

Law-Promise Hermeneutics, Lutheranism's Core Charism – for Every Context. Case Study: Mission Theology

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

1. SOLA FIDE, NOT SOLA GRATIA

It appears from the topics given for the major lectures here at Aarhus that “sola gratia” [grace alone] is being proposed as a

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

2. THE HERMENEUTICS UNDERLYING SOLA FIDE

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

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

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

“Before that discovery I had never noticed any difference between the righteousness of the law and the righteousness of the gospel. I always thought that Moses (the law) and Christ (the gospel) were basically the same thing. The only difference, I thought, was that Moses was farther back in history—and not God’s full revelation, while Christ was closer to us in time—and God’s 100% revelation. But I always thought that God’s word from both of them was the same.

“But when I found the distinction [das discrimen fand] that the righteousness of God’s law is one thing, and the righteousness of God’s gospel is something else, that was my breakthrough. [German: Da riss ich herdurch.]”

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

3. THE ‘LARGER’ HERMENEUTIC UNDERLYING ROMAN SCHOLASTICISM

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

Does that notion of grace have Biblical foundations? The Augsburg confessors said no. They also claimed that the notion

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

4. FROM GOD’S TWO WORDS TO GOD’S TWO HANDS

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

5. IN REFORMATION LUTHERANISM LAW-

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

1. I think it was Aristotle who said that the task of any philosophy was [in Greek] "sozein ta phainomena," to "save" the phenomena, the data, that the philosophy pursued. Whether consciously or not, the Augsburg Reformers were saying the same thing about good theology. Best theology was that which "saved" all the word of God and didn't "lose" fundamental elements of it. Over and over again Melanchthon in the Apology criticizes scholastic theology for "wasting" or "not using" or "misusing" basic components of the Word of God. His claim is that the opponents aren't "saving" what good theology ought to save. They are "losing" it. This can be illustrated at three places.

2. First of all THEO-logical-basic "God-data." Lost in the opponents' theology is God's law. One might think that by propounding a "legal" reading of the Scriptures, as Melanchthon claims they do, they really let the law come to its fullness. Not so. By turning the law into a soteriology, they lose the whole dimension of "lex semper accusat." God as critic, judge, accuser of sinners gets lost. And with the loss of the law, the Gospel too finally gets lost. When sola gratia is made a principle in the grace-nature paradigm, grace as Biblically proposed-God's mercy toward sinners-also gets lost. No longer needed is an intervention from God to trump the law's curse. There is no place for God bending-over-backwards to be merciful to sinners. Since God is by definition grace-full, God's radical criticism of sinners is lost, and surely "lost" is something as grim as "the wrath of God." The nature-grace hermeneutics undergirding scholasticism cannot "save" these Biblical data. The AC and esp. its Apology is a tour-de-force proposal for

using the law-promise hermeneutic for precisely that purpose: so that all of the Word and Work of God be saved.

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

6. CASE STUDY: MISSIOLOGY

1. The hermeneutics at work in the official mission theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (and elsewhere in contemporary missiology across the ecumenical spectrum) departs from the law-promise hermeneutic of Augsburg Lutheranism and returns to the nature/grace hermeneutic of classical scholasticism, but now in a 21st century format.

My text for documenting this thesis is the “Vision Statement” of the Division for Global Mission [DGM] of the ELCA entitled GLOBAL MISSION IN THE 21ST CENTURY [GM21] together with discussions at a missiology conference in Chicago [September 2001] with DGM mission executives on this mission statement. I was more than a casual partner in these conversations, for my job was to present a “position paper” on law-promise hermeneutics for Lutheran missiology. Thus I drew flak from the DGM staff.

Here are four comments I received from DGM voices:

A. You parse God's work of law and God's work of gospel under the rubrics of "care for creation (=law) and redemption of creation (=gospel)." To talk about "care" under the rubric of God's law and "redemption" under gospel is not right. "Care" belongs under gospel.

B. Redemption as you present it is an "individualized act, not world-wide." The real nemeses in the world are the evil powers of destruction manifest in the oppressive structures that tyrannize humanity. Your individualized redemption doesn't get to these evil powers in the world. The Gospel of redemption as you present it doesn't transform the world.

C. Your presentation centers on "getting me saved," and not—as mission should—on transforming all creation. God's mission in the world is to transform creation for the sake of life.

D. You stay too narrowly in the second article of the creed. God the creator of life is the central metaphor for mission. Life is God's highest value. God's goal is to transform the world so that we may have "life in its fullness."

The frequent accent (4x in the comments above) on "transforming the world" is at root a nature-grace project. "Individual salvation," "getting people saved" was central to Reformation theology as God's chosen way to "save the world," but it is peripheral to the DGM perspective. And that's why "care of creation" belongs to Gospel in DGM theology, because Gospel is God's good action, care is God's good action, and all of it can be subsumed under God's grace, a grace that transforms creation—or, to use scholastic language, "perfects nature."

2. Greater clarity on the alternatives in the discussion—nature-

grace vs. law-promise- -didn't come until one of the DGM execs walked us through GM21, the vision statement, and another DGM colleague put THE ISSUE into words: "The reign of God is God's mission to the world. It is the transformation of creation for the sake of life. [For Lutherans today the question is:] how do we exploit this understanding without getting bogged down in sorting out the Two Kingdoms notion."

3. For me that was an Aha! My earlier position paper had been arguing for the exact opposite thesis: "Concerning God's Reign in the world—how do we exploit this understanding without getting bogged down BY NOT sorting out the Two Kingdoms notion." God's double operation—law and promise, God's left hand and God's right hand, care and redemption, each term "distinguished" from its partner term in each pair—was a fundamental core charism of the Lutheran Reformation. DGM missiology claimed that attention to that charism would get us "bogged down." At the very least, this was an "anderer Geist."

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

5. Parallel shift (on the promise side) is that the Reformation drumbeat for "necessitating Christ" suffers. "Theology of the cross" in GM21 designates the shape (humble, vulnerable, suffering) of God's work, but not the content. Nowhere does GM21

offer Christ's cross as a "new thing" that "God was [doing] in Christ," namely, "reconciling the world to himself," and doing so in clear contrast to God's "normal" way of dealing with us, viz., "counting our trespasses against us."

6. GM21's crispest statement about the cross comes on p.8. "Jesus' ministry is a radical struggle for life. This puts him in continual conflict with those who would limit and destroy life. Jesus ultimately expresses God's vulnerable love for all humanity in his willingness to die in this struggle. Finally, he is put to an unjust, humiliating and yet redemptive death on a cross." [The "redemptive" aspect of the cross surfaces at Easter.] "The resurrection of Jesus is God's re-affirmation of life and a sign of hope in a world marked by sin and death. It declares that God's salvation, the restoration of life for all people and all creation, is rooted in God's compassionate and vulnerable love embodied in Jesus' ministry and death."

7. "Expresses" and "reaffirmation" are significant terms in the paragraph above. Question: If Jesus had never shown up, would God's project "to transform creation for the sake of life," have gotten derailed? In GM21's soteriology, it seems to me, the answer is: not necessarily. Christ "expresses" God's vulnerable love, and Easter "reaffirms" it, but there is no "necessitating Christ" for that love to be there at all, and for sinners to have access to it. Same question, different angle: apart from the cross, does God, or doesn't God, "count trespasses?" If God does, then the cross is a cosmic shift in God's dealing with sinners, not simply an expression of what God has always been doing.

8. Summa. GM21 openly calls the ELCA to move beyond the hermeneutics, the paradigm, of 16th century Lutheranism. Why? It had defects then, we learn, and even some of its good aspects are not relevant today. To move us forward, GM21 surprisingly

proposes an even more ancient paradigm, the hermeneutics of medieval scholasticism, reading the Word and the world under the rubrics of Nature and Grace. In GM21 “nature” is “creation” still tragically deficient of “life in its fullness,” and “grace” is God—and God’s people wherever they may be—“transforming creation for the sake of life.” That’s the scholastic axiom: God’s grace perfects nature, does not diminish it. The Lutheran Reformers found that medieval paradigm defective, so defective that they replaced it with another one, which they claimed was the hermeneutic the Bible itself commended—law and promise. Yet GM21 opts for the scholastic one and commends it to Lutherans today. Why?

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

1. The parallels to the Augsburg critique of scholasticism are striking. THEO-logical. God’s word as “law” gets lost. There no place in the GM21 blueprint for “lex semper accusat,” God’s own *usus theologicus legis*. In GM21 God’s critique of what’s wrong in creation is not directed to sinners’ unfaith (*coram deo* matters of the heart) but to evil principalities and powers in the world that diminish and destroy life. God’s action to counteract such destruction and to preserve an endangered creation (God’s own “care” agenda) is not seen as “law” (God’s own *usus politicus*) but is already designated Gospel. For it is a good action of God and produces beneficial results. But with such a paradigm, the law’s own *usus politicus* and *usus theologicus* are lost.

2. Paralleling that, of course, is CHRISTO-logical loss, since losing the law regularly also loses the Gospel. Christ is presented as good news, of course. The DGM Gospel comes under the rubric of the Reign of God as spelled out in Luke 4 (the

canon-within-the-canon for “grace” in this nature/grace blueprint). The center of God’s reign is God’s good news and good action for the oppressed. But that sort of Gospel needs no crucified or risen Messiah to make it all come true. Cross and resurrection are not ignored in DGM theology, but they too get “transformed.” Like this: Christ’s cross signifies that suffering is part of the package in God’s transforming the world vis-a-vis the mighty tyrants that oppress it. And Easter signals that such world-transformation will indeed finally be victorious. Both Good Friday and Easter are signals, but nothing substantive changes in the cosmos when Christ dies or when he is raised. In Melanchthon’s language (Apol 4:157) this “robs Christ of his honor as mediator and propitiator.” Paul called that “Christ dying in vain.” An Easter where death itself (along with the other cosmic nemeses that vex sinners) was not put to death is an Easter that leaves us “yet in our sins.”

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

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

8. THE PROMISE OF A LAW-PROMISE HERMENEUTIC FOR CHRISTIAN MISSION ON

THE NEW AREOPAGUS OF TODAY'S 21ST CENTURY CONTEXT. TWO EXAMPLES.

1. REPENTANCE The context for Christian mission today is “the new Areopagus.” Paul’s Athens in Acts 17—“the city was full of gods”—is everywhere in today’s world. This is especially true in the so-called “Christian” lands of the west. And, as with Paul on Mars’ Hill, Christian witness invites people to change gods—it’s as crass as that—to hang their hearts on a god previously unknown to them, the crucified and risen Messiah. “Repent” is the technical term—a 180% turnaround. “Times of ignorance God overlooks, but now he commands all everywhere to repent.” Nature-grace theology has a hard time calling for radical repentance. If human “natura” needs only “perfecting,” (“transforming” in the rhetoric of GM21), then radical switching of deities, and dying/rising of repentance, sounds like overkill. To law-promise theology it does not. Can Christian mission proceed without a call to repentance? It never did in the NT era.

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

a healing to hang their hearts on. “Repent and trust the Good News,” was the two-step invitation recorded as Jesus’ first public words in Mark’s chapter 1 and throughout his ministry in all four Gospels. That is law and promise proclamation, not “nature and grace.”

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

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

1. Deus revelatus is God in the Gospel. Deus absconditus is God in the law. It is the same “one and only true God” but as different as left-hand and right-hand. Because deus absconditus encounters with God are common among all human creatures – those who trust Christ as well as those who do not

– there is common ground here, common “God-experience” for Christians to engage in God-talk with all people of other faiths.

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

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

1. It ought to be obvious. Christians claim to “have Christ” to cope with the deus absconditus encounters of daily life. In order for someone who doesn’t “have Christ” to have him, someone else must offer Christ. Christian mission is precisely such an offering. In Apol. 4 Melanchthon makes the point that the fundamental verb accompanying God’s promise is “offer” (in contrast to the law’s fundamental verb “require”). Both Luther

and Melanchthon complained that the medieval church so often “made Christ unnecessary,” and with that it was joining the ranks of the Turks and Jews. The upshot of “sharing” deus absconditus experience in mission conversation and dialogue is to listen for and to hear those signals of people’s need for Christ – the same need(s) the Christian also has living in the same deus absconditus world we all do. It is a coram deo [face-to-face- with-God] need which “necessitates Christ.” Offering Christ is what the missionary is called to do.

9. SOME CONCLUSIONS

1. No one’s day-in/day-out religious experience – whatever their religion – is grace alone. To center inter-religious conversation on grace-experiences leaves vast areas of God-experience untouched, and almost guarantees that Christian grace- talk, centered in the crucified and risen Messiah, will be blurred. The law-promise hermeneutic “saves” such experiential data.
2. Inter-religious conversation that sidelines negative God-experiences is not speaking the whole truth. To talk about Christian grace-experience without specifying the antithetical God-experience it must cope with does not give the dialogue partner a fair shake. Nor does it clarify the Good and New in the Good News of the one Christians call Lord. Here too a law-promise hermeneutic saves the data.
3. The grace of God in Christ is not simply an unexpected and undeserved experience of goodness, as one missiologist defines it. It is rather a surprising fresh word of mercy from a Creator whom we chronically distrust, and to whom we are unendingly in debt. Might not this fact – Christians’ own chronic distrust of their creator, with all its consequences, and their willingness to confess it – serve as a leaven in the dialogue? Even a

leveler? Christians come with paradoxical God-experiences and paradoxical faith-confessions. “Lord I believe; help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24). And Christians admit to being “simultaneously saint and sinner.” Thus, Christians are no “better” in their moral life or the strength of their faith than their dialogue partners. They might even be worse. Their claim is not about themselves, but about a Word they have heard, that “surprising fresh word of mercy,” which encourages them to live in hope before the face of God despite all evidence to the contrary. The law-promise hermeneutic “saves” these data.

[Law-PromiseHermeneutics \(PDF\)](#)

FELLOWSHIP AT THE LORD'S SUPPER

Colleagues,

Jeffrey Anderson supplies today's Thursday Theology whilst Robin and I are both out of town. One of the pleasant memories of my first semester as prof at Concordia Seminary (35 yrs ago) was great students. One of that creme-de-la-creme bunch was Jeff, who still remembers that first semester encounter where he learned to have “sufficient grounds” for anything he said or wrote in Systematic Theology 101. And that for any assertion claiming to be Christian that “sufficient grounding” had to be the crucified and risen Messiah. From his piece below you'll see whether he still practices what his prof once preached. What's happened since then? “After 20 years, I retired from parish ministry. And for 12 years I have been enjoying my second career as an operating system and network engineer in the computer world.

I teach or lead Bible Classes from time to time. And I am part of a long-lived men's Bible Study in our LCMS congregation. My wife Judith and I have chosen to live 'in the city.' And we have found a warm and intentional Christian fellowship in a small Episcopal congregation in the inner city of Akron, Ohio. This parish family, which gets its life from the Sacrament, supports us in our life in the city."

Concerning the text that follows Jeff says: "The theses were written on Luther's birthday Nov. 10, 1982—one year before he turned 500! At that time the 'prayer fellowship' issue had temporarily receded to the back burner in the LCMS, and the 'close/closed' communion issue was hot. It is probably enough to say that these theses were my contribution to the debate at that time. This communion debate, along with a rejuvenated 'prayer fellowship' debate, have both flared up again in the LCMS. I suspect that they remain unsettled because God's promisory Word has not yet been the chief tool applied to the issue. For that reason, 'these 28 old theses' may be a paradigm of how the Gospel can be applied to these and other sticky spiritual/church issues."

Jeff's a gem. Enjoy his Gospel-grounded proposals below.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

THESES ON FELLOWSHIP AT THE LORD'S SUPPER
Jeff Anderson

November 10, 1982

INTRODUCTION

Lutheran congregations which have adopted a less restrictive practice of administering Holy Communion, sharing the Sacrament with confessing Christians of other synods or other denominations, should not do so quietly or in a hidden manner, for they are celebrating the highest feast God has given us in this world. Rather, they should be able to proclaim boldly the hope they are celebrating and to do so with a clear conscience.

On the other hand, a less restrictive practice dare not be an expression of spiritual indifference or mere Christian friendliness. It must be an expression of the Good News of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for me and all sinners. Therefore, the following statements are offered for fraternal discussion to examine whether various practices of administering the Sacrament enjoy the support of Scripture and of our Lord Jesus, who gives us this great feast of his body and blood.

A. Eucharistic fellowship is different from "church" fellowship.

1. Declarations of "synodical fellowship" or "church union" are legitimately in the hands of synods, councils, and commissions, for such declarations are adiaphora. Scripture neither commands nor forbids the formation of synods or church bodies, nor their union or independence, as the case may be.
2. Christian fellowship in the Eucharist, however, is commanded by Christ. Therefore no human rule and no synodical affiliation dare hinder Christ's will and command. Jesus says, "Take and drink, all of you" [Matthew 26:27], not "Take and drink, Lutherans," or

"Take and drink, Catholics." He addresses all his disciples.

- 3. The presence of disagreements or doctrinal differences between synods or church bodies may be signs of sin. But such brokenness does not exempt Christians of different affiliations from eating and drinking the Sacrament with each other.*
- 4. Christian fellowship in the Eucharist is indeed the Lord's Supper when it is celebrated under Christ's promise: "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins" [Matthew 26:28]. Faith in this promise, and not "agreement in all doctrines," constitutes proper reception of the Lord's Supper.****B. Eucharist precedes consensus on all articles of faith.***
- 5. It is a theology of works which mingles "eucharistic fellowship" and "synodical fellowship" or predicates the first upon the second. A theology of grace keeps first things first and recognizes Christ's primary fellowship in the Eucharist where sinners eat and drink together despite differences of affiliation.*
- 6. The Sacrament is abused when it is used legalistically as a "carrot" which one can eat and drink only after one first is holy, pure, and perfect. The Sacrament is precisely for those who are not holy, pure, or perfect but who need to be made holy by the Sacrament itself. "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" [Matt. 11:28].*
- 7. Likewise, the Sacrament is used legalistically when it is held out as a "carrot" which Christians of different churches cannot share together until they have achieved a uniformity and consensus.*
- 8. A theology of works builds Communion fellowship on a human foundation of agreement on articles of faith and of consensus on many doctrines. Such agreements reached at*

conference tables bring honor to human beings, but they do not comfort the hungry soul, for such human agreements come and go with the changing tides of human history.

9. A theology of grace, by focusing on the Eucharist, celebrates a certain and lasting oneness based on Christ's changeless promise: "Given and shed for you."
10. Consensus on the spectrum of doctrinal issues is a valid priority for the Church and a God-pleasing goal. But common sharing of the Sacrament by Christians is a higher priority because it expresses the unity we already have. "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all" [Ephesians 4:4-7 RSV].
11. A married couple refusing to live together commit sin, even though living together may express a greater uniformity than the couple really has. A marriage should be consummated in love and celebration, even though the husband and wife have not reached full consensus on "marriage and all its articles."
12. Likewise, the bride of Jesus Christ consummates her Eucharistic relationship with the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ, and with her brothers and sisters in Christ, even though all articles of doctrine are not yet settled between God and Church, or synod and synod, or denomination and denomination.
13. To place full doctrinal agreement ahead of Eucharistic fellowship places sanctification ahead of justification. Doctrinal growth and doctrinal consensus are fruits of the Spirit, which are advanced by the power of the means of grace given to those who share the Lord's Supper. To place sanctification (full doctrinal agreement) ahead of justification (given for you for the forgiveness of sins)

is neither Lutheran nor biblical. **C. Eucharistic fellowship makes the invisible church visible.**

14. Declarations of “church fellowship” are fitting actions to express human consensus, but “eucharistic fellowship” is God’s visible expression of the oneness which he gives in Jesus Christ. 1 Corinthians 10:17 : “Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the same loaf.”
15. If the Sacrament has the power to reconcile the sinner and God – a fact which is true, but invisible – then surely the Sacrament has the power to unite organizationally disparate Christians – although that union is also, at first, invisible, except in the common eating and drinking in the Eucharist.
16. Eucharistic fellowship around the table of Jesus Christ is an expression of faith in the Gospel, for no human eye can discern the oneness of German and Norwegian, ELCA and LCMS, scholar and mentally limited, plant manager and union leader, liberated woman and traditional patriarch, Lutheran and Catholic.
17. If the Lord’s Supper is shared only when the relationship of one synod or church body to another is complete, then the Lord’s Supper is reduced to a symbol of man-made unity already achieved.
18. But if the Lord’s Supper is celebrated between church bodies which do not have external fellowship or union, then it is elevated to its rightful place as a sacrament, which puts into action God’s power to heal, unite, and reconcile diverse and different Christians. **D. The serious implications of non-fellowship in the Eucharist.**
19. To say that other Christians receive the Sacrament when they celebrate it, but to refuse to receive the Sacrament with them denies our own discipleship in the footsteps of Christ. For if Jesus “receives sinners and eats with

them,” (e.g., with other synods or Christians not yet officially “members” of the congregation), then we are breaking fellowship with Jesus Christ when we refuse to eat with those same “sinners” [Luke 15:2].

20. “One Lord, one faith, one Baptism” [Ephesians 4:5] is Paul’s expression of proper Christian solidarity within the variegated Body of Christ. Fellowship at one table is Christ’s expression of the one Body He creates in giving his body and blood for you.
21. To confess invisible love of my neighbor, while I publicly avoid him, is to live a lie. To confess the invisible oneness of all Christians while I publicly refuse to eat at Christ’s table with them, or allow them to eat with me, is to confound the Gospel in front of a lost and puzzled world.
22. Paul says that those Corinthians who gorge themselves, get drunk, and fail to save food and drink for the poorer brothers and sisters are defiling the Lord’s Supper because they do not discern that rich and poor, early-comer and late-comer, are all part of the body of Christ [1 Corinthians 11]. So we fail to discern the body of Christ (all believers) and we eat unworthily when we exclude other Christians from the eating and drinking of the Lord’s Supper. It is his meal – and not our private party. **E. Implications of Eucharistic fellowship.**
23. It is lazy discipleship to join with other Christians in the Lord’s Supper and then uncaringly ignore their doctrinal weaknesses. It is also lazy discipleship to confront other Christians with their doctrinal weaknesses, but then fail to take the hard step of kneeling beside them at the one table to accept God’s forgiveness for one’s own doctrinal weaknesses.
24. It is only by the power of the Holy Spirit that one can both join with other Christians in the Lord’s Supper and

then also care enough to nurture and confront them with their doctrinal weaknesses while also accepting their nurture and counsel [Colossians 3:12-17].

- 25. The debate over Eucharistic fellowship with denominations closest to one's own is a smoke-screen of Satan to keep us from facing the radical vision of Christ's world-wide fellowship. For if one allows Eucharistic fellowship to extend to the church body closest to one's own, then there will be no excuse for stopping it from being extended to all Christians who confess Christ's presence in the Holy Supper.*
- 26. There will always be a line between who is welcome at the Lord's Table and who is not. These theses simply suggest that the line not be drawn along lines of denominational affiliation but along the wider lines of which the Small Catechism speaks: "He is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words: Given and shed for you for the remission of sins."*
- 27. Christians (those who have been baptized into Christ) who recognize their need and confess trust in Christ's promise – "This is my body and blood given for you and others for the forgiveness of sins" – are welcome at the eucharistic table for they are Christ's body in the world [1 Corinthians 12:27].*
- 28. Practices which carry out this wider understanding of the Eucharist affirm the threefold benefits of the Sacrament:*
 - a. Forgiveness – which sustains our relationship with God in the body of his Son [Matthew 26]*
 - b. Strength – to live as members of the body of Christ [Ephesians 2:10]*
 - c. Unity – with the rest of the body of Christ [1 Corinthians 10:16-17]*

“The Role of Mission in the Future of Lutheran Theology.”

Some Thoughts drawn from Luther and the Lutheran Confessions

Edward H. Schroeder

[Presentation at Aarhus University, Denmark, Conference on “The Role of Mission in the Future of Lutheran Theology,” January 15-16, 2003]

1. If Lutheran Theology has a future at all—a deserved future—that future is linked to the Gospel’s own future.
2. The Gospel’s own future is grounded in Christ’s promise that “his word,” the Good-News- from-God that he not only spoke, but in person WAS, will not pass away. There are no other guarantees for the Gospel’s future. It hangs on that thin promissory thread.
3. Nothing else in creation has a guaranteed future, Jesus says. It will all pass away. So Lutheran theology too will pass away if/when it disconnects from the Gospel—even if people called Lutherans continue to theologize.
4. Fixation on the Gospel is the genius of the Lutheran

reformation, and the fixation of Luther's "mission theology."

5. The term "mission" is hard to find in Luther's vocabulary (ditto for other 16th cent. Reformers) as far as I have learned. But his grasp of the Gospel carries many of the accents we today associate with the term mission.

6. Example: The Gospel is "the power of God for salvation" which signals movement, action, aiming for primal change in the lives of people. Luther's Gospel-metaphors of "Platzregen" and "ripples-from-a-stone-cast-in-a-pool" are mission metaphors derivative from that notion. Mission happens when God turns on the Gospel rain shower, when God tosses the Gospel-pebble into the water. The rain and the pebble do the "mission work." Major Luther sources for this are his many sermons on the Feast of the Ascension, where the assigned lectionary text always was the Markan version of Christ's Ascension linked to the Markan version of the "Great Commission."

7. By proposing the Gospel itself as central to the theological enterprise—and thus to the missiological enterprise as well—we cannot escape the question: What is the Gospel? What is the "Good News from God linked to Jesus of Nazareth?" Answers to that question have been conflicted—ever since Jesus appeared on the scene among his own people. Subsequent centuries have not changed on that score. The conflict has been among Christians themselves—in Galatia and Corinth, in 16th century "Christian" Europe and on into our third millennium A.D. That "in-house" debate about what the Gospel is (and is not) has consequences for mission theology.

8. Fundamental to these differing, even conflicting, answers is hermeneutics: how you read the Bible, how you read the world. Bedrock for Luther's understanding of the Gospel is the law-promise hermeneutic for reading the Bible. In one place he

designates this law- promise discovery his great Reformation “Aha!” It was linked to Romans 1:17 and the before-and-after of his encounter with that text. “[Ich] lernet inter justitiam legis und evangelii discernirn. Zuvor mangelt mir nichts, denn das ich kein discrimen inter legem et evangelium machet, hielt es alles vor eines et dicebam Christum a Mose non differre nisi tempore et perfectione. Aber do ich das discrimen fand, quod aliud esset lex, aliud evangelium, da risz ich her durch” [“I learned to distinguish between the righteousness of the law and that of the Gospel. Prior to that I lacked nothing except that I made no distinction between law and gospel. I considered them to be one and the same, and spoke of no difference between Christ and Moses except their location in historical time and [their different] degrees of perfection. But when I found the distinction, that the law is one thing, and the gospel is something else, that was my breakthrough.” Table Talk #5518].

9. Corollary to this Lutheran law-promise hermeneutics for reading the Bible is Luther’s hermeneutic of the distinction between God’s left-hand and right-hand for “reading” the world.

10. That hermeneutic for reading the world is Luther’s lens for reading world religions—and for reading Gospel-less Christianity. See his conclusion to the explanation of the Apostles Creed in the Large Catechism: “...heathen, Jews, Turks, false Christians” do indeed have knowledge of God, encounters with God, and “even though they believe in and worship only the one, true God, nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing. Therefore they remain in eternal wrath and damnation, for they do not have the Lord Christ, and besides, they are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit.” In the metaphor of God’s left and right hands, “not having the Lord Christ” equals linkage only with God’s left hand. The “power of God for salvation” is the worldly work of God’s right hand.

Until humans have received that offer, they “do not know what God’s attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing.”

11. A parallel distinction in Luther’s theology is hidden God and revealed God. His understanding of the faith and life of “...heathen, Jews, Turks, false Christians” comes under the rubric of “hidden God.” The reality of God-hidden does not mean the absence of any God encounters. On the contrary, they are manifold throughout creation, and replete with God’s blessings. But as blessed as these encounters are, they do not go beyond the rubrics of God’s left-hand operations. Still “hidden” is what “God was in Christ [doing, namely,] reconciling the world unto himself. Not counting our trespasses against us, but making him to be sin who knew no sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.” That’s the archetypal “sweet swap” [froehlicher Wechsel] in Luther’s vocabulary. God’s left hand does not offer such a swap. With that hand God counts trespasses. Trespassers pay.

12. It seems to me that this metaphor of “God hidden” is valuable for accessing the God- experience in other world religions. Especially with reference to Islam, where Allah is so fundamentally “hidden” apart from the Quran, that nothing in creation dare claim to present, to represent, him to humankind.

13. From two sides in recent days I have heard missionaries from India and Ethiopia tell me that this double-handed talk about God—also sometimes referred to as God’s two kingdoms in our one world—makes no sense to local Lutheran theologians in these two countries. So they abandon it. The colleague from India even suggests that the distinction is a specifically Western conceptual construct and cannot be translated into Asian modes of thinking.

14. It seems to me that the issue is not Western modes of thinking at all, but the Bible itself, which is hardly a Western product. At least that's what Luther claimed. He had been operating in "western" modalities before his "Aha!" It was the Biblical texts themselves that opened his eyes—and his theological vocabulary—to the hermeneutics of distinction. Both for reading the Bible and for reading the world. Luther's claim is that the Bible itself operates with these primordial distinctions. Folks who disagree—especially Lutherans— need to present their alternate exegesis and the Biblical hermeneutics that undergirds it.

15. So the debate is not East vs. West, but exegesis of the Scriptures. Is God doing something in Christ that he didn't do before in his creation, a fundamental claim of St. Paul in 2 Cor. 5 referred to in #11 above? If yes, then there is already THE primal distinction that the "Good News from God in Jesus" is "something else." If the Lutherans referred to in Ethiopia and India ignore this archetypal Lutheran distinction, I wonder what they understand the Gospel to be, if it is not something "good" and "genuinely new" in distinction to all else that God is doing in the world.

16. For 50 years [beginning at Willingen 1952] the concept "Missio Dei" has been "in" in missiology. There is no place for practicing Luther's distinction in "Missio Dei" theology as far as I can tell. If my reading is accurate, then this is one promising "future" for Lutheran missiology in the century before us.

17. The same seems to me to be true of "Gospel and context" work in current missiology. It would benefit from law/promise hermeneutics in reading the Bible, and the corollary left-hand/right-hand hermeneutics for reading the world.

18. There are two gaps confronting the Gospel's own "Platzregen." [I am taking this from a 1971 essay by Robert W. Bertram "Doing Theology in Relation to Mission."] Both need to be bridged. One is the "horizontal" gap of differences in historical time and place and culture between the Gospel-bringer and the one brought to. Luther's Platzregen image, as well as his "ripples in the pond" reminds us that it is finally the lively Gospel itself that brings the bringer, and not vice versa. Lutherans need to work on that idea and offer it to future missiology.

19. The second gap, call it the "vertical gap," is the gap of unbelief. It is a reality everywhere, not really located in cultures, but in the hearts of people, even the heart of the Gospel-bringer missionary. Quoting Bertram: "For, after all, it really is incredible—indeed, it is humanly impossible to believe—that an itinerant, first-century rabbi would NEED to go to such lengths to achieve the merciful mission of God toward us." Weighing most heavily against believing the Gospel, according to Luther, is not the "other gospels" found everywhere in the world—both East and West—but the omni-presence of God's law in, with, and under the operations of God's left-hand.

20. Bertram again: "But once that Gospel is believed, as again and again it is, the believer can assimilate also the law, can take its criticism, and can even profit from it, advancing its commendable good work in society. Still LAW is only proximate to Scripture's distinctive PROMISE. And only the PROMISE, finally, is the solvent of the world's hard unbelief."

21. For the "New Areopagus" of the 21st century, the Lutheran axiom in Bertram's words is: "PROMISSIO (the promise) is the secret of MISSIO (the mission)." The Christ who sends us to today's Mars' Hill with his "Go in peace; serve me there" was Himself God's promise-keeper. As we do our theological work

moving across these two mission gaps, it is the Promise itself (better the Promisor Himself) who spans the gaps—by the Spirit through the Word.

Edward H. Schroeder

[The Role of Mission in the Future of Lutheran Theology \(PDF\)](#)

So you want to be a priest, then?

Colleagues,

First off, some facts and figures:

1. Twenty-five of you sent generous donations for getting us ThTh honchos to the Aarhus Conference next week on the Future of Lutheran Theology. The 2K total you contributed covers most of the airfare. For that we are grateful.
2. Year-end statistics for the Crossings Web-page in 2002: Average hits per day 1,044. Average page requests per day 853. Total page requests 308,029. Distinct computers served 58,326 in 105 different countries or islands outside the continental USA.

I continue to shake my head at these statistics, but Crossings webmaster Tom Law says they are true. What hath God wrought? Even though the service is free, the high-tech that makes it happen is not. In order for us to keep on keeping on, you know what to do. Here's the address: Crossings, Box 7011, St. Louis MO, 63006-7011.

Now to the main topic.

With our departure for the Aarhus Conference just days away –and a week’s worth thereafter with Lutheran seminary folk in St. Petersburg, Russia–my plate is full. So this week’s ThTh, though confected today, does double duty. Minutes ago it went “downunder” to an Anglican cleric in New Zealand. Call him Bryan, which is close to his real name. Bryan and I met in Rome in 1988 when we were billeted together at the Int’l Ass’n for Mission Studies conference. He’s an evangelical Anglican, with a Ph.D. from Oxford (I think). One of his major mentors there was Alistair McGrath, a Gospel-superstar of our age. We’ve kept in touch on the cyber-circuit. When Marie and I were traipsing home from our stint in Bali (1999), we crashed with Bryan and family in Melbourne, his pastoral locale then.

He sent me recently a 10-pager and asked for my opinion. It was “put together for the Bishops Commission” and titled: SO YOU WANT TO BE A PRIEST, THEN? SIX THESES AND SOME THOUGHTS ON PRIESTHOOD, ITS MEANING AND DIRECTION TODAY. Even though I’m not sending along his 10 pages, you’ll deduce much of it from my responses. And even if you cannot, the responses–so says my editor–make sense (mostly) on their own. You will have to judge if that’s really the case or not,

Peace & Joy!

Ed

Dear Bryan,

You ask for my thought on your ten-page piece. Here they are.

- 1. You have woven an entire systematic theology into these six theses and their explications. Has that large-scale*

systematics frightened away the intended clientele—those thinking about priesthood—or nurtured them? What sort of response have you gotten?

2. Even with one reference to Blessed Martin of Wittenberg that I found in your screed, it's a forcefully Anglican piece. One signal thereof, methinks, is the grace-alone center with little reference to faith, let alone faith-alone. Not that the Luth. heritage ignores grace alone, but Luther's argument with the medieval establishment was on faith-alone, not really grce-alone. For my Lutheran take on coaxing folks for pastoral callings that would be front and center. Both in the overarching systematic theological blueprint, as well as in the counsel for the clerically curious.
3. No surprise, your constant designation for the pastoral calling is PRIEST. Which raises some thoughts. It is not only my Luth. penchant that then wonders about your key term "priest" throughout your piece for the leader in the Christian community. Or does your Anglican ethos make use of that term de rigeur? You've doubtless heard the data. 672 references in the OT to Levitical (et al.) priests and almost zero such references in the NT documents for the player-coach leaders in the Christian community. E.g., again no such reference in Paul's list of Christ's human "gifts to the church" (Eph. 4) and those few refs in Hebrews and Revelation that do link priesthood with Christ-followers are all and always to the whole mob of believers, and never to some baptized-brand of Levitical leader. To say nothing of the upside-down apple-cart turnover on priesthood occasioned by Christ himself and specked out in Hebrews. E.g., OT priests offered alien living organisms on their altars, THIS ONE put himself on the altar. That's not just a novelty. That's the undoing of mediatorial priesting, isn't it? Doesn't that make

human-priesting passee? I think so. Why else such absence of the term for community leaders in NT texts? And even though you strive to de-hierarchicalize the term, the levitical mindset—not only among religious folks, but even among our dear secular worldlings—makes that a lost cause, I think. I wonder if that levitical mindset might just be a signal of the Old Adam's "opinio legis" [legalist opinion] in all of us. All of which makes me ask: why should we want to stick with it and/or even rehab it?

4. To your six parts.

1. "THE PRIEST IS A PERSON OF PRAYER"

"Standing before God with the mind in the heart" is winsome as words for Christian prayer. You grant that prayer is gift for all, but your specs for the "priestly vocation . . . set apart [for] deliberate and careful nurturing of this gift," stretch me beyond where I sense the NT stuff on prayer commends me to go. Perhaps that is inevitable when an Augsburg Catholic and a Book-of-Common-Prayer [BCP] Catholic talk shop.

2. "THE PRIEST IS A PERSON OF WORSHIP"

From that Augsburg heritage comes this claim: "Faith itself is the highest worship of God." That is not all that can be said. But it is fundamental, seems to me, for whatever else gets said. I enjoy many of your bons mots about current culture and your gem about "transcendence transcended" when Chrsitleaves transcendence behind and becomes one of us earthlings. Yet I'm cautious about using transcendence talk at all—not just in these post-modern (?) days, but throughout our theological history. Seems to me that Blessed Martin's juxtaposition of theologia gloriae to theologia

crucis (stolen from Paul in I Cor, 1) is a caveat contra all concern with transcendence for Christians—even in addressing the Enlightenment's alleged declaration of the death of transcendence. But that's a whole other agenda.

3. "THE PRIEST AS PREACHER OF THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST"

I was frankly jolted when after this heading you go immediately to the Great Commission and then—horribile dictu!— to the “two commandments [of the LAW]” to articulate this Gospel-role for the priest. If there is one thing that macerates Gospel proclamation in most liturgies I attend (not all of them Lutheran) is that so often the preacher hasn't a clue about what “gospel” is. Simple test that preachers so frequently fail is: Does the crucified and risen Christ get “used” to get the hearers to whatever goal the sermon claims to have? If as happens so frightfully frequently, said crucified and risen Messiah never even gets mentioned—it has been known to occur—over and over and over again—then said parson was not a PREACHER OF THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST. And your immediate move to the two “great” commandments, no surprise, gives me pause. To put it in a thesis: “The Gospel of Jesus Christ is NOT the twin commandments to love God and to love neighbor.” It is something else—and I know you know this, that McGrath taught it to you. But why then didn't you say so? The Gospel of Jesus Christ is (as one early witness claimed) “God in Christ reconciling the world, not counting our trespasses against us [as God does when we seek, but never succeed, to fulfill those two commandments as our format for faith], but instead

making him to be sin for us, so that we might become the very righteousness of God.” This “sweet swap” is both Good and New (therefore Good News) *via-a-vis* the two commandments. It replaces those two as our link with the deity. It’s an offer (not a requirement as those 2 mandates are) and it only calls for the offeree to TRUST it. Call it faith-alone.

When you devote most of this section to Mission, I ask: Isn’t this cart-before-the-horse? Before you clarify MISSION for the PREACHER OF THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST, don’t you need to help her to clarity about the Good News of the Great Commissioner himself? If not, what we get (and such sermonizers are legion) noisy gongs and clanging cymbals.

4. “THE PRIEST AS DISCIPLE WHO DISCIPLES THE PEOPLE OF GOD”

Your words on servant-posture for a priest’s authority role is great. My Lutheran bones long for more “faith-in-Christ” as the mark of the disciple and the goal of any disciple called to disciple anybody else. If not Paul, then Evangelist John for sure, makes that the *sine qua non* for discipleship: “that you might believe, and that believing you might HAVE the Life that is in His name.” Luther is often linked mostly with Paul in seeing faith as “fiducia” [trust]. But he is just as much Johannine in his constant talk about faith as possession, having something you didn’t have before, finally “having” Christ [Christum habere] which is borrowed straight from St. John.

5. “THE PRIEST AS MIDWIFE OF THE GOSPEL”

Your motherly/feminine images are wholesome. They

come off largely as formal categories as you use them, don't they? Signalling the shape of the priest's posture in the execution of her calling. If the formal category, the "shape" of priestly ministry, is MIDWIFE OF THE GOSPEL, then I ask: Is there something midwifely about the substance, the Good News itself? E.g., God groaning in childbirth to bring off our salvation, as pictured in the first Suffering. Servant poem of Isaiah 42. That used to be the OT lesson for this coming Sunday, the First after the Epiphany, the Baptism of our Lord, but it's not there in our RSL selection for this year. When you then toward the end of this section slide into Jer. 31 and his new covenant proclamation (and cite its return in Paul's 2 Cor 3), I get excited. But not enough from what you offer. What is it that is really NEW in this covenant in contrast to Sinai? Answer: for one thing there is NO forgiveness for sinners in Sinai (read the specs of the contract both in Exodus and Deuteronomy), but God's forgiveness abounds in the New One. Which contrast Paul hypes in his self-presentation (2 Cor 3) as minister of the New Covenant.

But with that we're back to the Augsburg Catholic hermeneutics, the radical distinction between God's Law and God's Gospel—even though they come from the same God and are addressed to the same sinners. The difference being, of course, that the crucified and risen Messiah is in the one but not in the other.

6. "THE PRIEST AS AN ICON OF THE HOLY"

Holiness, as you well know, was a hot potato of the Reformation era. In view of the striving for

holiness in Latin medieval piety, the Augsburg reformers claimed that "holiness" for humans, ala the Gospel, amounts to being a forgiven sinner. Holiness is received, not achieved. Receiving the Gospel's offer of forgiveness is receiving holiness. Your thesis here is "Priesthood is the vocation to the holy; it is vocational holiness. Its specific ministry is the gift of grace or charism to the Church in order for the Church to mature in holiness." My re-reite might go like this: "The pastoral calling is to disperse (not dispense) holiness. [A US Episcopal bishop these days like to say that.] Holiness occurs when sinners trust Christ's word of forgiveness offered to them. The pastor and those she serves are equals in this body of forgiven-sinner-holiness. That is what makes them qualitatively 'different' [=root meaning of the Hebrew term for holy] in the world, also different vis-a-vis what they were before they began trusting Christ's word of forgiveness. The pastoral office is to administer the preached gospel and sacraments so that people trust Christ's forgiving promise offered to them via those media. That's dispersion phase one. Dispersion phase two is keeping them minded of Christ's Easter mandate (ala John 20) that this holiness—a.k.a. "forgiveness" [Jn 20:23!]-is the burden of their own vocations: as the Father sent me so I send you."

You asked for "some thohghts," Bryan. These may be more than you wanted.

Pax et Gaudium!

Ed

Luther as Resource for Mission Theology

Colleagues,

Two weeks from today, d.v., a least a half dozen of us on this listserve will be assembling at the University of Aarhus in Denmark to deliberate with a 100-plus other folks from around the world on the “Future of Lutheran Theology.” Robin and I will report on it when we get back. A recent add-on to the “big” conference at Aarhus is a mini-one the day before on “The Role of Mission in the Future of Lutheran Theology.” I’ve been asked to tell what I’ve found in Luther that speaks to the agenda. Below are my current thoughts for that assignment. ThTh readers have seen much of this before, and it’s still a work in progress. Comments welcome. Peace & Joy!
Ed

“The Role of Mission in the Future of Lutheran Theology.”

Some Thoughts drawn from Luther and the Lutheran Confessions

- 1. If Lutheran Theology has a future at all—a deserved future—that future is linked to the Gospel’s own future.*
- 2. The Gospel’s own future is grounded in Christ’s promise that “his word,” the Good-News-from-God that he not only*

spoke, but in person WAS, will not pass away. There are no other guarantees for the Gospel's future. It hangs on that thin promissory thread.

3. Nothing else in creation has a guaranteed future, Jesus says. It will all pass away. So Lutheran theology too will pass away if/when it disconnects from the Gospel—even if people called Lutherans continue to theologize.
4. Fixation on the Gospel is the genius of the Lutheran reformation, and the fixation of Luther's "mission theology."
5. The term "mission" is hard to find in Luther's vocabulary (ditto for other 16th cent. Reformers) as far as I have learned. But his grasp of the Gospel carries many of the accents we today associate with the term mission.
6. Example: The Gospel is "the power of God for salvation" which signals movement, action, aiming for primal change in the lives of people. Luther's Gospel-metaphors of "Platzregen" and "ripples-from-a-stone-cast-in-a-pool" are mission metaphors derivative from that notion. Mission happens when God turns on the Gospel rain shower, when God tosses the Gospel-pebble into the water. The rain and the pebble do the "mission work." Major Luther sources for this are his many sermons on the Feast of the Ascension, where the assigned lectionary text always was the Markan version of Christ's Ascension linked to the Markan version of the "Great Commission."
7. By proposing the Gospel itself as central to the theological enterprise—and thus to the missiological enterprise as well—we cannot escape the question: What is the Gospel? What is the "Good News from God linked to Jesus of Nazareth?" Answers to that question have been conflicted—ever since Jesus appeared on the scene among his own people. Subsequent centuries have not changed on

that score. The conflict has been among Christians themselves—in Galatia and Corinth, in 16th century “Christian” Europe and on into our third millennium A.D. That “in-house” debate about what the Gospel is (and is not) has consequences for mission theology.

8. Fundamental to these differing, even conflicting, answers is hermeneutics: how you read the Bible, how you read the world. Bedrock for Luther’s understanding of the Gospel is the law-promise hermeneutic for reading the Bible. In one place he designates this law-promise discovery his great Reformation “Aha!” It was linked to Romans 1:17 and the before-and-after of his encounter with that text. “[Ich] lernet inter justitiam legis und evangelii discernirn. Zuvor mangelt mir nichts, denn das ich kein discrimen inter legem et evangelium machet, hielt es alles vor eines et dicebam Christum a Mose non differre nisi tempore et perfectione. Aber do ich das discrimen fande, quod aliud esset lex, aliud evangelium, da risz ich her durch” [“I learned to distinguish between the righteousness of the law and that of the Gospel. Prior to that I lacked nothing except that I made no distinction between law and gospel. I considered them to be one and the same, and spoke of no difference between Christ and Moses except their location in historical time and [their different] degrees of perfection. But when I found the distinction, that the law is one thing, and the gospel is something else, that was my breakthrough.” Table Talk #5518].
9. Corollary to this Lutheran law-promise hermeneutics for reading the Bible is Luther’s hermeneutic of the distinction between God’s left-hand and right-hand for “reading” the world.
10. That hermeneutic for reading the world is Luther’s lens for reading world religions—and for reading Gospel-less

Christianity. See his conclusion to the explanation of the Apostles Creed in the Large Catechism: "...heathen, Jews, Turks, false Christians" do indeed have knowledge of God, encounters with God, and "even though they believe in and worship only the one, true God, nevertheless do not know what his attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing. Therefore they remain in eternal wrath and damnation, for they do not have the Lord Christ, and besides, they are not illuminated and blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit." In the metaphor of God's left and right hands, "not having the Lord Christ" equals linkage only with God's left hand. The "power of God for salvation" is the worldly work of God's right hand. Until humans have received that offer, they "do not know what God's attitude is toward them. They cannot be confident of his love and blessing."

11. A parallel distinction in Luther's theology is hidden God and revealed God. His understanding of the faith and life of "...heathen, Jews, Turks, false Christians" comes under the rubric of "hidden God." The reality of God-hidden does not mean the absence of any God encounters. On the contrary, they are manifold throughout creation, and replete with God's blessings. But as blessed as these encounters are, they do not go beyond the rubrics of God's left-hand operations. Still "hidden" is what "God was in Christ [doing, namely,] reconciling the world unto himself. Not counting our trespasses against us, but making him to be sin who knew no sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him." That's the archetypal "sweet swap" [froehlicher Wechsel] in Luther's vocabulary. God's left hand does not offer such a swap. With that hand God counts trespasses. Trespassers pay.
12. It seems to me that this metaphor of "God hidden" is

valuable for accessing the God-experience in other world religions. Especially with reference to Islam, where Allah is so fundamentally “hidden” apart from the Quran, that nothing in creation dare claim to present, to represent, him to humankind.

13. From two sides in recent days I have heard missionaries from India and Ethiopia tell me that this double-handed talk about God—also sometimes referred to as God’s two kingdoms in our one world—makes no sense to local Lutheran theologians in these two countries. So they abandon it. The colleague from India even suggests that the distinction is a specifically Western conceptual construct and cannot be translated into Asian modes of thinking.
14. It seems to me that the issue is not Western modes of thinking at all, but the Bible itself, which is hardly a Western product. At least that’s what Luther claimed. He had been operating in “western” modalities before his “Aha!” It was the Biblical texts themselves that opened his eyes—and his theological vocabulary—to the hermeneutics of distinction. Both for reading the Bible and for reading the world. Luther’s claim is that the Bible itself operates with these primordial distinctions. Folks who disagree—especially Lutherans—need to present their alternate exegesis and the Biblical hermeneutics that undergirds it.
15. So the debate is not East vs. West, but exegesis of the Scriptures. Is God doing something in Christ that he didn’t do before in his creation, a fundamental claim of St. Paul in 2 Cor. 5 referred to in #11 above? If yes, then there is already THE primal distinction that the “Good News from God in Jesus” is “something else.” If the Lutherans referred to in Ethiopia and India ignore this archetypal Lutheran distinction, I wonder what they

understand the Gospel to be, if it is not something “good” and “genuinely new” in distinction to all else that God is doing in the world.

16. For 50 years [beginning at Willingen 1952] the concept “Missio Dei” has been “in” in missiology. There is no place for practicing Luther’s distinction in “Missio Dei” theology as far as I can tell. If my reading is accurate, then this is one promising “future” for Lutheran missiology in the century before us.
17. The same seems to me to be true of “Gospel and context” work in current missiology. It would benefit from law/promise hermeneutics in reading the Bible, and the corollary left-hand/right-hand hermeneutics for reading the world.
18. There are two gaps confronting the Gospel’s own “Platzregen.” [I am taking this from a 1971 essay by Robert W. Bertram “Doing Theology in Relation to Mission.”] Both need to be bridged. One is the “horizontal” gap of differences in historical time and place and culture between the Gospel-bringer and the one brought to. Luther’s Platzregen image, as well as his “ripples in the pond” reminds us that it is finally the lively Gospel itself that brings the bringer, and not vice versa. Lutherans need to work on that idea and offer it to future missiology.
19. The second gap, call it the “vertical gap,” is the gap of unbelief. It is a reality everywhere, not really located in cultures, but in the hearts of people, even the heart of the Gospel-bringer missionary. Quoting Bertram: “For, after all, it really is incredible—indeed, it is humanly impossible to believe—that an itinerant, first-century rabbi would NEED to go to such lengths to achieve the merciful mission of God toward us.” Weighing most heavily against believing the Gospel, according to Luther, is not

the “other gospels” found everywhere in the world—both East and West—but the omni-presence of God’s law in, with, and under the operations of God’s left-hand.

20. Bertram again: “But once that Gospel is believed, as again and again it is, the believer can assimilate also the law, can take its criticism, and can even profit from it, advancing its commendable good work in society. Still LAW is only proximate to Scripture’s distinctive PROMISE. And only the PROMISE, finally, is the solvent of the world’s hard unbelief.”
21. For the “New Areopagus” of the 21st century, the Lutheran axiom in Bertram’s words is: “PROMISSIO (the promise) is the secret of MISSIO (the mission).” The Christ who sends us to today’s Mars’ Hill with his “Go in peace; serve me there” was Himself God’s promise-keeper. As we do our theological work moving across these two mission gaps, it is the Promise itself (better the Promisor Himself) who spans the gaps—by the Spirit through the Word.