. Again, read the book.

Marty is right when he suggests we think C (Christ), in answer to the big “D’s” of disappointment, doubt, discouragement, and depression. The interaction possibilities could make this into

an enduring volume. For those of us who are somewhat addicted to the email venue and snail mail hopes of each day, it would be good to review "Speaking of Trust" as a conversation-starter for the church group, the community klatch, or the decision- or power-centers of our communities. Better yet, give the decision-makers the book.

I am convinced that all of the Apostles, prophets, seasoned church sufferers, and Luther had visions of eternity as they trudged through their respective lives. Marty reveals a glimpse of timelessness, but he brings us back to face the mire. Luther, in the mind of Marty, felt that God impinged on his daily life. The 159 pages of this little book has that kind of potential of lifting power, but again this transformative power can only come through interaction and dialogue in the best and worst of our days. The reflections are made to order for such messaging.

Marty was at his best with the last chapter in "The Company of the Persecuted." Powerful, profound, and pervasive, it is. Jesus warns us with the caveat: "Blessed are you when men (women) revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." (Matthew 5:11) Our Lord allowed His Only Son to be tortured, mutilated, and murdered for our sakes. My Islamic brothers and sisters and other works-righteousness friends buck and turn away at this incomprehensible action...but the Blood Sacrifice was completed. The Sermon on the Mount ties in here, because Paul took his beatings and other savaging; brother Luther has always been the victim of unjustified vitriolic and racist polemics, and of course he could give back sometimes with interest, but he had to take his hits. I am sure Marty has been the recipient of some considerable sniping as well. Yes, say it, you and I and others on this faith journey have also had to take some hits, and like Luther, our own white shirts carry a few dirty spots

as well.

The story of my Uncle Emil is important in this. In 1945 he was hit with a communist rifle butt, threatened with death on several occasions, and transported toward seemingly inevitable death in a gulag deep in Russia. Yet, it was his singing of that confirmation hymn, "Jesu, geh voran" (Jesus, lead thou on), that made it possible for him to survive. With God's intervention, he was rescued by a Russian doctor who sent him back home because of his lame foot. He then worked without pay on a Polish collective farm. He had survived but all the other Lutheran villagers died.

Finally, all of us have our pet interests, woundedness, and theological issues, and my own beloved family wonders why I keep on going back to the suffering issues of my own ethnic Lutheran minority German family roots which went through ethnic cleansing in Poland circa 1945-1949. Dr. Marty's well-written inspirations can tie into all of these areas as well as the end of this universe.

Jesus invites Trust . . . Marty can help. Read the book.

The Reformation. What was it all about?

Colleagues,

God willing, Marie and I will be out of the country when this week's ThTh gets to you. And next week's too. Costa Rica's

the place. San Jose the town. We have a niece there, Heidi Michelsen, erstwhile Lutheran deaconess and now an M.Div. and ordained ELCA pastor. Heidi's husband Marco Ruiz is also a Lutheran pastor. Their team ministry in San Jose is not run of the mill. 'Fact is, we don't really know what it really is. So we're going to find out. On Heidi's invitation: "Uncle Ed, come down and do Crossings with us, and tell us something about Luther too." ThTh regulars know that for me that's just one request. But my Spanish is almost nil, despite the cramming Marie and I've been doing. [I may now just know enough to get for the bathroom—not unimportant for a septuagenarian male.] Just how "grande" is Heidi's request? Even though she has 15 presentation hours lined up (at last count), it'll really be only half that much talking-time for Tio Eduardo as she and Marco then interpret what uncle says. More when we get back, d.v., at the end of November. Therefore ThTh 284 and 285 were prepared in advance. They are the work of two co-confessors in the Crossings Community, neither of them from the clergy crowd.

This week's posting comes from a long-time ThTh receiver [hereafter LTTTR]. Seems his pastor, a solid pastor, Lutheran too, offered a Reformation Sunday sermon that discussed the shadow side of the Lutheran Reformation. Which is not to be denied. But apparently it got to be too much for LTTTR. Possibly even too much of the sermon. So he posted this note to his pastor with a blind copy to me. The grace of his prose is "grace abounding." I know it when I see it, 'cause I'm seldom graced that way myself. As you regular readers know only too well.

In real life LTTTR is a corporation president. He's 54 years old, a Crossings aficionado from way back. I have his permission to pass his posting on to you. If I didn't think it was great, I wouldn't do that.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Dear J. Thank you for having the courage and creativity to try to communicate the significance of Luther's theological revolution.

I continue to be animated by how we as a community of faith experience God's grace as tangible refreshment and nourishment in our lives today. I'm grateful that your sermons keep stirring the soup.

Here are my three thoughts about your comments on Sunday [= October 26, 2003, "Reformation Sunday" for Lutherans this year]:

1. The malady that kept Luther's contemporaries from experiencing God's grace – the whole merit system – is the operating principle for our world today. And we liberal, educated members of "X" Lutheran Church are part of that world. It's why we confess that "we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves."
2. The insight of Luther and the Reformers was that there was only ONE doctrine or dogma: justification by faith alone. So we really don't have lots of creeds, and the Augsburg Confession is a practical explication of that single focus. As are the ecumenical creeds. Everything else is relative – and related to justification by faith. And for Lutherans, faith always has an object: Christ. And that faith is contrary to lots of really good evidence – including our own mortality and the creation-destroying effect of the "merit system." One operation of God's righteousness—his left-handed righteousness, as Luther would label it— was that sinners die and that creation gets its cumeuppance, even gets handed over to chaos. [Ed: for example, that Los Angeles gets a foot of hail (sic!) in a "freak" storm a few days ago.] There is

another kind of righteousness, of course, faith's kind. About which more below.

For Luther, faith wasn't intellectual assent or emotional will power, but rather a "having" or "hanging onto" Christ. By being literally connected – through baptism and eucharist – to Christ, we have confidence that the "alternative righteousness" is true for us. That, contrary to the evidence, God loves us, that death is trumped by resurrection. There is the "truth" about us that sets us free.

- 3. It's probably another legend, but Luther supposedly said, "God rides the broken horse and carves the rotten wood." It's less apocryphal that Luther's dying words were, "We are all beggars." So it shouldn't surprise us that Luther – simultaneously sinner and saint – was captivated by medieval concepts about Jews, witches, and peasants. Someday, historians will condemn us for driving cars or sending children to high schools. It's not an excuse, but it is an explanation. And a reason to focus on the central, abiding contribution of the Reformation: justification by faith alone.*

Well, this sounds way more preachy – and sketchy – than it felt in my head, but I trust that your good nature can withstand yet another rambling parishoner. Thanks for listening.

Third Use of the Law and

“Valparaiso” Theology – A Book Review (Part II)

Colleagues,

Here’s the final portion of Matt Becker’s review of “Law, Life, and the Living God: The Third Use of the Law in Modern American Lutheranism.” By Scott R. Murray. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002. 250 pages. Part I was posted last week as ThTh 282. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Murray’s book offers inaccurate assessments of others, too. For example, Luther did not use the expression “tertius usus legis,” and those who simply cite Luther’s explanations to the Ten Commandments as evidence that he did teach such a “third use” do not recognize the inescapable dialectic in the two uses that Luther stressed. (See especially Two Kinds of Righteousness [1519], Treatise on Good Works [1520], and the 1535 Commentary on Galatians). Luther’s study of Paul and Luther’s reflection on his own Christian existence led him to the conclusion that there are primarily two “uses” of the law, a political-social use and a theological use. (Luther did not always employ the word “use” to talk about the effects and workings of the law, though in the history of Christian doctrine he is the first to coin the expression, “uses of the law.”) For Luther, the first, social-political “use” is the means whereby God establishes civic justice for the good of his creation by means of compulsion, coercion, retribution, “civil righteousness.” Such “civil righteousness” always ends up being

sin and hypocrisy, however, since it makes people presumptuous and it is in conflict with the gospel that states that one is saved solely by faith in Christ apart from works of law. The second, proper, and theological use of the law is God's use of the law to demand perfect righteousness, to convict the world of its sin, to drive people to death and despair under the divine curse of retributive judgment, to drive people to a crucified Christ (Gal. 3:23-25; 1 Tim. 1:8-11). While Luther did use the expression "three-fold use of the law" (*triplex usus legis*), he did so in only one place, in his exposition of Gal. 3:23-29 in the 1522 *Weihnachtspostille* (WA 10/1.1.449ff). Both Elert and Ebeling argue convincingly that for Luther even this "third use" merely reverts to the first two uses for the Christian. (Murray's book lacks discussion of Forell's and Althaus's studies of Luther's ethics, both of which have had a significant impact on Lutheran attitudes toward freedom and legalism, nor does the book refer to Scandinavian thinkers, such as Gusatv Wingren, and their impact on American Lutheran thought.) With respect to Article VI in the Formula of Concord, the one divine law, which is identical in both uses, is never merely a legal moral code. It is always more dangerous than those who so easily speak of the law as an objective, neutral guide. While the law does have an informatory effect (is this not a function of the first use of the law?), an effect that under the gospel/Holy Spirit is not coercive but free, that free effect is always itself ideal because Christians are never perfectly free of sin, and therefore always live, even as believers, bound to the first two uses of the law. This is the main point of FC VI, which acknowledges that the law is never merely or purely a neutral, informative guide (as in some forms of Calvinist theology). It is always an accusatory, juridical power that finally puts one to death. (For Murray, the first use of the law is primarily for "unbelievers" [13], but such a view minimizes that the law is also coercive for Christians,

insofar as they remain in the "old Adam" unto death. This coercive power of the law leads always to the experiential reality that the law always accuses.) Furthermore, FC VI underscores St. Paul's point that the law has not made things better for the Christian, but worse. The law has not given Christians a rule of life by which they can merely regulate their outward behavior. Rather, the law was added to human sin in order to increase the conflict and opposition between God and sinners. (See Rom. 7:7; Gal. 3:22; 1 Cor. 15:56; 1 Tim. 1:9).

According to Paul, the moment never arrives in the life of the Christian when the law has nothing more than an informatory significance. When we look to Christ, the law has absolutely no validity. On the other hand, when we look to ourselves, it is indeed valid, yet not in the sense that we only need to ask it what we ought to do, but rather that it constantly pronounces also upon Christians the verdict of God which makes sinners out of us. But this then also represents the constant anguish of our conscience, the temptation either to security or to despair, which we must relentlessly counteract by faith in the gracious promise of the gospel (Elert, *Law and Gospel*, 42).

Thus, "the law is always an accuser," even for the Christian (Apology of the Augsburg Confession IV, 38, 58, 129, 227), and "therefore godly minds must be called back from the law to the promise..." (Apol. IV, 229). With respect to the history of Lutheran theology, the theological method of the most significant Erlangen theologian, Johannes von Hofmann (1810-1877), was not "driven by the idealistic philosophy of history brought to its apogee by G. W. F. Hegel" (124), as Murray's book alleges, nor did von Hofmann "have difficulty accounting for the place of the Law" in his theological system (125). Hofmann was a thorough biblical theologian, who wrote

seventeen books of commentary on the New Testament, and thus he was not simply “intellectually indebted” to Hegel. Hofmann listened to St. Paul and St. John, who each spoke of Christ as “the end of the law” for faith (Rom. 10:4).

Similarly, the book’s presentation about Forde suffers from inattention to all of Forde’s pertinent texts. To be sure, Murray cites from Forde’s important contribution to the Braaten and Jenson dogmatics text; however, he ignores Forde’s explanations of the Ten Commandments in the text Forde co-wrote with James Nestingen, *Free to Be* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975), and Murray’s book overlooks Forde’s important essays on quotas, antinomianism, and sexual ethics that appeared in the main Lutheran theological journals from the late 70s through the mid-90s. Attention to these would reveal that Forde is not the existentialist that the book presents him to be. For Forde, outside of faith the law is accusing, yet Forde does not deny the first use by which God orders and preserves a sustainable life in God’s creation, as an existentialist probably would deny.

Part of the problem in Murray’s book is its definition of “the law.” For Murray, the law is “an objective and eternally valid moral Law of God” (44, 53, et passim; my emphasis). Is this Paul’s view? Does Luther’s 1535 Commentary on Galatians sustain this definition of the law? Or do the Lutheran Confessions, which stress the relational, existential, accusatory, and eschatological character and function of the law? Is the law ever an independent, objective, informatory guide which does not also simultaneously accuse? And how can the law be eternal if it has its creaturely origin in creation and its eschatological telos in Christ? How, if not eschatologically, does Murray understand Paul’s statement that the law has its end in Christ (Rom. 10:4; Gal. 3:23-26)? (Murray maintains that the “Gospel without the Law leads to moral laxity and the Law

without the Gospel leads to despair" [13], but the law without the gospel also leads to pride/security, something the book minimizes.) Murray's book is especially critical of the theological hermeneutics of individuals who taught theology in the LCMS between 1950 and 1975. "Schroeder and the other [Valparaiso theologians] were not correct in arguing that Law and Gospel was a biblical hermeneutic in traditional Lutheran exegetical practice" (114). Later one reads, "[Walter] Bouman is correct in pointing out that the Bible may not provide a handbook-like program for the Christian life. However, Law and Gospel functions to shape Lutheran theology, not Lutheranism's approach to the Bible. The Bible norms Law and Gospel, not the opposite..." (182-183).

But is this hermeneutical perspective consistent with Apology IV, 1-8? "All Scripture should be divided into these two main topics: the law and the promises..." Melanchthon clearly states, "For one has to distinguish the promises from the law in order to recognize the benefits of Christ" (Apol. IV 184)... "For the law and the promises need to be "÷rightly distinguished" [2 Tim. 2:15] with care. We must see what Scripture attributes to the law and what it attributes to the promises. For it praises and teaches good works in such a way as not to abolish the free promise and not to eliminate Christ" (Apol. IV 188). The Apology is critical of those who read the Scriptures "with an opinion of the law" and not "an opinion of the gospel" (cf. Apol. IV 204ff.). Furthermore, did not Luther make judgments about the content of biblical books on the basis of the proper distinction between law and gospel? (See WA 7.385.25ff; WA 39/1.47.3ff; WA 40/1.420.) Luther's judgments about the antilegomena texts of the Bible are well-known, as in his "prefaces" to the NT writings that he translated in 1522 (1546). Here, he did not hesitate to joke, "One of these days I'll use Jimmy [Ed: the book of James] to light the fire" (WA

6.10.33). On what basis could Luther write this about a book in Holy Scripture, if not on the distinction between law and gospel?

One also wonders why Murray treats "Law and Gospel" as a singular reality? "...Law and Gospel was..." "...Law and Gospel functions..." Are not the law and the gospel two contrasting words of God that require one to make proper distinctions? Such a seemingly minor point reveals that for Murray the law may not be all that distinct from the gospel and perhaps the two form a fundamental unity. But this is not Walther's view, based as it was on Luther's, based as it was on Paul's.

Likewise, one wonders why Murray restricts "the Gospel shape of the Christian life" to "the motivation for good works" (72). "In ethics a concrete word of God in both Law and Gospel must direct action" "the Gospel to motivate, the Law to inform" (60). But surely the gospel word of promise does more than simply "motivate" Christians in their behavior. "...Where there is forgiveness of sin, there are also life and salvation" (SC, "Sacrament of the Altar," 5-6). "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new" (2 Cor. 5:17). Murray says very little about the eschatological newness that the gospel creates for the person of faith. In faith Christ is the telos and finis of the law, but only in faith. In faith Jesus' disciples are called and empowered for a higher righteousness, the life of the kingdom. The gospel does indeed give the Christian life a cruciform shape, against which there is no law.

A main problem with Murray's approach to the law is the apparent fact that some of the works that get commended under "the law" are really no longer good and commendable. What often gets commended under "third use" are matters that fall properly into the category of human traditions, customs, and practices.

These matters are then commended as necessary or even necessary for salvation. What gets commended and the way in which such matters are commended seem to lose the promise of the gospel.

If “the law” is to inform the Christian about “the rules God wants Christians to follow,” then why does Augsburg Confession Article XXVIII set aside the written apostolic commands to avoid eating blood and food that comes from strangled animals and the apostolic command to make sure that women have an “exousia” on their heads? For that matter, why did Jesus in the noncanonical pericope of John 7:53ff not enforce/keep the written law of God when he forgave the woman who was caught in adultery? The divine, written law clearly states such women are to be killed. Why does not Jesus follow the written Word of God at this point? Or why does Jesus in Mark 7 (according to Mark’s own editorial comment) declare all foods clean that the written law clearly states are unclean? Or why does Jesus break the written law (=making himself unclean) by talking with a Samaritan woman (cf. Lev. 15:19ff)? Or by eating with sinners? Or touching lepers? Or loving Gentile enemies? On these occasions, Jesus hardly “kept” or “fulfilled” what the Jews understood to be the divinely-given, clearly-stated law of God.

Was Paul being obedient to the written law of God when he set aside for Gentiles Commandment 3 (=Commandment 4 in some lists) of the Decalogue, not to mention the divine law of circumcision? On what basis can Paul argue as he does in Gal. 3:25-26? Romans 4:14-15? On what basis was the writer of Ephesians able to assert what is stated in Eph. 2:15-16? [The Greek term here, “katargew,” according to BDAG, means “to invalidate, to make powerless, to cause something to come to an end or to be no longer in existence, abolish, wipe out, set aside,” Bauer, Danker, et al., A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, 3rd ed. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], 525.]

One can imagine how the Christian “Judaizers” could have asserted a “third use” of the law for Gentile Christians! They certainly would have appealed to Matt. 5:17-20 and they would have argued that the divinely-given written law corresponds to God’s eternal will for human beings, that is, “necessary” to be pleasing to God. But Jesus, in Mark and John and Luke, breaks the law of Moses! Paul says Christ is the end of the law for faith. AC XXVIII sets aside even certain apostolic prohibitions and commandments. In his 1535 Commentary on Galatians, Luther opposes the law with a crucified Christ and faith. Contemporary Christians, even conservative ones, no longer understand and apply the New Testament’s ethical exhortations to slaves and masters in the same way that eighteenth-century American Christians almost uniformly did.

A problem in our day is that some have set up their own legal construct of what constitutes “the eternal, unchanging order, according to which all human beings are obliged and bound to obey God,” and just like the Judaizers in Paul’s and Luther’s days, these have some scriptural support for their construct. The construct is, however, a legal, coercive construct and not a properly grounded, promisory, evangelical construct. A problem with the so-called “third use” of the law is that just about everything can be defended by it. One need only hold out something to be God-willed and God-created for it to be vindicated forever.

It is truly astounding that Murray’s book contends that doctrinal forms are forms of “the law.” He speaks of “doctrinal norms” as “legal norms” (114), as he does, for example, of the 1973 LCMS document, “A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles” (111, 133). Elsewhere in the book one reads, “[Making judgments of doctrine] remains a task of the Law” (110). “If there is no third use of the Law with standards for Christian faith and practice, there could be no scrutiny of

doctrine within the church or of the church practice that emanates from doctrine" (113). "Doctrinal and moral anarchy is the natural outcome of [the rejection of the third use of the Law]" (142). "[Yeago] has also shown that where the third use is taken seriously, there is a greater chance that the formation of doctrine will also be taken seriously. Where there is order, there will be both doctrinal and moral order" (182).

But one must wonder, is there not here a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of Christian doctrine? Does doctrine properly belong under the category of "law?" If so, such a "legal" understanding of doctrine seems far removed from the non-coercive understanding of doctrine contained in the Augsburg Confession and its Apology. If doctrine is understood "legally," then according to Murray's own acknowledgement, doctrine is always coercive and accusatory and not the free confession of faith in response to God's gracious word of promise. Needless to say, the book's presentation of the nature of doctrine is quite different from that contained in Walther's first presidential address.

There are other elements in Murray's book that troubled this reviewer: Is it really accurate to speak of "the hegemony of Oliver Harms" or "the walkout" (101-102)? These are loaded, propagandistic expressions that do not properly belong in a book supposedly devoted to historical description. Those influenced by Elert (e.g., Schroeder) do not understand "doctrinal orthodoxy" to be "a positive evil to be avoided at almost any cost" (112). The book informs the reader, "In the discussion of the third use of the Law there has been a rapprochement between younger theologians of the ELCA and their LCMS counterparts" (167). Really? Who? When? Where? Murray's assertion is a sweeping generalization, based on essentially one example (ELCA theologian Yeago), and as such it does not account for younger LCMS and ELCA theologians (such as Mark

Mattes and myself) who disagree with Murray's analysis. And why does Murray go after the sexual libertinism of the so-called "political left" in the ELCA without giving any attention to the economic legalism (e.g., liberation theology) of that same political left, nor any attention to the sexual/family legalism and economic libertinism (e.g., Reaganism) of the political right in the LCMS? Lutherans ought to oppose greed and lust and libertinism and legalism of every type.

The real problem with most discussions about "third use" is that the "third use" is given an equal and separate existence, and its function becomes as important as the first two "uses." In the process both the truly threatening and damning divine law and the saving and comforting divine promise in Christ are lost. The genius of the Lutheran Confessions is that, on the one hand, they relieve the law (in the law-gospel dialectic) from the notion that the law is an independent, objective moral code, and thus subordinate it to the first two uses, and that, on the other hand, they maintain (under the words of the living God) the law's accusatory function against the person who is *simul justus et peccator*. The law of the living God is something far more threatening, far more uncontrollable, far more existential and experiential than Murray's book acknowledges. In view of that word of God, only the gospel promise of a crucified and risen Christ, received in faith, will do.

To be sure, the issues of moral relativism in America and the need for moral clarity about difficult issues like homosexuality, bioethics, international conflict, and so on, ought to be of great concern to Christians. Murray is right to be concerned and one must acknowledge that his book does at least return the reader to a perennial, important issue for Christians: how does one commend good works without losing the gospel promise? Indeed, a problem in the Christian Church today

is that many believers justify all manner of sin as allowable within their “freedom in Christ” and their living by means of the Holy Spirit. I suspect that Murray’s concerns about sexual ethics are shared by many Lutheran Christians.

Nonetheless, as Elert and Forde have argued so well, the answer to libertinism and antinomianism is not to argue for a “third use” of the law in the life of the Christian.

The proper response to libertinism is to preach the law (allowing God to use it how he will) in such a way that the gospel promise trumps that word of law (to use Bertram’s metaphor) and creates and sustains faith that alone makes a life acceptable to God. In this way, too, the Christian life that lives by faith in the promise is properly and evangelically described, as several Lutheran theologians have done in a superior manner (e.g., Elert, Thielicke, Benne, Forde and Nestingen, Bonhoeffer).

While many will agree with Murray that the Lutheran heritage has much to contribute to discussions about the complex ethical and moral matters of today, one must ask if Murray’s understanding of “the third use of the law” and the narrow focus about the debate about “third use” in American Lutheranism, an otherwise valid focus for historical theology, are the rubrics under which to bring together the truly urgent and challenging task of addressing the moral and ethical issues of our day from the distinctive law-gospel perspective. Is there not a better way?

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Third Use of the Law and “Valparaiso Theology” – A Book Review (Part I)

Colleagues,

November 6, 1930 was the day I was born. So I'm 73 today—well beyond the Biblical 3-score-and-10. And this past year's deaths of oh-so-many dear co-confessors—Bob Bertram, Curt Huber, Tim Lull, Marcie Childs, Jim MacCormick, Dick Jungkuntz, Walt Rast, Andy Weyermann—has been a memento-mori drumbeat for me. So for one more year, one more day—Thank you, Jesus! Couple days ago I got an early birthday present that gives me a day off from confecting today's Thursday posting. In fact, two Thursdays off. Since it's so long—and so good—I'm passing on to you only half of this gift today. Second half, d.v., you get next week.

Matthew Becker is my benefactor. His gift is a probing review of a book that seems to be getting good reviews these days. But it shouldn't. Not just because it names me as a villain (not true, of course!), but for a whole raft of other more solid and objective reasons. I think Matt's got it clearly in focus. So read on. But I need to alert you: this is heavy stuff. Yet it's heady stuff. And for some of you too, it's about us.

Matthew Becker is a 41-year old theology prof at the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod's Concordia University in Portland, Oregon. Matt came “up through the system” for his education, as we Missouri “goldie oldies” say. He stepped outside that system for his doctorate at the University of Chicago. His Ph.D.

dissertation, "The Self-giving God: Trinitarian Historicality and Kenosis in the Theology of Johann von Hofmann (1810-1877)," is scheduled for publication by T&T Clark next year. [FYI: Von Hoffman was one of the grand masters of the Erlangen School of the Lutheran confessional-biblical renaissance in the 19th century.]

Besides his professorial chores Matt is active in LCMS church life—secretary of the synod's Northwest District and co-editor of a book that analyzes the history of the LCMS in the Northwest. He is also into internet-theology as co-founder of "Daystar," an email listserv of approximately 700 LCMS and ELCA clergy and laity. He and his wife, Detra, have a four-year-old son, Jacob.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

A Book Review by Matthew Becker

***Law, Life, and the Living God:
The Third Use of the Law in Modern American
Lutheranism.***

By Scott R. Murray.

***St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002. 250
pages.***

This book began as a dissertation at New Orleans Baptist Seminary. The author, Scott R. Murray, is a 1983 graduate of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne. He is currently an LCMS pastor in Houston.

The genesis of the work was sparked by Murray's attempt "to rationalize for a primarily Southern Baptist audience the uniquely Lutheran ethic of Law and Gospel" (11). Murray also states that a second motivating factor was the draft statements on human sexuality that emerged from the ELCA in the 1990s. According to Murray, the main problem with these statements is their authors' rejection of "the third use of the Law." Murray maintains throughout his book that "[t]he rejection of the third use of the Law leads to antinomianism, which is detrimental to the church and her Gospel message" (15). Put slightly differently, "If there are no rules, how can the Christian know what does please God" (72)?

In Murray's lexicon, the so-called "first use" of the law is "for unbelievers for whom threats of punishment can coerce only to outward obedience" (13). The "second use" is "the distinctively theological use of the Law that lays bare human wickedness and makes clear the need for a Savior" (13-14). The "third use" "gives direction for the impulses of the Christian to do good works" (14) or, as he states later, "The third use is the description of how the Law functions under the Gospel" (56). This third use is "the use of the Law that applies to Christians after conversion" (13). Throughout his text Murray defines the "Law" as God's "objective and eternally valid legal code" (44 et passim).

How have Lutheran theologians in America understood the use of the law in the life of the Christian? Murray attempts to answer this question by dividing his analysis into three main sections which examine how American Lutheran theologians have understood the "third use of the law" in 1940-1960, 1961-1976, and 1977-1998.

For Murray the problem with American Lutheran theology after 1940 was its general rejection of the so-called "third use of

the Law.” In Murray’s judgment the sustained critique of the “third use,” for the sake of the Gospel and against all forms of “legalism,” has only led to the present quagmire about ethical norms (particularly sexual norms) in the life of the ELCA.

Even though the subtitle of Murray’s book claims to be about “modern American Lutheranism,” the book focuses primarily upon theologians affiliated with the LCMS after 1945. Murray argues that LCMS theologians lost their theological-ethical bearings after the 1948-49 Bad Boll Conference, when they came into positive contact with Lutheran theologians in Germany, such as Werner Elert, Helmut Thielicke, and others, many of whom were critical of a “third use” of the law. Murray is especially critical of theologians who taught at Valparaiso University and Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, between 1948 and the mid-1970s. The theologians he holds in high regard are those LCMS theologians who upheld a “third use of the law,” over against “the Valparaiso theologians” and the Seminex systematicians, and who defended what he calls “old Missouri” doctrine. This perspective shapes Murray’s entire presentation. Thus, unfortunately, Murray’s perspective determines the selection of evidence to support what more and more appears to be a thesis-driven form of argumentation. Careful consideration of a theologian’s total context, including, for example, analysis of the place and discussion of “law” in a theologian’s entire oeuvre, is missing.

Despite his intention, Murray’s study does not provide a good historical understanding of the development of the discussions about the so-called third use of the law within twentieth-century American Lutheran theology. One wishes that Murray would have followed an orderly pattern similar to that found in Jaroslav Pelikan’s history of Lutheran doctrine (From Luther to Kierkegaard [St. Louis: CPH, 1950]), a book Murray criticizes.

There is no sustained historical analysis that builds from one chapter to the next. Instead, we get Murray's all-too-brief analyses, followed by even briefer conclusions, followed by additional all-too-brief analyses of individuals he had treated earlier. For example, in his section on 1940-1960, Murray moves from Karl Holl to Luther to Elert to Wilhelm Pauck to Richard Caemmerer to Aristotle to Melanchthon to Pelikan to Kierkegaard to Forell to Elert (again) to Lazareth to Francis Pieper to the old Erlangen theologians to the Bad Boll Conferences to F. E. Mayer. Along the way Murray makes brief, sweeping generalizations about "the Valparaiso theologians" (David Scaer's label), the "old Missourians" (as found in The Abiding Word volumes), and a few theologians in other American Lutheran churches. In the same section he moves from "third use of the Law," to "legalism" to "Aristotelianism" to "Reason and Law" to "Existentialism" to "natural Law" to "Formula of Concord" and then back to "third use of the Law." In short, Murray's presentation lacks coherence.

In the next section, 1961-1976, Murray describes the flowering of the so-called "Valparaiso theology" and its impact on theological study at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Here Murray returns his reader (and in this sequence) to "the Valparaiso Theologians," Elert, the Erlangen School, Melanchthon, Calvin, Elert (again), the Formula of Concord, Edward Schroeder, Walter Bartling, and then on to new paragraphs about John W. Montgomery, Paul Althaus, then the Missouri conflicts after 1969, back to Lazareth, back to Elert, and then on to William Hordern and Gerhard Forde, but then back to Missouri again in the figures of the Preus brothers, Henry Eggold, Scaer, Montgomery (again), and Kurt Marquart. Along the way Montgomery's label, "Gospel Reductionism," gets some attention, but Murray makes no reference to, let alone analysis of, Robert Bertram's important and influential essays, and Murray then

repeats conclusions he has attempted to draw in the previous section. In the welter of mini statements, historical coherence is further lost.

In the third section, 1977-1998, the book presents additional critiques of theologians who were critical of a "third use." This section outlines the emergence of a straightforward "third use of the Law" as a special function in post-Seminex LCMS theologians and a few ELCA thinkers. After treating ground already covered (Lazareth and Forde), the chapter moves on to new figures, Walter Wagner, David Yeago, Walter Bouman, Ted Jungkuntz, Eugene Klug, but then back to Scaer for the final word.

The brief conclusion of the book merely reiterates the thesis, namely, that the woes of American Lutheran theology are to be largely attributed to all the theologians the book treats, save for the "old Missourians," Scaer, Marquart, Yeago, and one or two other "younger theologians in the ELCA."

Would not Murray's study have provided greater historical insight into the issue of "third use" had he started with an analysis of the historical and normative sources and then moved to analyze his main object of criticism, namely, the critique of the "third use" by such theologians as Elert, Althaus, and those influenced by these Erlangen theologians? Thus Murray could have moved from Luther to Melanchthon (perhaps using Ebeling's essay on "third use" as conversation partner), then to the historical antecedents of FC VI and to FC VI itself [Ed's info note: Formula of Concord Art. 6, from the year 1577, titled "The Third Use of the Law," is the classic Lutheran statement on the issue. It sought to adjudicate the debate among Lutherans on this topic after Luther's death 31 years earlier. Thus Murray's critique of "Valparaiso Theology" is a contemporary debate about "just what FC VI really says."]

(perhaps conversing with Elert, Ebeling, and others' studies of the historical and theological problems of FC VI), then to nineteenth-century conflicts (analyzing von Hofmann's criticism of *lex aeterna* and his appeal to Luther, which started the modern study of Luther, and then to T. Harnack's rebuttal), and finally to twentieth-century developments (first in Germany, for example, Holl, Elert, Althaus, and the debates with Barth, then to Scandinavian thinkers [totally ignored by Murray's book], and then to America). This last section on American developments could be analyzed by devoting attention to individual positions in rough chronological order and showing their dependence on German and Scandinavian scholars. Had the book been organized according to the above outline, it would have complemented Forde's important historical analysis of the debate within twentieth-century Lutheranism about the place of the law in the life of the Christian, *The Law-Gospel Debate* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1969).

As it is, Murray's study neglects several key thinkers and their influence upon American Lutheran understandings of the law. For example, though cited in the bibliography, Gerhard Ebeling's important essay, "On the Doctrine of the Triplex Usus Legis in the Theology of the Reformation," in *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), receives no attention. The Scandinavian theologians are likewise conspicuously absent from the discussion. Similarly strange is Murray's relegation of Bertram to an endnote (46), especially since many consider Bertram to have been the deepest and most influential thinker among the VU theologians on issues of "law and gospel." I suspect that Ed Schroeder, Robert Schultz, and David Truemper would agree. Some theologians get a paragraph or two, such as Marty and Schultz, but that is about it. (Marty's little gem, *Being Good and Doing Good* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984], is absent.) Other theologians who receive little or no attention

from Murray include Frederick Knubel, Charles Jacobs, the Wauwatosans, J. Michael Reu, Warren Quanbeck, Joseph Sittler, George Lindbeck, Robert Jenson, Carl Braaten, Robert Benne, Gil Meilaender. (Murray does treat a few people who were otherwise unknown to this reviewer.)

Unfortunately, Murray's study also does not provide a good theological understanding of the discussion about "third use" of the law in twentieth-century American Lutheranism. One is struck, for example, by the book's lack of attention to the specific biblical and confessional texts utilized by the theologians Murray criticizes. These theologians based their doctrinal conclusions on careful examination of biblical and confessional texts, yet the book provides few clues as to which texts the theologians used as foundations for their respective positions.

The book's analysis of Elert's theology is especially disappointing. Following Scaer, the book concludes that Elert is an antinomian because he rejects a so-called "third use" of the law. On the other hand, again following Scaer's assessment of Elert and the Erlangen tradition as a whole, Murray labels Elert a "Lutheran-Barthian" (68). Murray then repeats Scaer's judgment that Elert and those influenced by him (Bertram, Schultz, Schroeder) essentially turned the gospel into law, since "the Gospel becomes the ethical regulating principle in the life of the Christian" (138).

Since Elert appears to be a primary target of the book's critique, one would think a careful, sustained analysis of "the law" in his main works would be in order; however, one will look in vain for such analysis in Murray's book. The author has instead relied on one little chapter by Elert and the judgment of another (Scaer).

Murray's citations from Elert thus come primarily from a translation of the seventh and last section of Elert's work, *Zwischen Gnade und Ungnade* (Munich: Evangelischer Presseverband für Bayern, 1948). This section was translated by Schroeder as *Law and Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967). On the basis of his reading of this booklet, Murray accuses Elert of "[setting] up a false alternative: Either the Law accuses or it is only didactic" (29). But this accusation itself creates a false alternative in Elert's theology: For Elert the law does inform, but it does so under or within the two "uses."

The first six sections of *Zwischen Gnade und Ungnade*, not to mention the pertinent sections on "law" in his main works listed above, clearly indicate that Elert is not an antinomian. On the other hand, he certainly is not a "Lutheran-Barthian"! Rather, Elert was a careful biblical theologian who appealed to such texts as 2 Cor. 3; Gal. 2:16; 3:5, 10, 13-19, 23-26; Rom. 3:20, 25; 4:15, 25; 5:16, 18-22; 6:14; 7:7ff.; 8:1-14; 10:4; 2 Thess. 1:8; 1 Tim. 1:9; 2 Tim. 1:7-10; 1 Jn. 2:2, 4:10; Heb. 9:28; and so on. An examination of Elert's entire oeuvre discloses Elert's profound understanding of the impact of God's law on the life of the Christian. For Elert, the Christian life is a life lived under two realities, the law ("ethos under the law") and the gospel ("ethos under the gospel"). It is not a question of one or the other; the Christian lives under both before God. Even in the booklet, *Law and Gospel*, one finds the following:

If the notion of a 'third use of the law' is understood in purely informatory terms, then we shall have to agree with the Scandinavian and Finnish theologians who have pronounced the doctrine of a third use incompatible with the Lutheran understanding of law and gospel. If we still wish to continue to use the concept in theology, it must be applied as it is in the Formula of Concord only for answering the question of the

realm of the law's validity, but not for indicating a special function of the law. The third use of the law then designates its significance for the regenerate in his earthly empirical existence, but not in some imagined earthly perfection which does not exist. In the earthly empirical life of the regenerate the law constantly exercises also the usus theologicus. It steadfastly convicts him of his sin (Elert, Law and Gospel, 42-43, emphasis original).

Elert thus did not “flatly [deny] that the concept of the third use of the law should be retained in Lutheran theology” (27), Murray’s contention to the contrary. Elert’s concern, it must be understood, was the influence of Calvin and Barth on Protestant understandings and articulations of the law that led in the direction of legalism. At the end of the day, Elert could live with FC VI, properly understood.

To be continued next Thursday.

Proposal: When Jesus says: “That they may all be one,” he’s NOT talking about ecumenism.

Colleagues,

Here’s what prompted the heretical claim in the proposal above.

It was this throw-away line from a big-name speaker last month at St. Louis University: "Remember, Jesus spoke Aramaic." [His point was that the Greek New Testament, our closest contact to Jesus's own words, is a translation. Jesus spoke Aramaic, the "pigeon"-Hebrew in the culture of his day.]

The event was an ecumenical workshop. We'd recited the ecumenical mantra many times: "That they may all be one," Jesus' mandate to us to get on with ecumenism and to do better, much better, than we've been doing. Though it's supposed to be Good News, it comes as accusation, an occasion for self-flagellation. And the oneness never happens.

And then it hit me. Jesus spoke Aramaic. So the word he used for "one" when he said ""That they may all be one" was "echad." When Jewish folks—then and now—hear "echad," they pole-vault back to the great Hebrew declaration of faith in Deuteronomy 5: 4-5. They call it "The Shema." Shema is the first Hebrew word in the confession, an imperative. "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one [echad]. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

So what does "echad" mean in the original Shema? I'd recently read an essay on that very question. Its title: ON THE MOST IMPORTANT WORD IN THE SHEMA (DEUTERONOMY VI 4-5) by J. Gerald Janzen, O.T. prof at the Christian Theological Seminary (Disciples of Christ) in Indianapolis, Indiana. It was published in the numero uno journal of O.T. studies, with the Latin name *Vetus Testamentum*. Vol. 37, no 3 (July 1987), p. 280-300.

The upshot of Janzen's comprehensive probing is that "echad" in the Shema is not about numbers at all. It's not arithmetic. It is NOT saying that there is only "one" God, Israel's God, "Yahweh" by name [regularly rendered in English translation as

the LORD (all-caps)], and there are no others. Even though such one-god-only monotheism is basic in O.T. theology, that is not what the Shema is proclaiming. It is not a confession against polytheism.

Instead the Shema is saying that Yahweh is single-hearted, single-minded. Echad means integrity, not duplicity. No double-speak from this deity. No double-talk, double-dealing. No double cross. No talking out of both sides of his mouth. No forked tongue. A straight-shooter, who sticks to what he says. Keeps his word. Keeps his promises. And THEREFORE trustworthy. So since Yahweh is trustworthy, therefore “you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”

In Janzen words: “The upshot of my analysis [is] that the claim upon Israel to love Yahweh its God with all its heart and soul and strength follows upon an affirmation to Israel that Yahweh is ‘echad,’ ‘one.’ The purpose of this affirmation is to identify in God the dependable ground upon which an exhortation to wholehearted loyalty may appropriately be made.”

It was this “oneness,” God’s “fidelity to his promises made to the ancestors,” that was challenged—even worse, contradicted—“under the vicissitudes of Israel’s history.” In crisis after crisis (military defeat, apostasy, captivity, famine, even locusts) “the alternatives become worship of other gods, or re-affirmation of Yahweh’s fidelity and integrity.” The Shema of Deut 5 is “one such re-affirmation . . . ‘Yahweh [is] echad’” and will not “forget [his] divine oath and promise.”

Janzen makes a compelling case. He’s got me convinced. And if that is the center of God’s oneness in the Shema, what is it in John 17?

First of all let’s recite the Johannine text and put

“faithfulness” in where the Greek says “one.” Starting at v. 11: “Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be FAITHFUL, as we are FAITHFUL (v.20) I ask . . . that they may all be FAITHFUL. As you, Father are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be FAITHFUL, as we are FAITHFUL. I in them and you in me, that they may become completely [Greek: “all the way to the end”] FAITHFUL, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

The anticipated consequence (twice repeated) of the disciples “being faithful” is that the “world may BELIEVE . . . that the world may KNOW” what God is up to in Jesus.

If the “one” in John 17 should mean ecumenical unity, that they all hang together and don’t squabble and separate, that’s not insignificant. Jesus does not recommend squabbling. But why would non-squabbling urge anyone to believe that “no one comes to the Father, but by me?” Or “whoever believes the Son has eternal life?” Or “I am the way, the truth and the life.” Or Jesus’ response to Pilate “everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice?” The fundamental scandal about Jesus is Jesus—whether his disciples are squabbling or are at peace with each other.

John’s Jesus does hustle a sort of ecumenism, but it’s not really the sort we’ve come to associate with the term.. Example: John 10. The Good Shepherd has other sheep that are not of this fold. Jesus “leads” them too, but the point is not that he leads them back into one big sheepfold. It seems that they could stay where they are and still be “one” in this shepherd’s sheepfold. Oneness means that those sheep too be “faithful” as the “one” shepherd is “faithful” to them. The fundamental game is like

ping-pong between shepherd and sheep. The common denominator of the sheep, a.k.a. their unity, is that they pong in response to the Shepherd's ping. This is the ping-pong of oneness in Jesus' Aramaic echad.

The fundamental danger—for Israel in the OT and for Jesus's followers in John's Gospel—is for the folks to run away from the ping-pong table. To desert Yahweh (back then) and THE Good Shepherd (now), to stop trusting the promissory voice of both Father and Son. The oneness—one thing needful for faithfulness—is to “keep hearing my voice and following (trusting) me.” The flock “scatters,” not when they get denominational brand names, but when they get out of earshot of the One (=faithful) Shepherd. No longer even hearing the ping, they cannot possibly pong.

Ecumenical unity under some world-wide umbrella is not what Jesus prays for in John 17. The nemeses to the faith are not differences in horizontal relations among his disciples. They are fractures in the (call it vertical?) God-trusting, Shepherd-listening department.

How does this impact the “world believing, the world knowing what God is offering in Jesus”? Can it be so simple as this? Faithful following of Jesus is what presents to the world the same Good Shepherd that he himself offered in that first generation, and that his sub-shepherds offer in subsequent generations, that someone somewhere offered—and keeps on offering—to us.

Were all Christians in the world to be “nice” to each other—granted that's a super-minimal ecumenism—that would hardly have the clout to convince the world in its hard unbelief to trust the Good Shepherd, would it? What made him hard to believe then persists now as well. For John the offense is articulated

by Thomas right after Easter: "How could a crucified Messiah be anybody's God and Lord?" If he can't save himself, how can he save others? And even if "they say" that he's alive again, even if I grant that, how is that Good News for me? Hurray for Jesus, he made it! Where's any spinoff from that for me? So it took a second visit. Jesus swapping his death-marks with Thomas—"touch here, touch there—for I did it all for you. Death-marks conquered. It's for you. Your death-marks conquered too." It doesn't always work that way, but in Thomas' case it did "You are my Lord and my God."

The world does not come to "believe, to know" in any other way than that "they believe on Jesus through the disciples' word." That means "faithful" reportage of God's faithfulness in Christ. Call it Gospel both in its indicative mood and imperative mood. "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself. Therefore be reconciled to God.". Put into the language of echad: God is faithful. You be faith-full.

That's not far from the one line on church unity in the Augsburg Confession. "For the true unity of the church it is enough that the Gospel be preached purely [=unencumbered by legalist add-ons] and the sacraments administered in congruence to this Gospel." That's what unites [one-ifies] folks to Christ, and hooked to him, they are ipso facto one-ified to each other. No add-ons needed.

Church unity is finally all about faith—on both sides of the ping-pong table. And I don't say this merely because tomorrow is Reformation Day. It's ping-pong faith. nThe ping is the singular faithfulness of God and the Son at "one" with their promises. The pong is the faith of Christ-trusters, at "one" with that promissory offer.

When the disciples are themselves echad (=faithful), then the

world will know that Jesus is echad just as the Father is echad. Better, not “just as” the Father is echad, but that Jesus IS the Father being faithful. The courtroom drama in John’s entire Gospel is focused here: IS Jesus the ONENESS of Yahweh, (God keeping his promise) down here on the ground, or is he not? The only way the world will know what the verdict was in that trial—after Jesus goes to the Father—is the faithful witness of his disciples to Jesus’ reliability. As they (stealing from the Shema) “love THIS Lord their God with all their heart, soul and might? and let the world know what they are doing and why.

Isn’t that John’s proposal for ecumenism? Is there any better one?

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

The God Question

Colleagues,

One of my Schroeder nephews, an M.D., has an associate who asks theological questions. Recently he sent me the last batch of such questions. He wasn’t actually asking for help, he said, but wondered what Uncle Ed might say. Here are the questions (the numbered paragraphs), and here’s what I said. Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

The God question

1. Does he physically exist?—Is he actually made up of matter, of cells, molecules or atoms? Is it possible to see, hear, touch, taste or smell him?

In the Biblical tradition the word “God” is the term for “Power” folks perceive to be impacting their lives. No wonder the ancients called the sun a god, sex too, war too, etc. They are powers people experienced. Powers are mysterious. Always were, still are. Some powers cause marvel, others terror, some both: Atomic internal combustion within the sun, a sprouting plant, rushing water, sex “drives,” SARS, AIDS, carcinoma, death. Opening words in the Book of Genesis set the pattern. “In the beginning . . . God created heaven and earth. Here’s how it went: God as RUACH [Hebrew for “wind” (also Spirit, Ghost, GUST = Power) was blowing over the chaos....” Today we say Big Bang. In both cases that’s Power. Is Big Bang (or inflation, or strings) any less mysterious? Hardly. Mysterious power created the universe.

2. Is he alive, a living being? – Does he have biological processes? Genes? Chromosomes? Can he die?

Biblical tradition: THE true God is the Power behind the powers that we know impact us. Liturgical form of that is “King of (other) kings, Lord of (other) lords.” OT term “Yahweh” (the personal name for that power in Hebrew scriptures) = “whoever it was, whose ever power it was, that got us out of Egypt.” NT variation on that is: “Whoever it was that overcame the POWER of death and brought Jesus back from the grave.” Does Power have being? I guess so. Is power “a” being? Some are, some

aren't. Biological? Some are. God is not "confined" to that form of being in Christian theology. For the Greeks the gods were by definition im-mortal. Not so in Christian theology—at least for the second person of the Trinity. But that mortality on his part was not intrinsic in the Son's god-ness. He assumed human form, we say, and thus assumed mortality as well. But the "biggie" in all this is not divine physics or biology, but that it was done "for us and for our salvation."

3. Is he a sentient being? Can he see, hear, feel, taste, or smell? If so, does he have eyes, ears, nose, etc?

Biblical imagery often used "person" language for "God-as-power," so such metaphors abound, analogous to the qualities of human persons mentioned in the question. Helpful for dealing with that, ala Paul Ricoeur, is the "second naivete." Not "first" naivete where God "really" has fingers, but a second naivete using metaphors for speaking of mystery. God a person? Yes and no. Most likely not in the manner humans perceive themselves as persons (by which we usually mean personalities). But if "person" indicates someone capable of generating initiatives, addressing others, making claims on others, interacting with others, and capable of responding and receiving responses and processing them, then person categories "fit" the power Christians call God. Even with other powers, it does seem now and again that the powers we experience are "somebody" addressing us. Like death, for instance. Why me? we ask.

4. He is always referred to as "he." Is he male, does he have a penis or a y chromosome?

Powers as we experience them (usually) don't have gender.

Electricity, atomic explosions, biological pressures within us, etc. But in image language they may. Yet in different cultures they differ. The sun is masculine in Greek, feminine in German. Biblical metaphors for God come in both masculine and feminine formats. Image-ing a personal address coming from a power who is genderless is difficult for lots of folks. So gender as metaphor, yes, but not constitutive.

5. He is referred to as intelligent—does he have a brain?

Your reference to “he” as though there is only ONE god (power) encountering us in our lives is misleading. Gods (=powers plural) abound. That’s why the Hindus can claim that there are millions of them. So it depends on which of these “powers” you’re talking about. Zeus, Aphrodite, Baal, Yahweh, the one Jesus addresses as “Abba.” Their name is legion. Question: is there a “GOD of gods, a LORD of lords, a KING of kings?” The Biblical religions—Christianity and Judaism—and even Islam—say Yes. Other religions say No. You have to choose. Brain? Probably not the sort of grey-matter in humans. But if “intelligence” is needed for being an active agent, then yes. Might be be a totally wireless super computer—but with a twist! Possible new element in today’s discussion about God is “information.” Not just “what information might God possibly know?” But what information does he have on us?

6. Is he out there some where? Where?

Power is present wherever it operates. Some sense it in more “places” than other folks do. Ditto for all the power(s) called god(s). Ditto for the GOD of all the other gods. First OT image—in the Genesis creation stories—is that God is distinct from his creation—creator

not creature—but that God is present within his creation. God “walks in Adam and Eve’s garden at the time of the evening breeze.”

7. He is said to “exist”—So, if he does not physically exist, HOW does he exist?— as an abstract concept? How do you define existence? Does an abstract concept exist?

Powers exist both as experienced realities and as abstract terms that we can talk about—as I am doing here. Ditto for atomic energy. Whether abstract concepts exist is the old scholastic debate between the nominalists and the realists. The latter said they “really” did exist, the former said only the names (nomina) existed. That’s a bigger conversation than I can enter here.

8. How can an abstract concept perform miracles or have knowledge or morals or power?

Right. So the power Christians designate as God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) is something else than abstract.

9. Or, if he is neither a physical being NOR an abstract concept, what exactly is he? A supernatural being that has no physical existence? (in which case how can he be a being if he has no existence—that is a direct contradiction) Does his existence abide by the rules of nature (physics etc) that are true on earth as well as other planets and galaxies, and presumably the whole universe?

I think I’ve addressed that above already. My point is God is a name for POWER. Powers are many. Their name is legion. Conversation needs to specify which one you want to talk about. Christian God-power-talk is about “whoever it was that raised Jesus from the dead.” “Supernatural

beings" is a Greek way of talking about gods. The term SUPER-nature signals their location and their freedom from what are the rules and regulations "down here" in nature. Still these powers are experienced down here on the ground by folks. Though they are "supra," above the natural world, they do now and then "come down" from Olympus to assist/interfere with the affairs of humans.

Not so, the Biblical tradition. Here THE deity is Creator, thus distinct from creation, but constantly linked to it relationally. So God, distinct from creation, is at the same time regularly "walking in the garden" encountering the creatures. Encountering especially the human creatures and "calling" them to respond (and to respons-ibility)—most frequently through the mediation of other humans. So from the git-go in Genesis, humans are "images (=mirrors) of God" in this yin-yang process of divine address and human response.

10. If the answer is beyond the scope of human understanding, or he exists in another dimension that we humans and other earthlings do not experience (a parallel universe type of concept), then that means humans can not see, hear, smell, (etc) him, and therefore cannot describe him or his characteristics or his nature, so why do humans believe he exists? Where did humans get their information about him? Where did the idea of him even come from?

"Revelation" is the fancy word in most all differing religions for getting signals about gods. But in the Christian faith it is not seen as the opening of heaven with info poured down. Initially "revelation" amounts to "naming" the powers we encounter in our lived-experience and interpreting them as they relate to us. Then (esp. in the Christian tradition) linking these powers encountered

in lived-experience to the Power behind all the powers as that Power relates to us. Such experiences are at best a mixed bag. Hard to tell from them if this Power is for us or against us. When that power finally allows death's power—maybe even sends it—to have the last word about us, such revelation is NOT good news. Au contraire the “second revelation,” Jesus as “revelation” of God. Although the “power” paradigm applies here as well, it's different power. He was experienced as a strange power in the lives of his contemporaries—fundamentally the power of mercy and forgiveness, and not the power that paid folks off with their just deserts. He claimed—and they believed him!—to be coming from the same Power who held them all accountable for their shortfalls. Especially their shortfalls in carrying out their “image of God” assignments. As they subsequently told others what had happened to them, the process replicated—and curiously (mysteriously?) continues to be experienced by and through the community that follows him ever since—both in their liturgy and their daily lives. Mystery abounds, but reality too.

11. Is he all knowing, all powerful and all good like some say? If so, why is there pain and suffering and evil in the world?

All-knowing, all-powerful, and other “omni” adjectives are more at home in Greek theology than in Christian God-talk, although they often have been imported from the Greeks into Christian God-rhetoric. Omni-language for God is “at home” in Greek religion where the deities are “super” to us humans, and therefore omni-this and omni-that when compared with us humans who are finite, and not omni at all—limited-this and limited-that. There are two different ways to pose the problem of Evil in the world.

One is the way your question does. Basically, "Where does evil come from?" For which different religions give different answers. Biblical tradition speaks of a "mystery of wickedness" (perceived destructive power with origins unclear) and thus has no specific answer to THIS FORM of the question of evil. But that is not all it says, though the word mystery is important here. Like other "powers" evil too is lived-experience, but seldom fully explicable.

Another way to pose the question: Suppose you approach the "problem of evil" this way: Can evil be overcome, specifically can MY experience of its power(s) be overcome? Then the Christian message has an explicit answer. It's that "second revelation" mentioned above. This second form of the question of evil is usually the question people "really" are asking, when evil becomes existential. Can the evil I am experiencing—inside or outside—be overcome? Are there resources for me to cope with the mystery-of-evil that tyrannizes me? To that the Christian Gospel says a big "Yes." When the Christian answer to that experience of evil "clicks" for such folks, the earlier question: where does it come from? loses significance. Though the origins of evil remain a mystery, though personal struggle with evil continue, its fangs are removed.

12. If he exists, why doesn't he make himself readily apparent and visible to earthlings? Why does he hide?

Depends on where you are looking—and for what. One of the central items of Luther's theology, vexed as he too was by these very questions, is his "Aha!" about the paradox of God-hidden and God-unveiled. If the data you are looking at are stuff of the "first revelation," then the

results are murky. God, though patently in the mix, is indeed "hiding." Specifically hidden in these data is whether God's last word for me is benign. In the second revelation, so claim Christians, God is "perfectly clear." It's all about mercy. It's the Jesus story. But that's another full essay. Very relevant, though, to this discussion.