

# Christmas and the Heart of Darkness

Colleagues:

Some clippings for the Sixth Day of Christmas 2004. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

1. In the Gospel for Christmas Day, John 1: 1-14, suppose the word WORD were translated TALKING. [Introduction: This text is St. John's Christmas story. Doesn't have any of the visuals we know. No shepherds, no angels, no Mary and Joseph, not even a baby in the manger. How so "Christmas story?" "Thought you'd never ask," John might well say. Think of it this way. The Christmas creche is the story St. Luke tells. You can reproduce it in a Christmas pageant. John's Christmas story is a much bigger production. Cosmic, you might say. But how can you "pageant" the cosmos? Impossible. Since we're part of it, we can't stand back and "produce" it. But you can talk about it, you can story-tell it. Which is what John does. "OK, keep one eye on Bethlehem, but now pull back, waaay back, to get the big picture. HERE'S what's going on in the cosmos when THAT is going on in Bethlehem." EHS's translation cum comment.]

" In the beginning was the "logos" [Danker's Lexicon for that Greek word for WORD: "An utterance, chiefly oral"] OK, in the beginning there was an utterance, chiefly oral. [A tad simpler] In the beginning someone was talking. The talking came from God's direction. It was God talking. God

was talking right from the very beginning. Everything that came into existence happened by God talking. And if God wasn't talking nothing happened. When God was talking LIFE happened, LIFE that was the LIGHT for all people. [God's sound waves become life waves become light waves.] This "talking" Light shines into the darkness [=turf devoid of God's voice, "tobu wa bohu" in Hebrew], and the darkness cannot counteract it. [When push comes to shove, this light wins. But darkness doesn't disappear. It regroups for another day.]

[That's John's rewording of Genesis—and then he connects to Christmas. But it's still about talking. A human talker. The one we usually call the baptizer. But in this Gospel he's mostly John the talker, the guy on the witness stand.]

"The talking God sent a man. His name was John. He came to be a talker to get on the witness stand and talk about the Light that goes on when God's talking. His goal was that all might trust that LIGHT by means of his talking [instead of trusting darkness]. John himself was not the light. His job was to tell folks where the LIGHT was.

[And now zeroing in on what's happening in the cosmos down in Bethlehem.] "The true light, the real thing, that can pull anybody, everybody, out of darkness, was moving into the world. The talking God was now IN the world (not OUTside talking it into existence as at the beginning). Even though the world came into being through God-talking, when God-talking showed up in person IN that world, nobody recognized him. The talking God came to his own turf, but his own folks didn't welcome him. However there were a few who did, who entrusted themselves to his name [call it faith]. When that happened God gave them the right to call

themselves God's own kids. Their birth does not depend on blood-lines, nor on normal procreative processes, nor even having a male father. Their birthing comes from the talking God [who says—as John's Gospel later will say point-blank—"Trust my beloved Son and you become my beloved kids yourselves."]

[Now comes the punch line about what's happening in Bethlehem.] "The talking God assumes a human body (with all its plusses and minuses), pitches his tent to live where we live. Result: We get to see his glory, the "GLOW" that comes from God Father's unique son. [Greek for that son: "mono-genes" = the only one with "genes" like that.] How so genetically unique? He's full of God's Grace-talk and God's Truth-talk. [Danker on Greek word for truth, "aleetheia." Actually a negative term with the "a" (=not) in front of "leetheia" (=escape notice). So this truth is "hiding nothing," no "cover-up," both about the reality of planet-wide darkness and our own involvement in it.]

[To come to closure the evangelist adds vv. 16-18.]

"From his fullness (from the overflow) all of us have received grace upon grace. [Now a retrospective about God talking at at the very beginning and some God-talking thereafter before Bethlehem.] God was talking before through Moses. That God-talk was law. [Didn't displace the darkness. May even intensify it. Thus not good enough for folks in darkness.] God-talking in Jesus is something else. Grace and Truth together. [Good news for benighted folks, yet no cover-up about our darkness.]

"No one has ever seen God. [No wonder, since God is "an utterance, chiefly oral." You hear a voice, but to "see" it, the voice needs to be embodied.] Only in the "unique

genes" of God's Son is God so embodied. The Son's talk comes straight from the Father's bosom. He's the one who "exegetes" [that's the Greek verb] the Fatherly heart for us. [Danker on this verb: "gives us the details."]

That's what the rest of John's Gospel does: gives us the details.

2. Christmas letter excerpts from a pastor in Thailand: CRASH SCENES OR CRECHE SCENES

[After several paragraphs about friends and associates who "failed" in 2004, he concludes:

I could have included other stories, some about family members, some of you, in this recitation. I could have written about me. It has been a mixed year for most of us. I could say the same thing about the USA or Thailand.

I think we're going to come through this. I am optimistic. But for the moment it's an unfinished Christmas symphony.

Once upon a time I would have predicted a triumphal ending, a crescendo up to be big chords at the end. I would have intimated that what we're going through is really a blessing, a prefiguration of the climax of the symphony. I no longer want to try to predict the way the symphony will end. My faith is much starker than it used to be. Christmas is much more a festival of incarnation than of nativity, much more about God's involvement in crash scenes than creche scenes.

3. Christmas letter excerpts from a senior colleague in California FAILURE TO EVOLVE

Consider that two of our five children are in their 50's; five of the grandchildren are in college, and one has completed college and joined the work force. The others

are growing up fast—and we worry about the world in which they're growing up. Here's poet Denise Levertov "On the Mystery of the Incarnation":

*"It's when we face for a moment the worst our kind can do,  
and shudder to know the taint in our own selves,  
that awe cracks the mind's shell and enters the heart:  
not to a flower, not to a dolphin, to no innocent form  
but to this creature vainly sure it and no other is god-like,  
God (out of compassion for our ugly failure to evolve)  
Entrusts, as guest, as brother, the Word."*

And so we pray the ancient Advent prayer:

*Oh come, Desire of nations, bind In one the hearts of all mankind;  
Oh, bid our sad divisions cease, And be yourself our Prince of Peace.*

God bless us, every one!

4. The earthquake and tsunami. Our attempts to make contact with Christian siblings (4 e-addresses) on the island of Sumatra have not yet succeeded. >From others in the area have come these two postings:

A. From an Aussie, Eddie Trotter, a pastoral colleague from our days in Bali 5 yrs ago. Bali is part of Indonesia. Bali post-Christmas notes  
Thanks for your Christmas greetings. I trust that your celebrations went well & that 2005 becomes a good year for you and yours.

Much of the world is reeling directly or from

reports of the catastrophe of December 26th's Richter 9 earthquake off Sumatra, with the ensuing killer tsunamis.

Here in Bali, we are grateful to have felt no effect. Wave action is normal, the tidal mark is as usual. Just noticed a couple of mild tremors, normal for here. Bali is in a "shadow" area from the epicentre. The West Australian coast was more exposed.

Indonesian Vice President Yusuf Kalla said on Monday night that maybe 20,000 people could have died in Aceh alone, where communication with a large section of the coastline closest to the epicentre is still not established. Unfortunately his guesstimate looks like being well below the final count in this tragedy, with those same areas not yet reached at time of writing! Let alone the threat from diseases!

On the good news front, Christmas celebrations across Indonesia went without any reported incidents. Again thousands of Muslims joined about 100,000 military & police deployed to protect churches. In Bali neighbourhood Hindu security also assisted. ( This story may not get into the Western media.) Even in Ambon Muslims joined Christians in the celebrations for the first time there in recent years.

Our annual combined [Nusa Dua, Legian & Sanur—three English-speaking congregations] Christmas Eve at the Grand Hyatt Hotel in Nusa Dua was well attended, despite terrorist threats. Our "angels" wore guns.

However, tourist numbers have been down here again,

although there had been an upbeat forecast based on airline / hotel bookings. It seems there have been a lot of domestic & overseas cancellations. Ironically numbers of Australians planning to holiday in Bali took heed of the government's travel warning for Indonesia & transferred to Phuket, Thailand, just in time to be caught in the devastation there.

More next time. Meanwhile have a grace-drenched New Year! Shalom.

B. From Pr. Martin Yee, Lutheran Church in Singapore Greetings from Singapore. Thanks for your concern. Yes, this earthquake and tsunami is devastating, many of us here are "traumatised". Some parts of Singapore also shaken by the quake aftershock tremors altho no tsunami reached our shores thanks to Sumatra's shelter.

However the Indonesian island of Nias was not so fortunate as it is on the flip side of Sumatra to us altho same latitude. One of our former LCS Co-worker Michael Christian is a missionary there right now. Yet to hear from him as communication to that island was cut. Michael is my good friend and former colleague pastor at Jurong Christian Church. I have been to that island with Michael previously and it was jolted by a Richter 7.8 quake offshore when I was there a few years ago. The ground moved under my feet and it was scary stuff. But this is Richter 9.0!

Some Singaporeans died and were missing too while holidaying in those areas, as thousands of Indonesians, Thais, Indians, Sri Lankans and hundreds of Malaysians. I have been to the Aceh

province before with Michael meeting and fellowship “secretly” ethnic Indonesian Christians in that fundamentalist Muslim state. That Aceh province was badly devastated by the quake and tsunami.

My wife Betsy just came back 2 weeks ago from Madras India after a missions trip to help some street kids there and she could hardly believe her eyes what has happened after she left them. She is wondering how they are now, as they stayed near a shelter home near the sea.

As I prepare for my sermon on Jan 16th from John’s Gospel 1:19-42, I hear Jesus asking “What do you want?” v38. What do all these suffering people want? What do I want? Have I found the Messiah, the Lamb of God?

Tough questions in the eye of a storm!

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## How I Finally Got Advent

Colleagues;

Today’s Thursday Theologian, of this very last day of Advent 2004, is Jerome Burce, pastor of Messiah Lutheran Church, Lakewood, Ohio. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder



## ***How I Finally Got Advent:***

### ***Notes on a June visit to old stomping grounds***

*On the First Sunday in Advent, 1976, I inflicted the second worst sermon I've ever preached on the patient saints of my vicarage congregation. A week of tearing out my hair over texts and typewriter had produced 15 plus minutes of dreadful rubbish about "Advent ambiguity" or some such thing. I did not, as I recall, preach the Gospel that day. Not even close. Truth be told, Advent had me flummoxed. I didn't get it, this mix of moods, this back-and-forth snapping of the head along the line connecting past and future. At what or whom were we meant to be looking, Christ the judge or Christ the baby? What exactly were we anticipating, knee-knocking apocalypse or warm-fuzzied nativity? That I held such things to be antithetical was proof, of course, of my unfitness for the Advent pulpit, though any who may have tumbled to this at the time were too polite to point it out. I'm glad I didn't preach that year on Advent 2. John the Baptist simply confused me. I could not have begun to parse or situate his rant as preachers must, in such a way that on reading out the passage containing it one can honestly add the assertion "This is the Holy Gospel."*

*Some of us learn slowly, others more slowly still. Where Advent is concerned, include me in the latter camp. It's been three decades since that seminarian's debacle, and while I don't think I've abused any other congregation quite so badly, still, it suddenly hits me that only now, in this present Advent, am I hearing a thunk as the "gotcha" penny finally drops into place. It strikes me too that I can attribute the thunk to two crucial days of a three-week visit that I paid to some old stomping grounds this past June. Herein the tale I'll tell.*

*Some background. I'm an MK, a missionary's kid, born and raised on turf now known as Papua New Guinea (no comma between the P*

and the NG, the three words jointly naming the independent nation that governs the eastern half of the big island just north of Australia.) I'm also in my own right an RM, a repatriated missionary, having spent most of the '80s on a first pastoral call to the same area I was raised in, PNG's Enga Province, westernmost of the five key highlands provinces that contain a slight majority of the country's population. Late last year a society of other RM's, people I grew up among, commissioned my elder son and me to do a brief survey in PNG, the aim being to dig up some clues on how they, the RM's, might be of present help and support to the churches and the siblings-in-Christ that were and are still being born of the catechizing and baptizing they did in the 1950s and 60s. Simon and I jumped at the chance and headed west at the end of May.

That in extreme brief is how I found myself in June's third week inviting 45 pastors and two or three bishops of the Gutnius Lutheran Church-Papua New Guinea (hereafter GLC; G as in Gutnius as in Good News as in Gospel) to take a good close look at Luther's Small Catechism, Part 5, The Office of the Keys. Turns out that the siblings-in-Christ, some of them at least, were looking not just to be surveyed but also refreshed, it having been a decade or more, apparently, since pastors in the area had had an opportunity to take an in-service course of any kind. I'd spent most of my stint in the '80s teaching at the GLC's second-tier seminary, the one that required no formal credentials of incoming students save the ability to read, write, and communicate in New Guinea Pidgin English. It was therefore decided that the old teacher, coming back, might just as well do some teaching. And so I did, with alacrity, recalling how those too few years at the front of a classroom had driven home the theology I had grasped, though not quite, not really, when I was the student. Tangentially: I will someday make the case that all American seminarians should be

forced to operate for a spell in New Guinea Pidgin. With its limited English-like vocabulary it's easy to learn. It's also impossible to hide behind, lacking utterly those polysyllabic abstractions like "justification" or "eschatology" that can serve so usefully to cloak a student's (or a preacher's) essential ignorance of what the Word of God is fundamentally about. Pidgin's metier is image, picture-talk, parabolic allusion. A student in the '80s, wishing to convey how overjoyed he was that I'd come to see him at his internship site, told me that had he been a dog his tail would have wagged like mad as he watched me trudge up the path. Burial is "planim daiman," literally "plant [the] dead man." Confession is "autim sin," i.e. "out [the] sin." The best teachers know that images are the cruise missiles of pedagogy. Launch the right one, correctly targeted, and the hearer's memory will be forever cratered by the point you wish to make with it. Fire wrongly or wildly, and the resulting damage will be nigh impossible to undo. A few days into the teaching this June I began to notice that an errant missile seemed to be flying about in the pastors' conversation. The image was "tekewe" or "kisim bek ki," i.e. "take away" or "fetch back [the] key." The thing being described seemed to be excommunication, though I wonder now if it wasn't defrocking. The latter would make some sense, the former none at all. It betokened a misuse, a dreadfully wrong application of the text that gives rise to the image. I mean Matthew 16:19, Jesus to Peter: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven..." It was to address this that we reached for our catechisms.

The catechism we reached for, by the way, was not just Luther's Small but an amplified edition thereof, the amplifier being Willard Burce, my father, who in the early '60s needed a basic theological handbook for Enga evangelists and so wrote one. I suspect his model was the Missouri Synod's old Schwann

catechism, much maligned in my student days for its so-called proof-text methodology, but enormously useful, as my father has pointed out to me, for getting quickly at the “sedes doctrinae,” i.e. seats or roots of doctrine, those strands of connection between the apostolic testimony of the first century and the Church’s current teaching. This presumes of course that the current church, taking St. Paul seriously, wishes to refrain from preaching a gospel other than the one the apostles preached (“not that there is another gospel” etc.). Burce, for one, so wished for his evangelists so to refrain. His text, composed originally in the Enga language, got ten or fifteen years of heavy use until fashions changed, necessities intervened, and Pidgin replaced Enga as the primary medium for pastoral instruction in the GLC. Now in retirement, Burce recently overhauled his old text, updated it to address present PNG realities (much changed from the ’60s), and produced parallel versions in both Pidgin and English. I had hauled copies with me this June. Resource-starved pastors-the happy few, attending the course-received them with joy. Rightly so, for they served us well.

The topic, remember, was the Office of the Keys, least of all the topics touched on in the Small Catechism, at least if the measure of least-ness is the amount of time that America’s Lutheran pastors will devote to it in their confirmation classes. First lesson for this Burce this June: that needs to change. Sleepy pastoral minds have long associated the Office of the Keys almost exclusively with questions of church discipline. This is as true in the GLC-PNG as it is in the ELCA, doubtless also in the LCMS. The big difference between GLC and ELCA pastors-here let LCMS-ers speak for themselves-is that the former, unlike the latter, still think about church discipline and try to exercise it. Has excommunication ever been discussed at any conference of pastors in the 17-year

history of the ELCA? I'll bet big and bet not. GLC pastors, by contrast, wrestle with it all the time. They're obliged to by their universal take-it-for-granted assumption that certain behaviors, unrepented, necessarily render a person unfit for participation in the body and blood of Christ.

Taking a second or a third wife is one of them. So is permitting yourself to be so taken. So is lethal participation in inter-clan warfare. Many are the men and women who have been asked to take a seat on the fringes when communion begins. Presumably many have responded by taking no seat at all. And now I'm guessing a little: some pastors, wishing to uphold standards yet grieving over lost sheep, have slipped into swamps of ad hoc casuistry and legalistic calculation: yea and so many months for yea and such an offense, restoration to follow on yea and such terms, etc., etc. This was going on in the '80s. I saw no signs last June that habits have changed. Again I'll bet big that GLC pastors butt heads fairly frequently over the casuistic details. What they aren't doing-not yet, at any rate-is looking long and hard at the assumptions that give rise to their dilemma in the first place. But this makes, perhaps, for another story at another time.

It's worth noting that of the 45 pastors at the in-service course all but one or two claimed to be hearing private confession on a fairly regular basis. Good for them. Good for the missionaries, both Western and Papua New Guinean, who got them doing it by ingraining the habit in Enga Lutheran culture. U.S. Lutherans would do well to be less sanguine about their sinning, more eager to have it attended to by a pointed word of absolution. This too, of course, is another time's story.

For now I concentrate on the matter that struck me most forcibly in June, namely the way the whole conception of the Office of the Keys had been squeezed down to the narrow and

*fundamentally miserable question of who's in and who's out-not in and out of the kingdom, mind you, but in and out of the kingdom's pale portents: a congregation; a wider church's pastoral roster. Thus the import of the expression, "tekewe ki," where the key is like the card that gives you access to the frequent fliers' lounge at the airport. Get rowdy, make a scene, insult the head waiter or maybe the head bishop, and guess what: the key is snatched from your trembling fingers and you're cast into outer darkness with the rest of the hoi poloi. Grovel sufficiently for the proper length of time and lo, the key shall be restored. If I exaggerate what I was hearing, I do so but slightly.*

*So we cracked the catechism and here's what we found-Luther's words first, then Burce's in amplification:*

*"The Office of the Keys is that special authority which Christ has given to his church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners..." (Luther). "Here are some parts of the work of administering the Keys: Preaching and teaching God's Word. Forgiving sins. Administering Holy Baptism. Administering the Lord's Supper. (Mt 18:18; 28:18-20; Mk 16:15; Lu 24:47; Jn 20:22-23; 1 Cor 4:1; 11:23-28; Eph 4:32; 1 Pt 2:9). Those acts open the door of heaven to penitent sinners." (Burse)*

*Those who once memorized the Small Catechism know that Luther's sentence goes on to talk about withholding forgiveness from the impenitent. The amplification faithfully reflects on this. That I omit these parts in my quoting is quite deliberate, the point being to draw the present reader's attention, as mine was instantly drawn, to the priority of the positive. God's proper work, Luther elsewhere calls it. Forgiving sins, a concept Burce arms with exactly the right image: opening the door.*

*I happened while introducing this to be standing with my back to a door, one that opened most happily on a marvelous vista: first a valley, then a row of hills, then another row of higher hills, and beyond them, in the far distance, a stretch of bona fide mountains. These tugged the eye, inescapably. Then they begged the imagination to leap them o'er, as an old poet might say.*

*I spent the next couple of days milking the image for all it was worth, again and again swinging that door on its hinges and inviting my pastoral colleagues to think of the far side of those far mountains as the future, or more specifically, as the only future that really is a future because it belongs to the One who owns the last word on what and whom the future finally contains. "The Office of the Keys," said I (and I taught myself as I said it) "embraces the totality of the Church's purpose. It encompasses everything that pastors properly do, not only hearing confession but also preaching a sermon, baptizing a baby, visiting a shut-in, teaching a Sunday School class. This assumes, of course, that at heart and center of all these activities is the proclamation of the Christ to whom the future belongs. 'Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden,' i.e. you for whom the future is dismal. The point is to kick the Jesus door open for such folks and to entice them to step through to his future. The Office is not about handing out keys to the nice and retrieving them from the naughty. It's about 'opim dua' (open [the] door) and 'pasim dua' (fasten [the] door), and if and when you swing the door shut on someone, it can only be for the purpose of jarring their attention so they'll sit up and notice the next time you swing it open."*

*This too: "Christ's future is not only the future beyond sight, though it's surely that. It's also the foreseeable future of tomorrow and next year. It's the valley of illness, perhaps, that you're about to plunge into. It's the hill of grief and*

sorrow that lies immediately beyond. Notice how the path to the far horizon leads first through these. Understand that these too belong to Christ who occupies them already, the great Good Shepherd in that valley and on that hillside, rod and staff already in hand to comfort and protect you so that nothing else you encounter there will separate you from the love of God. To tell people of this-to urge them to trust it-that too is what opening the door is all about."

Did the brothers get it? I certainly hope so. The world they serve the Gospel to is a fairly bleak one, its inhabitants far less able than Americans to pretend, however briefly, that they can craft or control whatever tomorrow might bring. I discovered this June that PNG, ever an adventure, is rougher and tougher now than it was in the '80s. Then crime was a nuisance. Now it's a steady threat. The country feels poorer. Roads have decayed. Coffee groves are fewer and shabbier. (A recent NPR bulletin: of the \$4 you spend on your Starbucks concoction, one cent reaches the third-world grower's pocket.) Shopping and entertainment options in provincial centers, never many, have declined noticeably. The number of educated yet hopelessly unemployed young adults has mushroomed. One guesses that most are not only frustrated but wretchedly bored. To ease the pain they reach these days for marijuana or home-brewed papaya hooch, both of them unknown two decades ago. A local businessman I crossed paths with mourned the increasing incidence of suicide among recent university graduates. General health and nutrition standards are slipping. The AIDS virus has teamed up with a nasty pack of older killers like pneumonia, malaria, and TB, all still vigorous and very busy. Peace on earth is a fantastical chimera, especially in the heavily-populated provinces of the central highlands where the basic social unit is the patrilineal clan. Clans are touchy creatures, quick to take offense. Inter-clan warfare has always



been the region's most intractable social problem. This too is worse than it was, guns having been introduced to arsenals that were once composed exclusively of bow, arrow, and spear.

All this in a country that is 95% ostensibly Christian ([www.adherents.com](http://www.adherents.com)). It seemed to me that many are on the hunt right now for more useful alternatives. Bear in mind that Papua New Guineans are as prone as Americans, Russians, ancient Romans, and yet more ancient Israelites to utopian fantasies, those spasmodic aches for an appearance on earth of this, that, or the other version of the peaceable kingdom Isaiah has been telling the Church about these past few weeks. Such dreams are by no means exclusive to Judaism or Christianity. Anthropological historians in PNG have recorded outbursts of millennial frenzy that predate any contact whatsoever with missionaries.

As with all such frenzies, the aim was to secure desired goods by demonstrating one's fitness (or the fitness of one's group) to whoever was thought to be running the cosmic shipping depot-gods, spirits, ancestors, principalities, powers, take your pick. Prophets trade on the future. Like Monte Hall of "Let's Make A Deal" they point to doors with the promise that the good life lies beyond. They offer keys-the right incantation; the correct ritual; the sufficient morality; the hot stock tip, the perfect diet-that will allow the lucky few to step on through to happiness and joy. Of course they never get it right, not least because none have the slightest clue what to do with the overwhelming evidence of intractable sin that stares us daily in the face, so they opt to ignore it. This aside, I've often wondered how much the steady failure of pre-contact prophets paved the way for the eager welcome that Christian missionaries received in most parts of PNG. Surely some saw them as the vanguard of kingdom-come-to-earth. If nothing else they afforded access to steel, an improvement in daily life of a

*magnitude comprehensible only to someone who has actually tried to split a tree with a stone axe.*

*But these days stone axes are great-grandpa's bad memory, and it's obvious to all that steel does not the kingdom make. Nor do roads, or helicopters, or gold mines, or high schools, or parliamentary democracy. Nor do churches, at least not the ones the missionaries established. Those who attend them are still sinners, dull, unpleasant, fractious, bossy; as prone as anyone else to mishap and injury, illness and death. The evidence is abundant that many Papua New Guineans, Engas among them, are weighing classic Christianity in the balance of their expectations for life right now, and are finding it badly wanting. So what else is new? Christ crucified disappoints no more badly there than he does here, and on both sides of the Pacific he disappoints badly indeed. At some point-and PNG Christians are at or beyond this point-the import of the cross has got to sink in. When he said his kingdom was not of this world he meant it.*

*One response to the disappointment in PNG is a present outburst of religious experimentation, akin, I should think, to the protracted 19th century madness of upstate New York. I spoke with researchers at the Melanesian Institute, an ecumenical think tank that tracks religious activity in the country. They told me of splits in every one of the major denominational groups; of new Muslim mosques and Mormons on the troll; of masses descending on the faith-healer Benny Hinn; of resurgent interest in the old animism, especially in those features of it that involved witchcraft, i.e. the promise of control over one's environment and, more to the point, one's enemies. Charismatic and Pentecostal expressions of Christianity, nascent in the '80s, have exploded everywhere in the country and certainly in the Enga Province. A variant of the old American tent revival is suddenly popular. We passed one in*

progress. My son visited a place called Irelya, home to a motherchurch of sorts for Enga Lutheranism and for a long time the site of GLC headquarters. His tour guides showed him special prayer houses where the super-faithful gather for night-long sessions of something, exactly what he couldn't ascertain. Hopes were high there that the Holy Spirit would name a new prophet at a forthcoming youth conference.

I stopped in one day to see the GLC's first bishop, now retired. Where he lives there was once one congregation, solidly Lutheran. Now there are six or seven, some affiliated with overseas holiness groups, others of strictly local invention. The bishop shook his head as he talked about it. So did the principal of the seminary that hosted the in-service course. Not so long ago he was commissioned to gather information on what the new groups and movements are teaching. Turns out that much of it is blatant heresy-heresy precisely because it despises the door of Christ crucified and gropes for other openings to the future that might prove more immediately productive of God's goodies, spiritual or material. Most of the heresy is very old heresy, recurrences in the Enga Province of notions that doubtless troubled the saints in 3rd-century Antioch. Bad ideas refuse to die. Like crabgrass or cockroaches they are with us always, to the close of the age.

And so is Christ, of course. With us, that is, to the age's conclusion. That was June's good news. It's December's too.

To my GLC pastoral counterparts, many confused and dismayed by the muck and furor swirling around them, I said simply this: hold your ground. To you is granted the high and holy office of standing watch at the Jesus door. So exercise it. Keep swinging the thing on its hinges so people, finding it open, will look on through and step on through. Other doors will disappoint. They're bound to. A kingdom-come-to-earth tomorrow does nothing

for people who are dying today, a point that lots of Christians seem intent on forgetting, also in America. In any case, the future that Isaiah imagines for us is a future only God can produce. Who else will dissuade lions from eating lambs, asps from biting babies, or Enga clansmen-Americans too-from killing each other? And how will God produce this future for us except via the One who alone attends to our flagrant unfitness for it through the forgiving of our sins? To point this out, by the way, is to exercise the other side of the Office-the alien side, Luther would say-where one shuts the door on those who fancy that their sin is not an issue; as if God is obliged to populate his future with them as they are, in their present condition of mind and heart. God will not be mocked. That's what the shutting of the door proclaims. This Jesus door, by definition, is for sinners only. If you can't or won't accept those terms go try another. Of course, paths that dodge the Crucified One are at best short paths to a truncated future. They'll get you through the valley, perhaps, maybe halfway up the nearest hill. They sure won't get you to the far side of the far horizon, not even close. Some who try them will tumble to this. The moment they do, swing that Jesus door open all over again, and lead them through.

That, more or less, is where I left it. I hope it helped. I pray in any case that a solid core of GLC pastors will continue faithfully to preach and teach the Word of God, to forgive sins, to administer Holy Baptism, to administer Holy Communion-in other words to exercise the Office of the Keys on the Church's behalf. I pray for the sake of the Enga Province right now that they and others will keep the Jesus door open. How else shall there be an honest and a real future for the people who live there? May all who read this pray these things as all.

For my part I'm back these days in the parish I serve doing as my colleagues are doing in PNG-and realizing of a sudden that

*I've figured Advent out. There's nothing ambiguous or confusing about it. (Whatever was that addled seminarian thinking?) Plain and simple, Advent is 'opim dua'-nothing more, nothing other, nothing less. Liturgically it opens the door on a new church year. It does so by putting readers at lecterns and pastors in pulpits all over the world, reading out and preaching the Word of God that tells of the future-God's future; a future that God is determined on Christ's account to include us in, lions and lambs, snakes and toddlers, the biting and the bitten alike, all of us created anew and knowing nothing any longer of devil, death and sin. "Fling wide the door," the congregation sings (Lutheran Book of Worship, 32), and I understand at last that they're singing to me. "Crank that door, pastor! Let the king of glory through. Show us our future." Here, I think, is the Church's grandest statement of the Gospel as that Gospel bears on present time. We blare it out for four Sundays in a row. Then we spend the rest of the year explaining why we were so bold in Christ to say the things we said. Along the way we encourage the faithful to function as true prophets in their own right, dropping their signals here and there that, no, they are not content with the world as they find it, nor do they imagine for a moment that God is. Even so they'll trudge their daily paths with confidence, knowing that God will make all things new, themselves included, in God's good time. While they're at it they'll share the wealth of their spectacular future, beginning with the simple matter of treating each other-the stranger too-as persons who also have a future in Christ. That's another way of saying that they'll forgive each other's sins.*

*Anyway, it has felt this Advent as if I were back in that Enga Province classroom, swinging the door to and fro, always leaving it as wide open as it will go. Again I'm getting it. By the grace of God and the will of the Church I'm an officer of*

*the Church's Keys which are Christ's Keys. Using them, I get to provoke young men into seeing visions, old men into dreaming dreams. (Women too. Of course women too!) So that's exactly what I've been up to these past few weeks, with lots of help from old Isaiah. It's been a blast.*

*Jerome Burce Lakewood, Ohio*

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*Addendum, from the catechism discussed above:*

*"Christ gave the Office of the Keys to his church-*

- because he loves the world (Jn 3:16)*
- so that his people will continue to preach the Word, administer Baptism and the Lord's Supper, and forgive people's sins in his name until the Last Day (Mt 24:14)*
- so that his people in the world will continue to have saving faith in the Savior, Jesus Christ (Jn 17:3, 6-15)*
- so that people will continue to receive eternal life through the Word of God (Jn 8:31-32; 20:31)*
- to prevent the devil from destroying the Christian church on earth (Mt 16:18)*
- so that the church will grow (Acts 2:47; Eph 2:21)."*

*To which let us add: Thanks be to God.*

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# **The Peace and Justice Mantra.**

# Part II

Colleagues,

Herewith some stocking-stuffers I received in response to last week's posting [ThTh 339] on the "Peace and Justice Mantra."

1. Several responses were not happy with ThTh 339. Here's one sample: Now let's get this straight, Ed, You seem to be saying in Thursday Theology #399 that any appeal to the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus in the struggle for worldly justice and peace is a waste of time, off base, biblically unacceptable. The End is near ("Apocalypse Now"). "God-relations" is exclusively where it's at for the Church. Forget everything else. Let's pack our bags and get ready to move heavenward. Right? I, too, remember when such concern for such justice and peace appeared rarely if at all in prayers and sermons. Blissfully, there was hardly any intersection at all between what was going on in the Church and the world around us.

Do you really mean that the spheres of the right and the left hands of God aren't connected at all in Luther's metaphor, i.e., are disembodied ... that they don't even come close to bumping into each other, ever? Hmm ... maybe that's what allowed him to stomp so brutally on the peasants and the Jews? But, Luther's theological construct is not infallible (don't get me wrong, it's been an important image for me over the years) and has its limitations especially if interpreted as a rigid system. Or, Jerry Falwell's theology may be more Lutheran than I thought (like the witness of Jesus and, e.g., supporting Bush and the war in Iraq having absolutely nothing to do with each other)!

I'm hardly naive about the historic realization of worldly peace and justice before and since the Cross – including what's going on now – but to bug out now on the struggle and distance Jesus absolutely from it all is profoundly contradictory to me. No question God's decisive action in Christ is primary and preliminary and, yeah, justice and peace is often a superficial, popular, even meaningless, mantra. But your analysis seems to summarily dismiss the less-than-ultimate evidence of justice and peace that has occurred over the centuries because of the countless faithful who have been compelled/inspired/called by the sphere of the right to participate passionately in that of the left, whether The End is near or far off.

My response was:

Colleague: It seems that we are on different wave lengths, so that my stuff comes to your receiving set as static and when I read your response, I say: What you apparently heard is not the program I transmitted. I don't know where to start with a reply. One thing seems clear to me: e-mail is not the medium to do so. Even so, Peace and Joy!

## 2. Others thought otherwise about the posting.

A. I appreciated your take on Peace and Justice as the PC version of Christianity. My own, cynical take on how that began and grew to be the chic point of being a Christian is that it's a version of religion people can join in even if they're too embarrassed to have anything to do with Jesus, the cross, and forgiveness—or even God for that matter. All one needs is the conviction that my politics are better than this or that “oppressor's” politics. It's liberation theology for dummies, or something like that. Everyone is for peace and justice, so long as they're on our terms. Well, all I meant to do was



say thanks, but then I went off on a mini-rant.

B. [Obviously from Hawaii] Aloha Ed, I just finished reading posting #339. As we say here, Mahalo nui loa (thank you very much or hugely) for some focus. As I was thinking about John's question for this Sunday's Gospel, "Are you the one or should we look for another?", your thoughts are helpful as we prepare to celebrate the birth of the great forgiveness-bringer. Aloha ke Akua me pili o'e (The Love of God be with you).

C. Thanks for your impeachment of peace and justice. (Typically we get one OR the other: the conquerors THEREAFTER want peace.) Isn't it a new incarnation of 19th century FOGBOM liberalism ("Fatherhood of God, Brotherhood of Man"). Thanks especially for holding up the forgiveness business as primary.

It is true, though, isn't it, that the Gospel does factually increase peace and justice in the world, if only in an ancillary way? Think of master and slave side by side at the Table (Philemon) or husbands loving their wives in a Gosselly way (As Christ loved the church). Of course you are right that this is left-hand stuff, but as your excellent Care and Redemption piece put it, the right hand at least gives strength to the left. Yes?

3. This came from a lay theologian and continuing student in the Lutheran School of Theology here in St. Louis. Seems to me that his questions are on target. To them I think I can say something. [My brackets inserted into his text pinpoint my responses.] Dear Ed:

I read with much interest your latest ThTh posting on the 'peace and justice' mantra. I too have been puzzled and sometimes troubled by this rather new emphasis in our churches. And my sons both went to Catholic high schools

and were exposed to it there as well; it seems to be a very popular notion in current Roman Catholic teaching. [1]

But I have a question. Last Sunday, we forewent the usual third-Sunday-in-Advent chanting of the Magnificat. Instead, we sang the alternative, verses from Psalm 146. We sang the following verses:

*[The LORD] gives justice to those who are oppressed,  
and food to those who hunger.  
The LORD sets the prisoners free;  
The LORD opens the eyes of the blind;  
The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;  
The LORD loves the righteous; the LORD cares for the  
stranger;  
He sustains the orphan and widow...*

And of course the Psalms and the prophets both include words similar to these. So does the apostle James (see James 1:27). How does God's apparent concern with justice for the oppressed, as expressed in these and other similar verses, fit in with Jesus' ministry? Or does it? [2] Is this an expression of God's 'left-hand' dealings with His people that is not directly related to His 'right-hand' work of redemption through Christ? [3] Should we as God's people proclaim the validity of this left-hand work? If so, how? [4] And if so, how do we avoid falling into the 'ministry of peace and justice' trap that you discussed? [5] Just curious.

My response:

[1] That's no surprise. The fundamental axiom of classic RC theology makes this a natural. "Grace does not diminish nature, but brings it to perfection." Any good action

people do that improves creation's welfare, is grace (God's grace) in action. Jesus is the grand finale of God's history of gracious action. God's supernova of God's long history, even from before creation, of gracious goodness. But – and here's the kicker—what God is doing in Christ is not qualitatively different from all God's other good and gracious actions. Christ is on the same grace-wavelength of all that God has been doing since the beginning. So “peace and justice” work for the wellness of creation comes from the same divine chemistry as Christ's own work does.

Here's where the Augsburg Reformers said: Not so. First of all the Bible says: Not so. What God was doing in Christ is NOT part and parcel of what God's been doing all along—even God's unceasing good things. [And, of course, it surely is radically different from the critical stuff God does with sinners when he pays them their “wages.” God's pay-off death-sentence for sinners could never really fit within the RC axiom. With that axiom God is—by definition—always gracious to sinners (and not just in Christ). So the tough stuff about God's law always accusing us has to get “re-interpreted” in classic RC theology.].

The reformers read the NT saying that God's grace in Christ was something BRAND NEW. In Matthew's language God's forgiving sinners by the sacrifice of his own son. NEVER happened before. In Luke's language God's seeking and saving the lost. NEVER happened before. In John's language, God's offering the “bread of life” that even Moses (God's previous superstar) didn't offer, couldn't offer. NEVER happened before. In Paul's prose God's reconciling sinners to himself and not “counting trespasses,” as God always otherwise does, even with all

the grace-goodies God has been showering on the planet since time immemorial. NEVER happened before.

That's why Luther in his preface to the Letter to the Romans says: To understand Romans you must see that Paul distinguishes between God's grace and God's gifts. God showers gifts all over the place. Call them God's peace and justice stocking stuffers. Metaphorically speaking, from his left hand. Only in Christ, ONLY in Christ, is God gracious to sinners so that death does not have the last word for them. God's right-hand work is qualitatively different from that of his left, although that in no way pooh-poohs the left stuff or the left-hand human agents through whom God does it. It simply says: Curing leprosy is one thing; undoing a sinner's death-sentence is something else. Jesus majors in the latter, at best he minors in the former.

Every NT writer hypes Jesus' major. They all agree with Jesus' last words in John's passion narrative about that work: "It IS finished." None of them ever say anything like that about the left-hand stuff Jesus did. No NT writer ever says that with Jesus' departure at Ascension, the world's "peace and justice" situation was palpably improved. Why don't they? Seems to me that the NT's answer is that the Kingdom of God which came with Jesus was healing the sinner's God-problem. God uses other agents for the left-hand stuff. Jesus has left-hand skills too. But that is not why the Father sent him.

To put Christ on the same production line with all of God's left-hand gifts -"it's all the same grace"- can only diminish Christ-and lead to the saddest line in Paul's Galatians epistle (possibly all of his letters): "Christ died in vain."

**[2]** Psalm 146 for all the good stuff it ascribes to God does not describe the unique Good Stuff that came with Christ. So by definition it's all left-hand. But remember, it's GOD'S left hand. And not to be pooh-poohed. Peace and Justice is God's agenda. It preserves the endangered world. But does anyone get their sins forgiven from the benefits cited in the Psalm? Does any God-distruster become a God-truster? Does anyone, did anyone, "repent and believe God's Good News," upon receiving those good-gifts? That's the redemption question.

I've been reading Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel these days for Advent meditation. These three regularly talk like that Psalm does, and then always add on: And still you deserted me for other gods! If the goodies cited in Psalm 146 could have done the job, then Christ would have been unnecessary. But patently they did not. "It was NOT finished." Christ did not die in vain.

Sample. From the lectionary in the Year of Luke just ended: 10 guys got their leprosy-problem cured (God's left hand therapy). Only one of the ten got his God-problem healed (right hand therapy). The end situation of all ten was NOT the same. The end product for the 9 and of the one were radically different. Ten got God's "care" ministry. Only one wound up with "redemption."

**[3]** Jesus doing left-hand stuff. In last Sunday's Gospel (Matt. 11) Jesus gives John's disciples a laundry list of the signals that the Messiah has arrived—and who the one doing that stuff is.

[John the evangelist's gospel will later have to explain what the synoptics did not always clarify, to wit, what the "sign" quality of these acts of left-hand goodness

are—and what they are not. Once again ,John 6 is the paradigm for clarifying what “eating bread in the wilderness” (a left-hand blessing)—whether from Jesus or from Moses—does and doesn’t do. If you miss the “sign” quality of such feeding, Jesus says, you wind up no better than you were be fore. Sure, you have a full tummy for a while. Which is not at all bad when you have an empty tummy. Good stuff, gift from God. But for those who don’t follow through on the “sign” in the lunch-box-bread to ingest THE bread of life (the right-hand offer), nothing in their God-box has changed. Wherever “nothing in the God-box changes,” the Kingdom has not yet come to such folks.]

It may appear at first reading of las Sunday’s Gospel that the “preaching of the Good News” is just another in the laundry list and that all of the items mentioned are of the same ilk. But all of those listed goodies, even that right-hand “goodie” offer of Good News, fail to be Kingdom-productive if they do not elicit the right-hand blessedness signalled in v. 6. Namely, not being offended by Jesus, but trusting him and following. Call it “faith.” Wherever faith hasn’t happened, Jesus’ messianic mission hasn’t yet arrived. His kingdom—God’s kingdom—has NOT (yet) come. That’s the dipstick for checking whether someone got in under God’s mercy management Kingdom or not: do they call Jesus Lord and follow him, or don’t they? If yes, then they’re in. If not, then not yet. [When Luther says that about “thy Kingdom come” in his two catechisms, he’s just reporting (so he claims) what the NT says. If he’s mistaken, then he’ll have to be refuted by scripture. Which he also often said.]

**[4]** Not just preach it, but do it. And when preaching it (you’re a Lutheran—you guessed it) make the proper

distinctions. As in the offertory collect often pray on Sundays: “We dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that you [God] have made.” Care and redemption are not identical. One preserves creation, the other brings it back home to its God and father. Tell folks that both are godly works, both assigned to God’s human workers. Folks not trusting Christ are nevertheless created by God to be able to do p&j stuff and have the “law within their heart” to activate them to do so. Folks who trust Christ have the other agenda added on to their first left-hand assignment from God. Their freedom in Christ frees them up to be even more dedicated—and risk-taking—in the vast work of caring and preserving the world.

**[5]** No “law” will guarantee that we won’t fall into such traps. “The mind of Christ” is one NT anchor for not getting trapped. A ThTh colleague recently told me that he now translates that as “the evangelical imagination.” Sounds good to me—imaging everything from the Gospel. Another one of Luther’s suggestions is: “the conversation and consolation of Christian folks talking with each other.” Sounds like a good venue for shop-talking that evangelical imagination.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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# The “Peace & Justice” Mantra

Colleagues,

*[Crossings office manager, Cathy Lessmann, reminds me to remind you of the gift-giving option for our Crossings operation that always comes at the end of each listserve posting. It'll be there at the end of this one too. You get the message.]*

In last Sunday's worship in our congregation we were encouraged to join Jesus in his “ministry of peace and justice” for the world. For a long while I've been scratching my head when those words appear in preaching and in prayer. They pop up everywhere in Christian language these days. They've become a mantra. Everybody's for peace and justice. Jesus was working for peace and justice. Christ's disciples are called to create a world of peace and justice. Sez who?

When did that doublet, peace and justice, become such an automatic mantra in Christian rhetoric? When did it become so p.c.? And why? Concretely, what are we praying for when we mention the doublet? Did Jesus ever designate his own ministry as peace & justice? And if not, why not?

**My thesis is: The ministry of the Manged Messiah was NOT the ministry of peace and justice that this mantra invokes these days.**

Here's some support for the thesis. What folks seem to have in mind when commending “peace and justice,” is (to use Luther's Biblical imagery) assigned by God to his agents of the left hand. The godly agenda of these left-hand agents is civil righteousness in God's old creation. Though peace & justice are indeed good and godly, they are not assigned to Jesus at all. To stick with Luther's image of the ambidextrous deity, Jesus is



God's right-hand man. His assignment is God's right-hand task that none of God's left-handers ever did fulfill, nor could fulfill. In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself—a.k.a. getting sinners forgiven. As God's original, only-begotten, right-hander, it's no surprise that after fulfilling his assignment he now "sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty" with authorization to be on the bench on Judgment Day.

I don't know how to research the question: "WHEN did this peace-and-justice combo become the p.c. language for Christian action, for Christian prayer?" I know it wasn't around when I was a kid. So I'll go with some hunches. It became vogue when the notion of the Kingdom of God moved away from its native focus (in the NT) on God's promise in Christ to forgive sinners, and came to be understood as a God's program for world renewal. The self-understood referents for peace and justice—as I listen to contemporary religious rhetoric—is for a world where folks live without warfare, where swords become plowshares, and where equitable justice reigns among peoples. Here's my crass claim: Never once does any NT text predicate that agenda to Jesus. His job is to get sinners forgiven, get lost children back to their Father, get the task of God-sinner reconciliation done. Jesus' job is "God-relations." The peace & justice mantra is all about "human relations." God-relations is Jesus' full-time job. He dedicates his entire life to it. Key word is promise, not program.

Not too long ago one of you dear colleagues, a guest writer for ThTh postings in the past, suggested that I was possibly "stuck" on the God-sinner reconciliation agenda and not framing the Kingdom of God broadly enough. You told me: "The promises of the coming kingdom in the prophets are much more than forgiveness; they also are about abundant food, water in the wilderness, the liberation of slaves and exiles, healing of the lame, blind, and

deaf, coming home to one's land and occupation, and peace between peoples."

Which prompted this reply:

1. And none of that ever happened anywhere in the OT except in very isolated instances, did it? And even at the hand of Jesus after individual "signs" of healing the lame, blind and deaf, there was no general improvement in the public health in that corner of the Roman Empire. Where IN REAL HISTORY did the prophets' "peaceable kingdom" ever show up? Even after Jesus came, it didn't happen either. He himself didn't restore any Eden-Garden anywhere before his departure when he was "in charge." And after his departure (when he still is "in charge" as the Dominus of 2004 years of Anno Domini) it never happened either, except here and there, and then still ephemeral. When Constantine declared the Roman Empire "Christian," there is no evidence that I know of about "peace & justice" improving anywhere in the realm. And when later the HOLY Roman Empire came on the scene, loaded with Christian premises, peace and justice remained as iffy as it had been before.
2. So unless Jesus was conning us all with his kingdom talk, his kingdom must have been about something else. And of course it was. His kingdom is NOT what the prophets were talking about with the items mentioned above. His kingdom was what the prophets couldn't deliver, even super-prophet Moses. That's the whole point of the Jesus-and-Moses contrast in John 6. Forgiveness of sinners (=Life that lasts, that can lick death) is what Moses' bread was unable to do. Jesus' mission was different. Radically different. Jesus claims his bread is to get sinners to live forever. It's a promise in God-relations, not a program in human-relations. And in John 6 the evangelist

wants us to understand that the “Moses manna” is not just the morning edibles the Israelites gathered in the Sinai, but the “Manna” of Sinaitic Torah. Patently the morning edibles didn’t get sinners forgiven, but neither could the bread of Sinai’s covenant. It couldn’t get sinners unsinners; it couldn’t offer them the bread for life that lasts.

3. My respondent continued: “Wouldn’t it be good to hear on Sunday mornings what Norman Borlaug did with Mexipak wheat fueling the Green Revolution, what Dag Hammarskjöld did for peace in the Congo, how Florence Nightingale with her good deaconess training helped to reform nursing, and how liberationists of various stripes worked for land reform, and how Wilberforce worked to end the slave trade and even folks like Charles Colson worked to bring hope to folks sitting in prison? Yes, these people are some of the vehicles through whom Christ carried out his promises of bringing the kingdom.” To which I replied: Couldn’t disagree more with your last sentence. We must make distinctions. [That’s a Lutheran mantra!] All that great good stuff by these great people is God’s good left-hand work. None of it is ever assigned to the Incarnate Logos as his agenda according to the NT gospels. I’m reminded of one specific text, Luke 12:13. Jesus gets asked to adjudicate a legal conflict between two brothers. He opts out. “Not my job,” he says. “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” And if he did speak a second sentence, it might have been: “My Father has assigned such peace & justice work to other agents. I’m on a different assignment—to help both you guys become rich toward God.” Those last three words conclude the parable that follows. Jesus’ work is God-relations. God’s southpaws work in human-relations. If Jesus refuses to take on the ministry of left-hand peace and justice, who

“sets us” to rewrite his assignment?

4. The great left-hand work of these great folks—Borlaug, Hammarskjöld and Nightingale—was not Christ’s kingdom. Or if it was, then the evidence to document that is personal confessions—of sin and of faith. “God, be merciful to me a sinner. Lord I believe; Help thou mine unbelief.” One signal that such good and great stuff of peace and justice is left-hand stuff is that it didn’t last. The Green Revolution has become a mixed-bag. The Congo is chaos again. Where is there land-reform that has made a lasting difference? The slave trade, e.g., worldwide sex slavery, is back again with a vengeance, etc. This is not to say these heroes should not have done it. Nor to denigrate their great efforts—and benefits. Rather to rejoice that in these instances—even if just for a while, the “care” part of the offertory collect about “care and redemption of all that you God have made” did actually happen. But then to go on to say that even with such courageous left-hand work, the Kingdom Christ brings did not show up there. It does not, it cannot, appear through God’s left-hand agencies. Only one agency brings that kingdom, God’s NEW management systems for sinners, viz., “That repentance and forgiveness of sins be preached in his name.” And when that agency elicits a trust-response, THERE the Kingdom comes that Christ was sent to effect. It’s also in the Johannine “great commission” [John 20]— “As the Father sent me, so send I you. If you forgive the sins of any, for them God’s forgiveness happens! And if you, or somebody else, doesn’t do it, it never happens.”
5. When folks say that Christ’s kingdom is “much more than forgiveness,” I twitch. Almost sounds like forgiveness of sinners is small potatoes, but the real biggies are a reconstituted paradise of “abundant food, water in the wilderness, the liberation of slaves and exiles, healing

of the lame, blind, and deaf, coming home to one's land and occupation, and peace between peoples."If that's what Jesus's kingdom-talk and kingdom-work was really about, then why/how – even theoretically– can his crucifixion & resurrection (clearly central as THE Gospel core in the witnesses we have) generate such a society of peace and justice? What's the connection, the cause-effect linkage? Is there any way to show that a crucified/risen Messiah is generative of the paradise world we all long for? I know of no one in the history of theology who has demonstrated that to bring in the "peaceable kingdom" it'll take a Messiah on a cross.

We need to take a closer look at the terms peace and justice, for each one is indeed linked to Jesus in NT texts. But with a difference. His kingdom operation is to terminate the hostility between God and sinners. When he "breathes" on his disciples Easter Sunday evening in John's gospel, that's the breeze–the holy gust–that's blowing on them. "My peace I give to you, not the world's (left-hand) kind. Here is shalom in God-relations.

And the justice that comes with that peace is not the equity justice of the modern mantra. It's the exact opposite. When sinners get equity justice from God, you always wind up with dead sinners. Not so the justice ministry of Jesus. His "justice ministry" is "mercy justice" for sinners. He takes the equity justice, the death sentence, in his body on a tree. And from his done deal he offers us a "life" sentence. Which he promises will hold up from here to eternity–right on through Judgment Day and then beyond.

This peace and justice confusion about the Kingdom of God has been around throughout the church's history. It may even been present when the NT documents were being

written. I have a hunch that John's gospel is a corrective to such confusion in his own time. Why else would he pass on to us such explicit words from Jesus that "my peace" is not what passes in the world for peace. Or Jesus' long dialogue (only in John) with Pilate that his kingdom is NOT the world's kind of kingdom. It's not that his is real and the world's is phony. Both are real, but they are on different turfs. In classical Lutheran Latin lingo, one is *coram deo* (God-relations), the other *coram hominibus* (human-relations).

Such confusion surfaced in gory fashion right in the midst of the Lutheran reformation too. Thomas Muentzer, Luther's one-time student and later public enemy, claimed that a paradise restored was what the Kingdom of Christ meant. And if the violators of such a peaceable kingdom, the princes and landlords, wouldn't make restitution peacefully, then by the sword it would have to be done. Granted, the princes were ungodly and demonstrated their bestiality as they butchered the oppressed. Even so, Muentzer's theology of Christ's kingdom was wrong. His vision was akin to Pilate's in the long Johannine dialogue Jesus had with him. It was a kingdom "of this world" different in kind from the "not of this world" kingdom Jesus described as his own to Pilate.

6. Since Christ's cross & resurrection didn't generate such a paradise-world anywhere in the Roman Empire, what are the conclusions? Jesus was a charlatan? That's plausible. More plausible, and more explicit in the NT kingdom texts is that Jesus' Kingdom is something else than the kingdom envisioned by Pilates and Muentzers and today's paradise-seekers. What do we do with his explicit claim to Pilate that his kingdom is "not of this world"? That doesn't mean it's pie-in-the-sky. Instead it means that the agenda he's

working on is a different one from “world-restoration.” It is a new way for God to “king it” over sinners, a new regime, a new way for God to “manage” sinners so that they don’t wind up dead, but live forever. It’s a kingdom about which Pilate doesn’t have a clue, bridging the God-Sinner gap—which no one “of this world,” not even the best folks (e.g., Moses) were ever able to pull off. Pilate, too, doubtless thought such a kingdom was no big deal, finally irrelevant to the serious difficulties of daily life. And he has lots of allies these days too. So what else is new? The world’s majority has always sided with Pilate about the irrelevance of any kingdom of forgiveness, God’s included. John the Baptizer did not revamp Jewish society with his baptism for the forgiveness of sins. Neither did Jesus when he picked up the forgiveness theme himself and concretely enacted it. The convinced were always a remnant, a little flock. But Christians, of all people, ought not get conned into minimizing the God-relations rescue and claiming that Christ’s kingdom is “much more than forgiveness.” How far away is that from what Paul tells the Galatians is an “other” gospel? For such other gospels you don’t need a crucified Messiah. For such gospels “Christ died in vain.”

7. Seems to me that the apocalyptic Gospel texts of recent Sundays are “perfectly clear.” Heaven and earth will pass away, Jesus claimed, even the social-Gospel improved society that we, here and there, are able to confect. But such oases of left-hand peace & justice are ephemeral. “Renewed and improved” old creation, yes, but still OLD creation. Not immune to the divine verdict “Not good enough to last,” ergo it too will pass away.
8. If it is Apocalypse Now—as I think it is—then the last book of the NT is our standard-bearer. And the Christian calling is to be “hustling the Lamb” (a.k.a. Christum

treiben) for/with all the folks we bump into as the apocalypse comes over the horizon and “we all fall down.” Christ calls us to be awake, that is, conscious that the four horsemen of the apocalypse and THE BEAST (once the Roman Empire and now the one and only empire still around) will be calling the shots, will be orchestrating the world’s destruction. Therefore “abundant food, water in the wilderness, the liberation of slaves and exiles, healing of the lame, blind, and deaf, coming home to one’s land and occupation, and peace between peoples” doesn’t happen when it’s apocalypse now. Read the headlines.

9. Au contraire. And why? Because God is turning loose the 4 apocalyptic destroyers. That’s what John the seer says. They come with divine authorization. Therefore we’re not gonna stop ‘em. Sure they terrorize us all, but they are the “rod of God’s anger,” and no one (even the Lamb’s worshippers) in John’s apocalypse escapes the war, plague, famine, fire. The Lamb’s worshippers trust, not that they will escape these grim-reapers, but that the Lamb’s resurrection is their grounds for hope—even as all the parameters of left-hand peace and justice crumble. Such hope is not pie-in-the-sky. It’s planting your OLIVE tree (so Pastor Mitri Raheb of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem) even as the Israeli soldiers come again to destroy your life’s work. It’s doing the “inasmuch” stuff of Matt 25, howsoever you can, as the sky continues to fall in. But still not resting your hope on what you can achieve there, since it too shall pass away. As Bob Bertram liked to say: “Hope needs success.” The only big success we’ve heard of—an Advent invasion from up front, beamed back into our law-of-sin-and-death world—is the One who conquered death, the death that otherwise always conquers all sinners. For sinners to hope in him makes sense, given the other options available.



10. That is what the Kingdom of God is all about. It's about "God-relations" being healed. Here's one description (Luther, Large Catechism, Lord's Prayer, Second Petition): "What is the kingdom of God? Answer: simply what we learned in the Creed, namely that God sent his Son, Christ our Lord, into the world to redeem and deliver us from the power of the devil and to bring us to himself and rule us as a king of righteousness, life, and salvation against sin, death, and an evil conscience. To this end he also gave his Holy Spirit to teach us this through his holy Word and enlighten and strengthen us in faith by his power. We pray here at the outset that all this may be realized in us and that . . . led by the Holy Spirit many may come into the kingdom of grace and become partakers of salvation, so that we may all remain together eternally in this kingdom." Christ's kingdom is a Good-News promise in God-relations. It's coram deo stuff. The word "eternally" in the last line above signals both the kingdom's turf (vis-a-vis the Eternal One) and its durability (forever and ever). Partial paradises in human relations, even extensive world-peace and equity-justice among peoples, are not "what is the Kingdom of God." For one thing, they cannot pass the "eternal" durability test. In Jesus' words, they still "pass away." They are part of heaven-and-earth. They are never death-proof. Death-proofing is a coram deo agenda.

You have to have death behind you in order to be death-proof for the future. Which comes with the peace and justice generated by the Manged Messiah. Which was the peace the angelic messengers were proclaiming. Yes, it was "on earth" (Hallelujah!) but it was a Peace with God (double Hallelujah!) that earthlings can never pull off. This promissory peace renders its trusters death-proof, Judgment Day survivors, even before it happens. This is

the promise all Christ-trusters cling to—also as they take their last breath. The last line of Luther’s apocalyptic hymn “A Might Fortress” highlights its chutzpah: “Das Reich muss uns doch bleiben. This Kingdom MUST be ours forever.” Why the “must”? God has “gotta” do it. He promised.

Peace (you know whose) and Joy (ditto)!  
Ed Schroeder

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## The Futures Market for Advent

Colleagues,

I pulled two things out of the barrel for today’s posting. It’s Advent stuff that we’ve used locally. Marie’s Google search on the Crossings web site says they’ve never been passed on to you via the listserve. So they come to you now. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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### ***The Futures Market for Advent***

*Church vocabulary in the (Latin) Middle Ages had two words for the future: FUTURUS and ADVENTUS . FUTURUS designated what lay up ahead in view of what could be extrapolated from the past. This future was to some degree predictable. It had a karma-*

quality. What you did in the past worked on into the future—for good or ill. You got what you had coming to you.

ADVENTUS signalled something up ahead that arrived from the other direction. Not at all the consequences of the past, this future was an arrival (maybe even an invasion) from up front, from what had not yet happened. FUTURUS is predictable; ADVENTUS not at all.

Small wonder that the early Christian community latched on to ADVENTUS as the word for their future in the light of the Good News. What they had once expected from God—extrapolating in the FUTURUS mode—was not what actually came. Even if some of the clear-eyed ones had a hunch that the deity would arrive enfleshed, none could even imagine what this humanized deity finally did. To have God on the ground in action dishing out FUTURUS pay-backs was not likely to be good news. What God did do in Christ was different. For that there was no precedent. Brand new. A nova.

One apostolic advertisement for ADVENTUS hypes the novelty this way: “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor human heart even conceived, that’s what God has coming from the future toward those who trust him.” (I Cor. 2:9) But can anything so never before seen, never before heard, never before conceived be described at all, if it is so radically brand new? Paul answers yes. It’s the Jesus story.

What happened from Bethlehem to the Ascension was ADVENTUS, nothing you could have deduced from preceding human experience. Here’s one way Paul re-words it: In Christ God was doing a balance sheet, settling accounts, you might say, with the share-holders of his world. But God did this by not calculating their trespasses as debits against them. [That would be FUTURUS stuff] The Christ-transaction was ADVENTUS. Here God took the

debtors' liabilities (and their lethal consequences), transferred them over to Christ, and then took Christ's assets and credited them to the debtors. And Christ, the real loser in this exchange, concurred in the whole transaction! No wonder Paul calls it a New Creation. (II Cor. 5) That's what ADVENTUS always is. Something you could never have expected.

From what all of us know about balance sheets, is this any way to reconcile accounts? Of course not. But our convictions about balance sheets are deduced from our past experience. Call it Old Creation, where accounts never get settled apart from the debit-credit system. Someone always returns to collect—both in the world of economics or of personal relations. “You owe me one” is the mantra of the regimen of FUTURUS. Our lives in what we call the “real” world make sense only when we use a debit-credit calculus for human relations. But not so for God, the God of Gospel-ADVENTUS.

God also runs the FUTURUS business, of course. God is the paymaster in the “wages of sin” business. But ADVENTUS is different. It's an alternate offer from the owner. God never compels any of us to live by divine ADVENTUS, but we're crazy not to, since the only alternative is FUTURUS, which for sinners is always bad news.

Yet if you don't count people's debits and credits, how on earth do you—does God—reconcile the books? Since God's ADVENTUS-offer is itself so crazy, it is worth repeating. “God had his Son, the Christ, take ownership of the debits of us all, and in the transaction transferred to us all this Son's own native credits.” (Ibid.) What a deal—our liabilities for his assets! Our frightful FUTURUS for his advantageous ADVENTUS. What a way to run a railroad! Yet in view of who the beneficiaries are, why should we quibble?

So the Good News for Advent lies in the futures market. Which one will we buy into? Sinners, even very moral ones like us Crossings types, are offered an alternate future, an ADVENTUS, a quantum leap beyond the FUTURUS they could expect. The Advent season urges us to expect the unexpected. Expect what otherwise never happens in the Old Creation, Christ's assets-for-debts "fröhlicher Wechsel," (Luther), and in Bob Bertram's lingo, the "Sweet Swap." ADVENTUS is God's own preferred stock offer for human futures. Christ's resurrection is God ratifying the whole business. But the FUTURUS alternative doesn't disappear. It remains a stock option.

No wonder the Bethlehem shepherds were scared stiff on Christmas Eve. Like sinners everywhere, they automatically anticipate debit-credit futures. That holy hullabaloo in the heavens signalled Apocalypse Now for them. It was Judgment Day. When all the lights go on and nothing is secret anymore, our immediate futures—extrapolated from our personal pasts—are not going to be Good News. But surprise, surprise, the angel announces a different future. "In the city of David, for YOU! A Saver for losers." It's an arrival, an ADVENTUS. Something from up front coming toward us from the outside. It's Glad Tidings that overjoys the shepherds plausible terror, namely, that in the manged Messiah God's "good and gracious will" is now being "done on our earth as it is in heaven."

How can you run things on earth with such a management system, such weird bookkeeping? Manged-Messiah-Management? God's own "Triple M?" Yet, if God backs it up—as the unfolding life of the One in the manger will show—then it is too good NOT to be true. And if we are the beneficiaries, then our earthly "gloria!" is the best response to the angel's heavenly one.

And, oh yes, one more thing. In your own Advent waiting this time around, get some practice in settling your own accounts by

sweet-swapping (call it “forgiveness”). Take advantage of Advent. See what happens when you transact your own business of living by this Christic-calculus. Folks with whom you settle accounts in this way may well think you’re crazy. All the more so if they are committed to cornering the market for their own futures by “trespass-counting.” But that’s their problem. They are not crazy enough.

For we have it on good authority that sweet-swapping ADVENTUS is the way of God’s own future, the one that lasts. The Christ of Advent says we have it coming to us. We have his word for it. That word holds true right in the midst of our own Apocalypse Now. Should you have some doubts—and who wouldn’t in the planet-wide debit-credit karma-chaos of our time—read the last book of the New Testament again. In the last battle FUTURUS terminates. ADVENTUS doesn’t.

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In keeping with that crazy confidence herewith a little something we sent in this year’s Advent letter to folks on our list. It’s a recent German hymn (1954) discovered by Steve Mager (church musician at our congregation here in St. Louis) and translated by M&E Schroeder. We’ve subsequently tweaked the text a tad to focus on the four Sunday Gospels for Advent. [Melody available on request]

#### FOUR CANDLES FOR ADVENT

Dear Christians, rejoice, for Advent is here.  
See the first candle bright & clear.  
It signals Christ’s call: “Keep watch every day.  
Those with eyes closed are swept away.”  
Christians, be wakeful, with one accord.  
Near at hand is the Lord.

*Dear Christians, rejoice, for Advent has come.  
The second candle signals John.  
In our darkness too his message brings light,  
Points us to Christ, from faith, not fright.  
Christians, be joyful, with one accord.  
Near at hand is the Lord.*

*Dear Christians, rejoice, for Advent is here.  
See the third candle, bright and clear.  
Our God, 3 in 1, sent Mary his call  
To bear his Son and bless us all.  
Christians, be joyful, with one accord.  
Near at hand is the Lord.*

*Dear Christians, rejoice, for Advent is here.  
See the fourth candle, bright and clear.  
The circle is closed, we soon will be fed  
At Bethlehem, God's House of Bread.  
Christians, be joyful, with one accord.  
Near at hand is the Lord.*

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## **Repentance in America, What Might it Look Like?**

Colleagues,

The same U.S. President Lincoln who in 1863 authorized the last Thursday in November as a national Thanksgiving Day also signed the following proclamation earlier in that very same year. How about that? Right in the hellish horror of the Civil War,

national repentance and national thanksgiving go together. Maybe even in that very order—Mea culpa first, then Now thank we all our God.

*Proclamation Appointing a “National Day of Fasting, Prayer and Humiliation”*

*Washington, D.C.*

*March 30, 1863* Senator James Harlan of Iowa, whose daughter married President Lincoln’s son Robert, introduced this Resolution in the Senate on March 2, 1863. The Resolution asked President Lincoln to proclaim a national day of prayer and fasting. The Resolution was adopted on March 3, and signed by Lincoln on March 30, one month before the fast day was observed.

*By the President of the United States of America.*

*A Proclamation.*

*Whereas, the Senate of the United States, devoutly recognizing the Supreme Authority and just Government of Almighty God, in all the affairs of men and of nations, has, by a resolution, requested the President to designate and set apart a day for National prayer and humiliation.*

*And whereas it is the duty of nations as well as of men, to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgressions, in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon; and to recognize the sublime truth, announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations only are blessed whose God is the Lord.*

*And, insomuch as we know that, by His divine law, nations like individuals are subjected to punishments and chastisements in this world, may we not justly fear that the awful calamity of*



civil war, which now desolates the land, may be but a punishment, inflicted upon us, for our presumptuous sins, to the needful end of our national reformation as a whole People?

We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us!

It behooves us then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.

Now, therefore, in compliance with the request, and fully concurring in the views of the Senate, I do, by this my proclamation, designate and set apart Thursday, the 30th day of April, 1863, as a day of national humiliation, fasting and prayer. And I do hereby request all the People to abstain, on that day, from their ordinary secular pursuits, and to unite, at their several places of public worship and their respective homes, in keeping the day holy to the Lord, and devoted to the humble discharge of the religious duties proper to that solemn occasion.

All this being done, in sincerity and truth, let us then rest humbly in the hope authorized by the Divine teachings, that the united cry of the Nation will be heard on high, and answered with blessings, no less than the pardon of our national sins,

*and the restoration of our now divided and suffering Country, to its former happy condition of unity and peace.*

*In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed.*

*Done at the City of Washington, this thirtieth day of March, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and of the Independence of the United States the eighty seventh.*

*By the President: Abraham Lincoln  
William H. Seward, Secretary of State.*

That was 141 years ago. How might nationwide U.S. repentance—if we ever could replicate what they did then—take place today in the U.S.A? What might it look like? That's what Pastor Jerry Burce (Messiah Lutheran Church, Fairview Heights, Ohio) asked some present and former members of his congregation. And they responded. He wrote to tell me about it, and subsequently got permission for passing their words on to ThTh readers. Here it is.

*Ed,*

*I forwarded ThTh 335 [Sc. its topic was "No place for national repentance in Bush's or Kerry's campaign theology"] to a handful of lay folks who I thought might appreciate it. I attached an introductory note—"You'll find this of interest, perhaps. The question left hanging: what might 'repentance' in America look like? All of you, I suspect, would have some good guesses about that. I'd be interested in what they are. If so inclined, tell me. —Jerry"*

*Here's what came back in under 24 hours from three of them: Ward, Tina and Scott.*

*[Jerry begins with sthese words to the responders.]*

*Ward, Tina, Scott–*

*Thanks for your quick responses. I'm tucking them away at the back of my own mind, and am taking the liberties a) of passing them along to Ed Schroeder who I know will appreciate them, and b) of sharing them with you so that I'm not the only hoarder of the wealth.*

*By way of intro: WARD is Director of Development for Lutheran Metropolitan Ministry, a leading social ministry organization in Cleveland that specializes in services to the elderly, the disabled, troubled teens, and ex-prisoners. TINA has spent 12+ years in the Deep South, much of it in ministry to the rural poor. Her husband is presently Director of IT at Concordia College, Selma,[Alabama, the only historic Black Lutheran College in America]. SCOTT is in Boston where he works for Responsible Wealth, an organization that Ward and Tina might well be interested in learning more about. See [www.responsiblewealth.org](http://www.responsiblewealth.org)*

*Here's what each of you said in response to my question about what repentance might look like in America–*

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*Ward:*

*I think that American repentance would be an undertaking so disruptive that I cannot imagine we would seek it. Even the idea of God blessing the American kingdom is frightful – US who are accustomed, committed and entitled to being first will not go to one knee voluntarily.*

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*Tina:*

*I'm glad this arrived in the morning when I have a bit more brain power, as it took about all of it to get through. It was good; not the typical message by any means.*

*My idea of repentance for America would be to stop lording it over everyone about how rich we are, when so many of our people live in subhuman poverty. I am astonished when I see how some people live here in Alabama—in Selma and in the rural areas. I'm not talking about homeless people, I am talking about families living in horrible substandard housing without water, electricity, sewage, heat. There are well over 100 churches in the Selma (pop. 28,000) area – one Lutheran, one Catholic, one Episcopalian, many Baptists—and yet we cannot keep the shelves on our Food Bank filled. I know this is a national problem in many ways, but it seems as if good Christians could at least have enough compassion to buy and donate canned goods each week (how sanitized is that?). I first heard that “God Bless America” religion several years ago while standing on a bridge over the Rio Grande in El Paso watching Mexican families float across to ‘freedom.’ My host could only shake her head and say, “Thank God I'm born in America.” All I could think of was, “Why? How did I get up here, and the others down there?” NO answers...*

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*Scott:*

*I like the notion of the Folk Religion of God Bless America. Did you ever see the movie, Head of State with Chris Rock. Rock portrays the first African American president, and ends every speech with “God Bless America, and everywhere else.”*

*The parable penned by Ed Scroeder holds not only with America and its place within the world, but also within our own country. Both Right and Left are themselves microcosms of The*

*Truth is on Our Side, and views the other side as enemy/ignorant/evil. The greatest sadness for me is to hear long time progressive colleagues say the most heinous things about those that voted for Bush. One person concluded a long screed, published on a widely read national website:*

*“So our guy lost the election. Why shouldn’t those of us on the coasts feel superior? We eat better, travel more, dress better, watch cooler movies, earn better salaries, meet more interesting people, listen to better music and know more about what’s going on in the world. If you voted for Bush, we accept that we have to share the country with you. We’re adjusting to the possibility that there may be more of you than there are of us. But don’t demand our respect. You lost it on November 2.”  
(Ted Ralls, Commondreams.org)*

*A colleague of mine at work penned an op-ed she is trying to get published demanding a “divorce” between red and blue states-splitting into two countries. The notion that our state of Massachusetts itself is 58% blue and 42% red and that her liberal town was 40% red, is blocked by these deeper troubled feelings of hatred.*

*The day after the election the most widely circulated electoral email that I received was one entitled the New Map and featured a blue swatch engulfing Democratic states and all of Canada, labelled “The United States of Canada” – the rest of the map was red and labelled Jesusland. Aside from being poorly informed about the state of Canadian politics which has its own red swatch cut across it, the map to me portrayed the left’s contempt for the impulse of faith. I support the Left’s role in creating a secular society, in insisting that no particular religious viewpoint be enshrined and forced upon others. But in so doing, I wonder whether they (we?) haven’t created a public space intolerant of political positions motivated by faith.*

*I think of the debate over teaching creationism in schools. It has become so very polarized and that makes me sad. But truth be told I think there is a place for talking about Adam and Eve, as well as the great turtle that rose from the floor and holds earth on her back, and whatever other creation stories have enlivened people since time memorial. Isn't there something in all human people that longs for the sacred and the mysterious? Have we served ourselves well by teaching only the Big Bang as a cold and scientific formula in which it is hard to stand in mystery with awe? I sometimes wonder if the science-only insistence of secularism hasn't laid the foundation for the environmental mess we find ourselves in today. If global climate change plays out as most think it will, with increased storms and coastal flooding, that sounds like the script for Noah, the Sequel.*

*So what is to be my response as a Christian person? First, I think Ed is spot on to focus on the "I" stories of the Bible. We live in a "you" oriented world. Both sides do it, if only you rich would pay more taxes; if only you poor would work harder. I once heard being politically liberal defined as someone who believes that every social problem can be addressed without them changing a thing about how they live. Exaggerated, but a lot of truth there I think, and probably not just for liberals. This gets to the heart of repentance and humility – what's my role, what do I have to do differently, for what do I need to seek forgiveness.*

*Second, I think one of the stories of this election is not simply the evangelical vote, but the thirst for community and spirituality. I don't see all those who voted for Bush as greedy, fearful or empty-headed. Some surely are these things, but I think most are people who desire community, who care about the messages told by cultural story-tellers (TV, movies, news outlets). What response does the Left have to this? What*

community does the Left offer? The evangelical churches have people to church several times a week for prayer group, for bible study, for worship – what are these things if not in part community building and times of story telling? Where does the Left invite this sort of sharing?

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[Here's Jerry's response to all three of them.]

I agree deeply and sadly with Ward. Repentance, Nineveh-style (see Jonah 3) ain't in the cards, for reasons that Scott elucidates from his blue side of the divide. Tina reminds me forcefully of the repenting I need to keep doing myself, and that I certainly need to provoke in the congregation I serve. (Do I ever!) Why is it, by the way, that her final thought seems to elude so many Americans, red and blue alike? That I'm a wealthy American and other guy a dirt-poor Mexican is a dark mystery. An accident of cosmic unfairness? No, worse: an act of divine unfairness. So Luther would say, at any rate.

But then Luther, believing the Gospel, has more nerve than most anyone else when it comes to calling the thing as it is. He'd be quick to point out that we ought to take Jesus seriously when he tells us that God operates with the principle of noblesse oblige: from those to whom much has (unfairly) been given, much will be expected; and when it comes to the expectation, screaming "Unfair!" will get us nowhere. Kyrie eleison.

Scott's piece strikes me immediately as a great example of repentance-in-the-making. He's a bona-fide blue boy. (The folks at his home congregation, the one I serve, overwhelmingly red, would instantly tell you as much if only they knew what he did for a living.) Notice, then, how his critique starts (and stays) at home, with his own kind. He takes the "I" seriously

*and winds up asking the kind of questions that repenting people will find themselves asking. It occurs to me that the great majority of his blue confreres would regard him as a traitor. But then repentance necessarily entails betrayal, does it not? The turn to God—and, along the way, to honesty—means a break with fellow sinners who aren't inclined to make that turn, who then will take it out on the one who does the turning. Saul learned as much on his way to becoming Paul.*

*That's one of the biggest reasons, I'll bet, why Ward is right about the knees not bending, or why Tina sees so little in the way of whole-hearted mercy for the black poor. Luther again: "Suffering, suffering, cross, cross. That's all a Christian has to expect. Nothing else." To repent—the first and fundamental Christian move—is to expose yourself to crucifixion. And who wants that? But woe to us all if we don't start wanting it soon. Or to put that another way, bouncing off Ward: God in his own way, in his time, will force knees to the ground.*

*So much for the moment—and thank you each, so much, for provoking more thought.*

*—Jerry*

One more item.

A dear buddy from our old days at Valparaiso University, Bob Springsteen, sent us something apropos of this. "My mother's hymn book which is at least 110 years old (published by The Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Ohio and Other States – ninth edition) contains 3 hymns of (for) National Humiliation (#151-153). They fit in with the recent ThTh-postings prior to and after the election. Bob"

*151When in our hour of utmost need*



*We know not where to look for aid,  
When days and nights of anxious thought  
Nor help nor counsel yet have brought,*

*Then this our comfort is alone,  
That we may meet before thy throne,  
And cry, O faithful God to thee  
For rescue from our misery:*

*To Thee may raise our hearts and eyes,  
Repenting sore with bitter sighs,  
And seek Thy pardon for our sin,  
And respite from our griefs within.*

*For Thou hast promised, graciously  
To hear all those who cry to thee  
Through Him whose name alone is great,  
Our Saviour and our Advocate.*

*And thus we come, O God, today,  
And all our woes before Thee lay,  
For tried, afflicted, lo! we stand,  
Peril and foes on every hand.*

*O, hide not for our sins Thy face:  
Absolve us through Thy boundless grace:  
Be with us in our anguish still,  
Free us at last from every ill.*

*That so with all our hearts may we  
Once more with joy give thanks to Thee,  
And walk obedient to Thy Word,  
And now and ever praise the Lord.*

152

*While o'er our guilty land, O Lord,*

*We view the terrors of thy sword,  
O wither shall the helpless fly?  
To whom but Thee direct their cry?*

*The helpless sinner's cries and tears  
Are grown familiar to Thine ears;  
Oft has Thy mercy sent relief,  
When all was fear and helpless grief.*

*See, we repent, we weep, we, mourn--  
To our forsaken God we turn!  
O spare our guilty country-spare  
The church which Thou hast planted there.*

*We plead Thy grace, indulgent God;  
We plead Thy Son's atoning blood;  
We plead Thy gracious promises--  
And are they unavailing pleas?*

*These pleas, presented at Thy throne,  
Have brought ten thousand blessings down  
On guilty lands in helpless woe;  
Let them prevail to save us too!*

153

*Lord Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace,  
True God and Man art Thou!  
Mighty to help in life and death,  
O hear and help us now!  
'Tis through Thy name alone we claim,  
The mercy of Thy Father!*

*The times are sore and perilous  
With heavy woes and wars,  
Whence no man can deliver us*

*But Thou! O plead our cause,  
That God may lay His wrath away,  
Nor deal with us in anger.*

*We have deserved, and patiently  
Would bear, whate'er Thou wilt,  
But grace is mightier far with thee  
Than all our sin and guilt;  
Forgive us then, dear Lord, again;  
Thy love is everfaithful.*

Lincolnian hymns, good for Thanksgiving and good for moving into Advent.

Peace & Joy! Ed Schroeder

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## **Remembering Werner Elert – Fiftieth Anniversary of his Death**

Colleagues,

Sunday, November 21, 2004, is the 50th anniversary of the death of Werner Elert, Professor of Systematic Theology and History of Dogma at the University of Erlangen in Germany. In the year before he died three seminarians from Concordia (St. Louis) were in his classes at Erlangen—Bob Schultz, Dick Baepler and I. Not too many years thereafter all three of us wound up teaching in the theology department of Valparaiso University in Indiana.

Before long another Erlangen alum and Elert student, Gottfried Krodel, came from Germany to join the department. With four "Schueler" at Valpo, Elert's heritage took root in American soil. It was genially supported by the newly appointed theology chair Bob Bertram, whose own doctoral research on Luther rendered Elert simpatico.

If there is a thesis to this remembrance, it is this: Elert's Confessional Lutheranism did not make a big dent on German theology—and that is a topic of its own. By contrast, however, the greatest number of "Elertian" pastors and theology teachers anywhere in the world today is quite likely in the USA. Here's some support for that claim.

In the early 1950s in the Luth. Church-Missouri Synod [LCMS] Jaroslav J. Pelikan, young professor at Concordia Seminary (St. Louis), was recommending to us students that if we wished to escape Missouri's "hangup" with Verbal Inspiration of the Scriptures, we should go to Erlangen and study under Elert. Elert's 2 volume "Morphologie des Luthertums" [literally: The Morphology of Lutheranism], was "epoch-making"—he said—with its presentation of the "Evangelischer Ansatz" ["Gospel-grounding"] for Lutheran confessional theology.

So three of us students "went to Erlangen" for the academic year 1952-53. Bob Schultz, already graduated from Concordia, became Elert's doctoral candidate. Baepler and I were only half-way through Concordia, but had finagled scholarships to go to Germany for the year. Elert died before Schultz finished his work. He attended Elert's funeral. Elert's colleague, Paul Althaus, took over as his "Doktorvater." Bob's dissertation (written in German, of course) was a flat-out Elertian theme: "Law and Gospel in Lutheran Theology in the 19th Century." It was published by Luthersiches Verlagshaus.

Baepler and I were there only for the "Sommersemester" '53. We all enrolled for Elert's lectures and seminar. He even invited the three of us over for Kaffeeklatsch one Sunday afternoon, since he appreciated that the pioneer of the Missouri Synod, C.F.W. Walther, had been faithful to law/gospel Lutheranism and had even written a book by that title. At that Kaffeeklatsch Elert agreed to write an article for our Concordia Seminary student theological journal, "The Seminarian"—I can still hear him saying, "Das tue ich!"—which was then published when Dick and I returned to St. Louis. Its title: "Lutheranism and World History." Most likely it is the one and only Elert article that first appeared in English—and probably never in German. He wrote it, of course, in German and we translated it. It was posted 6 years ago as Thursday Theology #29 in the first year of this enterprise. [If interested GO to the Crossings webpage ([www.crossings.org](http://www.crossings.org)) and click on Thursday Theology, December 10, 1998.]

By 1957 all three of us were at Valparaiso University, and were teaching what we had learned, not only to V.U. students, but to the wider Missouri Synod. With Bob Bertram as dept. chair and Gottfried Krodel added to the staff later on, law/gospel Lutheranism became the trademark of "Valparaiso Theology." So there were 5 of us in one place at one time. We encountered conflict within Missouri, of course, with our teaching and writing. Verbal inspiration and "Evangelischer Ansatz" were not compatible.

This Elertian sort of Confessional Lutheranism, though hardly ever acknowledged as such, was also near the center of the eventual explosion in Missouri in 1973-74 that took place at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis and then created "Concordia Seminary in Exile, a.k.a. Seminex. That is, of course, one man's opinion. Bertram and I were then on the faculty at Concordia—and "Elertian" confessional Lutheranism, already at home there (but

hardly majority opinion), got additional support.

The fuse for the explosion was the LCMS national convention in 1973. By a 55% to 45% vote the convention declared the “faculty majority” [45 of the 50 professors at Concordia Seminary] to be “false teachers.” Three false teachings were specified. Two of the three were actually Elert’s own “heresies,” although he was never named. One heresy of the Concordia faculty was called “Gospel-reductionism.” In nickel words: grounding the Bible’s authority on the Gospel itself [ = Elert’s Evangelischer Ansatz] and not on verbal inspiration. The second heresy was on the so-called “third use of God’s law,” a constant hot potato among Lutherans ever since the 16th century. Our “false teaching” on the law’s “third use” was that we opted for Elert’s Gospel-grounded interpretation and not the one the LCMS had supposedly “always” taught.

The upshot was Seminex. Seminex lasted for 10 years. Not every Seminex graduate was an “Evangelischer Ansatz” confessional Lutheran, but many were, and they are pastors and theology professors both in the LCMS and in the ELCA, and elsewhere in the Christian church. At least six of the current bishops that I know of in the ELCA are such confessional theologians. They say so themselves. They are Seminex graduates.

When Seminex went out of existence 20 years ago, the heritage moved over to the Crossings Community, and the rest is history, the history that most of you know. If not, GO to the Crossings webpage.

The Crossings “method” for Sabbatheology text studies is the Biblical hermenutics we learned from Elert—which he doubtless learned from Luther and from Apology 4 in the Lutheran Confessions. The Thursday Theology postings operate with the same hermeneutics—both for reading the scirptures and for

reading the world.

All of what I have said may suggest that this Elert heritage is confined to our circles here in the USA. Not so. The Crossings website, of course, is open to the whole world. Our web-master tells us that people from over 100 countries come to our Crossings web site. If current usage persists, 100,000 distinct computers will have come to our website during 2004. Each day the website gets 1,500 "hits," one per minute 24 hrs a day. Each day the people who come to our website download over 1,000 pages of material. We don't know who they are. Nor do we know if they "believe" what we offer. But what they get (most of the time) is theology in the Gospel-grounded mode, a.k.a., the Elert tradition of confessional Lutheranism.

Elert's theology had been brought to America a generation before Pelikan was recommending him to LCMS seminary students in the 1950s. Charles M. Jacobs, Reformation scholar at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, apparently was doing the same for his students. He translated and published in 1926 Elert's "An Outline of Christian Doctrine" (German ed. 1924). In his "Translator's Preface" he says: "This volume introduces to American readers a new author, and a new system of theology. . . . The value of the book lies in its new approach to the problems of theology." But Jacobs makes no mention of the "old" Lutheran roots of this new author, new system, new approach.

Elert's own "Preface to the American Tradition" does so as he offers his book to American Lutheranism. With one eye to the chaos in Europe after World War I—also in Lutheran churches—he has higher hopes for American Lutheranism. "The inner steadfastness of American Lutheranism . . . has long had a keen eye for the necessity of keeping the abiding foundations of Lutheranism in the foreground. . . . We believe that, for this reason, it is the special task of our American sister churches .

. . to be the standard-bearers who will carry forward the old banners. We dare not deceive ourselves, then, into thinking that the inner situation of Lutheranism in America and Europe is the same. But if, as children of the same mother, we do belong together, then we must look each other in the face, talk to each other, and try to see into each other's hearts."

Whether Elert's wish was fulfilled in American Lutheranism is dubious. There is scant evidence that Jacobs' translation brought any of Elert's sort of "newness" into the United Lutheran Church in America, Jacobs' denomination. It had no impact on the LCMS at all, as Pieper's dogmatics and his "Brief Statement" articulated its brand of Lutheranism in those days and for some time thereafter.

Two of Elert's books did get translated and published after WW II. The LCMS publishing house printed volume one of Elert's "Morphologie des Luthertums" under the title "The Structure of Lutheranism," but never did volume two. Muhlenberg Press, the ULCA's publisher, printed Elert's ethics book, "The Christian Ethos," in 1957. Unhappily Elert's dogmatics, "The Christian Faith," never was published, although it was translated into English by Bob Bertam's father, Martin Bertram. The story I heard was that "Missouri" did get the rights for English publication, and Martin Bertram, life-long professor of German, did the work. But then the LCMS censors read Bertram's manuscript, noted that Elert was "heterodox" on verbal inspiration, and the project was scrubbed. A mimeographed version exists, prepared by Walter Bouman during his years of teaching at Trinity Seminary in Columbus, Ohio.

But the impact of these publications on both the ELCA and the LCMS today does not support Elert's hopes for "the inner steadfastness of American Lutheranism . . . to be the standard-bearers who will carry forward the old banners." That's a sad



note on this 50th anniversary of his death. And, of course, it's not Elert, but the "Evangelischer Ansatz" that is the one thing needful—and not only in American Lutheranism. He'd be the first one to say that. It is "Gospel-grounding" that is the one-string banjo of Crossings listserve postings. But you know that.

The four of us mentioned above, who were "there" at Erlangen 51 years ago, are now retired septuagenarians. The "Meister" left his mark on all of us, even though—no surprise—we each "processed it" in distinctive ways, and thus remember Elert differently. My own remembrance on this anniversary parallels Melancthon's at Luther's funeral in 1546. After a long sermon eulogy [yes!] about Luther, he concluded: "But most of all I thank God for Dr. Luther because he taught me the Gospel." Elert did that for me. I too thank God.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## Luther's Birthday and American Politics

Colleagues,

Something else was in the hopper for posting today to commemorate Martin Luther's 521st birthday yesterday and his baptism a day later on November 11, the day of St. Martin of Tours. That's why his given name is Martin. Had he been born/baptized one day later, we'd be remembering Lebuin Luther or even Nilus Luther, the saints for November 12, the former a student of Alcuin, the latter of John Chrysostom. Had his Mama

waited a whole week to deliver him, we'd have either Mawes Luther, or Odo Luther or Romanus Luther. Thank you, Mama Margaret, for your pro-choice of Nov. 10.

That was the plan, but then the election came along. So the Luther piece can wait. It'll keep.

The accepted wisdom says our presidential election revealed this:

*"Christians in the U.S. today do not simply disagree on a hierarchy of values. They read the Bible quite differently and express their faith in Jesus in radically distinct ways. I award Thomas Friedman, columnist of The New York Times , with the pithy phrase of the week past: We are 'two nations under God.'" [from the Sojourner's website by David Batstone]*

Despite a seeming national consensus on this, I want to make the case that nothing has changed. That these two nations under God (and the two candidates of last week) are linked—yea, imprisoned—by the same Folk Religion of God Bless America, [FROGBA]. If you've been reading ThTh since 9-1-2001, you already know why. FROGBA is an "other" Gospel, fundamentally "other" to the Christian Gospel of the crucified and risen Messiah, even though Jesus gets cited by advocates of that other gospel all the time. So what else is new? "Other-gospel" Christ-promoters are all over in the epistles of the New Testament—in every one of the place-name letters of Paul (Galatia, Corinth, Rome, Thessalonica, Ephesus, Colossae, Philippi) and in the person-named letters of Peter and John.

So questions such as: Does this candidate pray or doesn't he? Does he publicly do God-talk or doesn't he? Does he trust that God is guiding his life or doesn't he? Is he committed to doing God's will or isn't he? are all irrelevant for the fundamental

Christian question. For the people who pushed Jesus toward his cross the answer to all those questions was yes. And in the days before they executed him Jesus excoriated them for the falsity of their praying, the un-faith in their God-talk, their blind commitment to doing God's will. Final evidence? It was this faith-based politics that compelled them to crucify the Son of God.

Faith-based, shmaith-based! Faith in what? That is the Christian question. What gospel animates the faith? What Gospel are we hustling?

### **First off, a parable.**

Two men went up to the (television) temple (of America) to pray. One a Democrat, one a Republican. They prayed thus: Each besought American voters to select him as high-priest of the nation. Both told the voter they were faith-based persons. Both invoked God, the God of Christianity, as the one in whom their faith was grounded. Both concluded their pleas to the voters with "God bless America," the mantra of the nation's folk religion.

Both were patently faith-based candidates—and not ashamed to say so, although one did so more often than the other. Yet that difference in public profession of faith was really no surprise. They came from two different families in American Christianity—Evangelicals and Roman Catholics. Each was speaking from the ethos of his tradition. American Evangelicals (the home base of one of the men) are taught to talk faith in public—even pray in public. The other man (a Vatican II Roman Catholic) was taught to do faith-talk in private, rather than public, circles, often in the privacy of the confessional one-on-one. For such Christians the public arena is for deeds, less so for creeds. But when public words were called for both did go public with faith-talk, Christian faith-talk, in these two major traditions

of today's American Christianity.

### **Pushing a bit deeper—**

For one the faith-talk, though expressed on the outside with ease, was fundamentally “interior” reality. It focused on his personal piety, his own conversion, his God-relationship, his prayer-life, his confidence that God had called him to the task at hand. And that task at hand was to be resolute in the fight against evil, the clearly biggest threat to our nation today. For the other there was scarcely a word of his faith's interiority, although “I once was an altar boy.” For him the focus for faith-talk was “exterior” stuff, “deeds” that needed to be done by people of faith in the body politic of America, and in the wider world, on deeds that needed to be UNdone with a “wrong war, at the wrong time, in the wrong place.” This is also a faith-based conviction that “by their fruits ye shall know them.”

Although their texts were different, and the Christian heritages they came from were different, both prayed the same prayer. Both prayed the Pharisee prayer of Luke 18:9-14—and both encouraged America to pray along. How so?

The fallacy of the Pharisee prayer in Luke 18 is not the “I-centeredness” of his praying. It is not impious. It is faith-based prayer: “God, I thank you.” The tax-collector's prayer is I-centered too, also faith-based: “God, be merciful to me a sinner.”

But the “I” in the two prayers is different. Radically different.

The Pharisee's heresy, says Luke in introducing the story, is that the he is an “I” who “trusted in himself that he was righteous,” and needed no repentance, as did that other despicable guy, “standing far off” [from righteousness], the

companion of “thieves, rogues and adulterers.”

The “I” of the other guy is different. Yes, he is indeed despicable. He doesn’t deny it. The righteous Pharisee has described him rightly. He does indeed “need” repentance, and he does repent, ‘fessing up in the petite petition he blurts out: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” He “goes down to his house justified,” says Jesus, and the “good guy” does not. How come?

The pay-off is not the “rightness” of his “I” compared to the other. It’s not “humility pays off, while self-righteousness does not.” It’s all “faith-based.” But we see two very different faiths in action in these two prayers: Faith in God’s mercy for sinners and faith that I am not a sinner and thus don’t need any mercy. Which is, of course, nonsense throughout the Bible. Since the days of the primal human parents “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” If anybody ever “goes down to his house justified,” “they are now justified by God’s grace (a.k.a. mercy) as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus . . . effective through faith.” (Rom.3:23ff.)

It’s all faith-based. But the “to be, or not to be” question is: What is the faith based on? Which faith-basis are we talking about? One faith-basis justifies. Others do not. That is both the scandal and the hilarity of the Christian Gospel.

### **Back to America.**

Both presidential candidates avoided the faith-basis of the tax-collector. And that was no wonder. They were speaking for all of us. They were confessing our American faith, FROGBA, The Folk Religion of God Bless America. It is also thickly layered in American Christians, in the faith confessed across the board from Evangelicals, through Lutherans, and over to Roman Catholics.

FROGBA is our American version of the Pharisee heresy.

Our national prayer goes something like this:

1. God, we thank you that we are Americans, and not like all the rest of the people in the world, especially those evil people who are out to destroy us.
2. "They" are evil people; we are righteous.
3. We do not need repentance, but "they" surely do.
4. All the blessings we've received from you are evidence that you count us righteous.
5. We constantly sing "God bless America" to proclaim our faith-based convictions.
6. Our leaders—both in churches and in government—never mention the word "repent," for we don't need any.
7. We are good people, your beacon of light to the world—to displace the darkness of evil empires, of axes of evil.
8. We trust that you have made us that "Light" spoken of in John's Gospel, and as our president said not long ago, we trust "that the darkness [the terrorists] will never put out our light."

Neither Kerry nor Bush told us anything in their campaigns to dislodge the "faith-basis" of FROGBA. In terms of Jesus' parable, all their rhetoric about "the American people" was Pharisaic. Nary a word about repentance needed for "this great nation." Though they looked like two angry foxes running in opposite directions (a metaphor Luther liked), their tails were tied together. Tied together by the strong cord of FROGBA, allegedly America's "In God we trust," but de facto America's faith in America. Even when it got godly, it was the "God, I thank thee" of the Pharisee "I." And that "I" is a false God. Trusting it is trusting a false Gospel. No matter how intensely we Americans confess that faith, we'll never get down to our houses justified by the God who runs the justification business.

The Biblical role assigned to political leaders, God's left-hand

agents, is akin to that of the OT prophets in one specific respect. Whatever else the OT prophets did, they also interpreted history to the Israelite nation. Most often their nation was blind and deaf to what was happening—and so were its leaders—both in the palace and the temple. My Doktorvater Helmut Thielicke taught us this about the prophets. Historical events are themselves mute. They do not on their own carry messages. Storms, famines, rich harvests, floods, rain at the right time, locusts, sunshine—even wars—“happen.” But they are not self-interpreting. They need to be “worded.” God-appointed leaders in palace and temple were called to be the ones “wording” for their people what God was doing in the bane and blessing of their personal and national lives. But when they became blinded to their callings, they were blind leaders of the blind. God sent prophets as emergency agents, “seers” who could see what God was doing in the random chance events of history, and then “word” it to the folks who didn’t catch the message from the events themselves.

They were seldom popular with their audiences, for the gist of the events they worded was “repent . . . stop what you’re doing. Turn around. Go the other way.” There were competitor prophets—usually on the palace payroll—who offered more consoling and comforting interpretations. Their message, says Jeremiah, is “‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.” The NRSV caption for that section of Jeremiah is “The Blind Perversity of the Whole Nation.”

Americans have chosen a prophet to lead them who is blind to our national need for repentance. Whether Kerry would have been better is not obvious, but that question is now moot. I expect the next four years to bring more of the grim consequences of our nation’s God-problem. As Augustine, and Luther, and Jesus and the OT prophets all proclaimed: “Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.” There is no good news for people whose

faith is based on the Pharisee heresy—no matter how often they chant the God Bless America mantra. Such prayers are akin to wailings of the Baal-prophets in their stand-off with Elijah on Mt. Carmel: “they raved on . . . but there was no voice, no answer, no response.” (I Kings 18)

Another teacher of mine, Leonhard Goppelt, taught us that Jesus give two calls to repentance, one a “condemning” call, the other a “saving” call. The condemning call went to Pharisee types who “needed no repentance.” See Matthew 23 for a whole chapter of such rhetoric exposing how “lost” they were. The saving call went to the tax-collector types, the patent sinners listed by the Pharisee in the parable. For those folks Christ’s call was “Come unto me” and “Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven” and “Follow me.” Both calls entail a turn-around in order to come home to God. Goppelt showed us this in the Lukan parable of the prodigal son and his righteous brother. The distance that the prodigal had to travel from the “far country” to the Father’s house was actually SHORTER than the distance that the elder brother had to travel, even though he was working in the field right next to that house. How so? The prodigal had only to leave his unrighteousness behind to come home. The elder brother had to leave his righteousness behind in order to come home to the Father’s mercy. That’s a much more wrenching journey. But the Father’s house is the same for both and both are invited to come home.

As the Year of Luke comes to an end in a fortnight, these two Lukan parables are Christ’s good news for us Americans too. In the face of our own self-engineered Apocalypse Now, Jesus’ saving call to us is “Repent and believe the Good News.” If our born-again president doesn’t get around to it, then those who “see” must step in for him.

Peace & (yes) Joy!



# **Eulogy Plus Gospel – A Case Study: David Truemper, R.I.P.**

Colleagues,

Marie and I just got off the plane at noon today, returning from Dave Truemper's funeral yesterday at Valparaiso University in Indiana. We brought along Fred Niedner's sermon to pass on to you for today's ThTh posting. Fred does a stellar Gospel-crossing of David's life: the Gospel trumping Truemper's cancer, even though it seemed that the cancer trumped him at the very height of his career and calling. Dave was chairman of the V.U. Theology department (since 1993). Back in the previous millennium (1967) I had recruited Dave for the department when I carried his title. Dave had his doctorate in systematic theology from Seminex (1974) where Arthur Carl Piepkorn was his Doctorvater.

Marie and I engineered it so that the Seminex Resurrection banner stood at the head of the casket in the V.U. chapel. That banner also stood as witness at Bob Bertram's funeral last year. That constitutes a curious "first and last." Bob was the first ever chair of the V. U. theology department. Truemper now the most recent. Between them there were five of us—all still living—who had the job. The banner's feisty Gospel in word and image is: "We shall rise our Lord to meet, treading death beneath our feet!" Here follows Fred's procaliming that to us yesterday.

Peace and Joy!  
Ed Schroeder

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## Now a Word from the Newest Neaniskos

*Sermon at the funeral of David G. Truemper  
Chapel of the Resurrection, Valparaiso University, 3 November  
2004*

*Frederick A. Niedner* Isaiah 25:6-9

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Mark 15:46-16:8

*Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid. When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and*

*amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*

*Only a little more than a year ago, as we returned together to Valparaiso after attending Walter Rast's funeral in Michigan, David Truemper initiated a conversation that I now understand was an early stage in the preparations for this day. "I am perplexed," he said, "by the amount of talk at funerals nowadays concerning the deceased. I have always assumed that at my funeral there would be very little talk about me and what I did or didn't do. It isn't really about me."*

*I knew he must be right, for David knew more about the liturgies of the church than anybody in these parts. I also knew, because we had been raised in the same ecclesial culture and taught by the same teachers, that David's comments reflected what our tradition dictates. In the little, black book on both our shelves, used by generations of pastors for the conduct of occasional services, emergency baptisms, and communing the sick and homebound, the first rubric for the conduct of a funeral in the church says, "It is not in the best Christian tradition to eulogize the departed." This will not surprise many of you, for you know that it is not part of the tradition and ethos of the church body that formed David, myself, and many others here to speak well of anyone, whether living or dead.*

*So, on that day in the car a year ago, I said, "Yes, David, your funeral is not about you. It's about the gospel, and about the living ones who have only that word of promise to cling to. And yet, it is about you, because if you wouldn't have died, we would not be gathered like this. Moreover, we come not only to join in burying you and comforting ourselves. We come for Eucharist. We come to give thanks. We come to lift up our hands*

*as a way of handing back to God a dear one whom God gave us as a companion on our way through this wilderness. And as we do that we name the gifts for which we're grateful, and we praise the God who gave them." In the end, then, this gathering is about David, and it isn't.*

*We have much to give thanks for today. President Harre and Randy Lee have already named, in both general and specific ways, gifts that Valparaiso University and the Lutheran family of Christians have received because God called David to follow a vocation in the church and in the academy.*

*As David's colleagues and friends in this place, we give thanks not only for a gifted theologian, teacher, and intellectual partner in countless debates and colloquia, we're grateful for the host of details he attended to over the years, and now we wonder who in the world will ever figure out the computer programs by which he kept track of our business so efficiently. We'll eventually manage, for David was also the one who brought many of us into the digital age, beginning with that old computer named "Sweet Pea" he built for us and taught us to use back in long-gone Lembke Hall.*

*His role as director of the Institute for Liturgical Studies was only the visible tip of a proverbial iceberg when it comes to all the ways David taught us to worship through his leadership, participation, and embodiment of the sacramental life we practice and cherish here. Gail Eifrig, our longtime colleague now retired and moved away, may have found the best way to express this gratitude when she wrote in a note this week, "One solace I find amidst this great loss of David's untimely death comes in anticipating the work of the committee that must surely now serve to welcome the rest of us in the heavenly rite of Receiving the Faithful Departed: Herb Lindemann, Jon Nelson, and now David Truemper. My, what a*

liturgy that will be!"

As with any more or less public person, there are a million stories we could tell today (and have been telling all week, and will tell in the days to come). Our lives get so intertwined with each other that it's all finally one story, yours, mine, David's. I, for one, would not be here if David had not gone off to finish his dissertation and teach at the St. Louis seminary in 1973. Instead of taking a parish call as planned, I agreed to come here and fill in for a year. David, meanwhile, got caught in the biggest battle of the Missouri Synod's long war and became the only person he ever knew of to get fired from a visiting professorship. Along with the rest of the faculty and most of the seminary's students, David first helped to bury his mentor and Doctorvater, Arthur Karl Piepkorn, another passionate and churchly scholar of the Lutheran Confessions who left this life too early by our way of thinking, and then with the other survivors experienced the birthing of something new, an offspring that soon got the name Seminex, symbolized here today by this Resurrection Banner that comes from those days, and which has been present at so many services just like this one over the past 30 years.

We can't even hint at all the stories in the course of a sermon. But there are golfing stories out there if you want to hear them, and stories that have to do with a surprising knowledge of classical music, a love of the theater, photography, and food. Well, not just food – cuisine.

David's family has a host of stories, too, that the rest of us could scarcely guess at—stories of a man who could fix or invent most anything that needed fixing or inventing (ask his mom about the plumbing in her bath down in Florida), a dad who loved to invent word puzzles for Pam and Rebekah (ask them how they ever found their Easter baskets), and one whose heart

*melted into sheer delight in the presence of his three grandchildren.*

*One feature permeates most all the stories. David was a big man who stood up straight, was quick with words, and had a gravity about him—a combination many found intimidating. Moreover, David knew he could be intimidating. Doubtless many here today experienced that at some time or other. Sometimes, however, even that became a reason to give thanks. During the Truemper family's Reutlingen years, when Pam and Rebekah were schoolgirls, the family nearly got trampled once in a Swiss train station when a throng of skiers on holiday began pressing all at once to board the train. David braced himself against a wall, and made of himself another wall between the children and the crowd, and shouted over his shoulder, "Pasz auf fŷr die Kinder!" followed by a common interjection that's really a theological term in English that starts with a "D." With that, the crowd parted like the Red Sea of old.*

*On another occasion a group of us colleagues attending a professional meeting in New York City went out to eat and got off at the wrong subway station, whereupon we found ourselves lost on a cold, November night in a very rough district of the Bowery. Five of us in trench-coats, hands in our pockets, with David in the lead, began to walk along the sidewalks strewn with broken glass. Though no one said it, we were frightened, until we began to notice how the few people we saw along the street would dart into the shadows and disappear when they saw us coming. If we had to be lost, it was good to be lost with David.*

*All his life, however, big, strong, intimidating David knew the truth of the gospel he preached and taught here for 37 years, including the part about our strength being made perfect in weakness. Two years ago came the time to begin practicing that*

truth with a new intensity, taking it more than ever as a habit in which to live. For a small, malignant invader, no bigger than a battery in one of Dave's cameras, came to make him weak.

He preached some marvelous, gospel-laden sermons in these last two years, and he did perhaps the most powerful teaching in all his tenure here, openly facing his illness and its threats, and clinging publicly to the cruciform promise that, as he put it, "God loves you, for Christ's sake, and will never let you go." David was a teacher of the theology of the cross, an unabashed practitioner of what some scornfully call 'gospel reductionism.' With Luther, he believed and taught that the only God we can truly know, or dare to give our hearts to, is the one we see in the crucified Christ. There, in that brokenness, we find the God who gives anything and everything to be reconciled to us, who takes on every sin, every shame, every pain, every curse that befalls us or that we visit on one another. And in exchange, we take from that cross the crucified one's identity—we are children, the sons and daughters of God. Nothing more, nothing less.

David wrote his doctoral dissertation on Christ's descent to hell, which had become a controverted matter among 16th-century reformers, and that piece of Christ's biography, which also became his own biography, remained a centerpiece of David's theology. Think how often you heard David quote Luther on what it means to confess that Jesus Christ descended to hell. "It means this," said Luther, "that there is no place I might ever go, no depth to which I might sink, but that even there, he is Lord for me."

That was David's faith and his teaching. But like all the rest of us, he had to learn it over and over and over. Only in his final days did he tell some of us how hard he had worked through these last two years to remain in control as the

manager of his cancer, the administrator of his treatment and recovery, the intimidator against all that threatened his life and the years he still hoped to have with Joanna. In the end, it took all the courage he had, but mostly the gift of faith, to receive a simple gift, permission to give up that complex project of saving his life and to rest in the embrace of the crucified. "I'm free now," he said last Thursday morning. "It's such a relief. Now I'm just one more sinner hanging by a thread."

In that spirit David chose in those last days some elements of this service today. He said he didn't want to be the choreographer, but please read from the beginning of First Corinthians, he asked. And for a gospel lesson, use Mark. All of it.

David loved Mark's gospel, for he came to see in it the simplest and most eloquent theology of the cross in all the New Testament. Mark's Jesus lives and dies as we all do—vulnerable, misunderstood, trusting in a secret that gets tested over and over, agonizing in his last hours, and dying with the hardest question of all on his lips, "My, God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And there is no vindication in Mark. We do not see a happy, healed, risen Jesus who came out on the other side even stronger than before. No, we find only an empty tomb, a messenger, and a promise. "You will see him, even as he told you."

I told David, "Yes, we'll use Mark on the day that we bury you. And we'll find you in Mark's story, and hopefully find ourselves as well." Actually, in our conversations at the hospital last week we found David, and everyone else in the room, all through Mark's gospel. It truly is his story. But in those last days we found Dave's part especially near the end of the story. Many of you know that what finally killed David was



that his breath was taken away. Despite all the tumors elsewhere, and the assaults of chemotherapy on his system, it was the tiny micro-tumors that covered the inner surface of his lungs that left him breathing deeply as he wanted, but unable to get oxygen. It's not that different from being crucified, for it's not the nails, the whippings, or even the thirst that finally kills you. In the end, you can't breathe. (Surely he has borne our griefs!)

Mark meant for all of us to see ourselves in Christ the crucified. But I want to close on this day by pointing to another place where we find David, and ourselves, in Mark's gospel. Only Mark adds one little snippet to the story of Jesus' arrest in Gethsemane. There was a young man out there that night, says Mark, a *neaniskos* (in Greek), that is, a 'new guy,' dressed only in a strip of linen, the kind used for burials. They seized him by that strange garment, meaning to take him, too, it seems, but he fled away naked, leaving the grave-clothes behind.

The prophet Amos had envisioned such a day, when even the strong, the mighty, and the young would flee away naked in the great and terrible 'day of the Lord.' Yes, that was the David we saw in these last days, a strong, mighty, and too-young man whose strength and youth had failed him and who left us on Saturday naked as the day he was born, leaving only a hospital gown behind.

But it wasn't the first time he'd done that. It had happened 65 years before, on the day of David's baptism. The same scenario played out. Like that *neaniskos*, that new guy, and like all of us, he was stripped of his old clothes, buried with Christ by baptism into his death, and dressed in a new, white garment in which he, and we, might testify that we cling to the promise of a different life, a new life, a life that for now is hid with

*Christ in God.*

*Today we see again that neaniskos, and David as well, in the next place he appears in Mark's gospel, sitting inside the tomb, dressed in baptismal attire, and witnessing to the promise. "Don't be afraid. If you would see the crucified one, don't look here. He is risen. You will see him, even as he told you."*

*Here the rest of us belong, today and always, the collection of the baptized gathered at the entrance to the tomb listening to the promise of our Lord as it comes to us from yet another neaniskos. And today it's David. So one more time, in Neaniskos David's own words, hear the promise, from a sermon he preached here in this place last April, on Maundy Thursday:*

*"We live in him, that we may die well. We die with him, that we may live well. That is the path of repentance and faith: we let go all that entices our devotion, all that pretends to make a life, in the death that we baptized ones share with Jesus Christ; we receive from him, crucified and risen, all that genuinely makes a life out of our being buried with him. So dying and living get all turned around, all upside-down, all inside-out and backwards, and our lives, as the apostle says, are "hid with Christ in God," even as our dying is as good as done, together with that Jesus, stashed as he was, in Joseph's fresh-hewn grave.*

*"What a way to live – buried with Christ. What a way to die – a life hid with Christ in God. What a way to be a part of Jesus, to have a share in Jesus. Imagine, then, as God keeps promise with you, how you shall be able to die – and since you can thus die, how you are able to live!"*

*Frederick Niedner, Jr.*

*Acting Chair, Department of Theology*

# Reflections for Reformation Day

Colleagues,

The number on this posting is 333. For 333 weeks in a row ThTh has gone into cyberspace—more or less regularly. Are there any of you out there who were there when ThTh #1 was posted? 333 is one-third of the way to 1,000. Also half-way to the number of The Beast in the Book of Revelation. So it must be a significant number. And the timing too. Elections for the president of the USA will have happened before #334 comes out. I'm tempted—but not much—by this posting's snazzy number, “half-way to the number of the Beast,” to ring the changes on Armageddon in anticipation of Election Day. After all, Luther was a vivid believer in “realized eschatology,” namely, that the apocalypse was NOW—or at the very latest, tomorrow. And Revelation 14:6 was a text that Luther-followers early on linked to Luther himself. John the seer says: “Then I saw another angel f lying in mid-heaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on earth—to every nation and tribe and language and people.” Consequently Luther's face appears on that angel in woodcuts of the time illustrating John's Apocalypse. Maybe we should rehabilitate an airborne reformer into our Lutheran iconography.

Naytheless, I'll eschew “Luther and Armageddon” for ThTh 333, and wait till after the election, when the aftermath may offer

even more grim signals of America's God-problem—and our need for that “angel with the eternal gospel to proclaim . . . to this nation.”

For a cheery note on this Reformation Day weekend, here's an item sent our way by Paul Goetting:

*“Dear Ed: This is the link (<http://www.pbs.org/empires/martinluther/>) to the Martin Luther 2 Part Documentary which is appearing again on our PBS station next month. They have some classroom resources which may be beneficial for Adult Forum, Sunday School or Confirmation. You can purchase the DVD on this too from PBS directly.”*

Instead of my prose for Reformation remembering, ThTh 333 offers a few more responses from Reformation-minded folks. The first one is in response to the “faith-as-surrender” exchange of a month ago. The last three bring closure (I hope) to the conversation about eulogies.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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I. The Surrender Discussion— (Wherein one respondent brought in John Donne's poem “Batter my heart” as a surrender text.)FROM JERRY BURCE

Pastor, Messiah Lutheran Church in Fairview Park, Ohio

I have liked the [John Donne] poem ever since I ran across it in my mid-20's, when it gave splendid verbal form to the roilings of my own innards. I was moved then to

memorize it. I still catch myself rehearsing it from time to time. Here's the text—

*BATTER my heart, three person'd God; for, you  
As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend,  
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee,'and bend  
Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new  
I, like an usurpt towne, to'another due,  
Labour to'admit you, but Oh, to no end,  
Reason your viceroy in mee, mee should defend,  
But is captiv'd, and proves weake or untrue.  
Yet dearely'I love you,'and would be loved faine,  
But am bethroth'd unto youremie:  
Divorce mee,'untie or breake that knot againe,  
Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I  
Except you'enthrall mee, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish mee.*

Comment:

- a. It's patently not about surrender. To the contrary. It's about the impossibility of surrender. This is the cry of the person who thinks he ought to fling wide the gates of the "usurpt towne" to its rightful owner—and realizes to his dismay that he can't do it (lines 5-6). Freedom, chasteness, righteousness—he can ache for these till the cows come home but all are beyond his own grasp and forever will be unless God should do something drastic to effect it (lines 11-14). The spirit is indeed willing. The flesh is worse than weak.
- b. Echoes, then, of Romans 7. I wouldn't be at all surprised to find this lurking in the background. Were I a scholar I'd dig around for the sermons

Donne may have preached on that chapter and look for connections.

- c. Echoes too, perhaps, of Luther—or at least of the way this Lutheran (JB) was hearing a piece of Luther at a certain point in his life: “I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him.” Was JB hearing Luther rightly at the time? Probably not. The hankering, after all, was not for the righteousness extra nos that comes of “true faith,” but for the intrinsic righteousness of the age to come when all is made new.
- d. Of course, Paul hankers for that too. See the inward groaning of Rom. 8:23. Might that have been the passage Donne was thinking about? Yes or no, the sonnet serves regardless as an exquisite devotion on it. “Get on the stick, Three-person’d One. Finish the job!”
- e. I especially like the way Donne pushes the imagery that today’s Pelagians keep trying to cover up and bypass. It isn’t about my choosing, my surrendering, my getting with the program. It isn’t, because it can’t be. I don’t have it in me. What I need—we’re talking necessitation—is not the wooing God but the raping God (line 14, i.e., line 4 pushed to the extreme). A shocking, loathsome image? Absolutely. Yet no more shocking than the reality of the crucifying God who is also the God crucified, or the God who kills (as in my dying) in order to make alive.
- f. I might even go so far as to think of Donne as a friend of Crossings. Is he doing Level 3 diagnosis? If not, he’s certainly toying with it. And as Elert taught you to teach us, that’s something you just don’t do unless there’s an inkling of the promise

lurking somewhere under the surface. With hope in  
Christ,  
Jerry

II. The Conversation about Eulogies. FROM MATTHEW BOLZ-WEBER  
Pastor, Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Longmont, Colorado.

For the reason illustrated here, any eulogies offered at funerals I preside at happen before the sermon. Thus, the last word folks hear is Gospel – or to put it more bluntly, but accurately considering some of the eulogies I’ve heard, then I get to speak to the bad theology espoused during the eulogies, hopefully directing folks to God’s grace instead of how great the person was. I find these eulogies, even Kathy’s, have a place in funeral and memorial services. However, as Bill indicates, the Gospel needs to have final say.

Shalom,  
Matthew

FROM GEORGE WELLER  
Inventor, Musician, IT-whiz in Michigan

There is another side to the eulogy discussion. What music shall we choose? Let me offer a few cases, not as a theologian, but as a practitioner, though Ed knows me as a theology student of old . . .

1. A couple in my brother’s church and choir had a young son who committed suicide. They asked my brother to sing something (quick, someone, tell me the musical analogue of “eulogy”) at the funeral. Trying to select the right thing, they ransacked his repertoire without success. Finally they hit upon a piece I had written for my son’s baptism (upon words

by Deaconess Susan Wendorf) which resonated with the parents. Song of the Holy One... "Someday you will understand that I am the One looking after you." Someone called for permission to use the song. Do you get calls like this? Doesn't happen often, but I keep the Kleenex handy, just in case.

2. A very senior gentleman from a former parish called. It took me a bit to figure out who he was. His wife, a dear, somewhat eccentric lady had died, and he had prevailed upon a mutual friend and former bandmate to sing another song I had written for the same baptism. "I have called you by name, you are mine..", and he wanted to thank me for writing such a good song. And he was planning his own funeral, and would it be alright if he used it for that service too? I keep the Kleenex handy. Both of these songs consist of a collection of promises and commitments taken out of scripture, out of context, with reckless disregard for theological accuracy, but with thoughtful regard for encouragement of the saints.

What has astounded me is not only the reaction of the hearers (and singers!) but of my own reaction upon knowing that some comfort was found..

3. A colleague lost a second sister to cancer. At a loss for something to say (aren't we always?) I quoted (I think) Pilgrim's Progress: "...all the trumpets sounded for her on the other side..." And the report came back that those words were on the family's lips the whole time of the funeral. I had no idea. I am convinced that, just as we distinguish law and gospel, so we must distinguish between faith (which is about trust) and theology (which is about



ideas). The bereaved need to hear about trust in large doses, and theology, as may be required. Trust comes from the heart, most often without words.

FROM BILL MOORHEAD (who initiated the discussion a fortnight ago)

Pastor, Pacific Hills Lutheran Church in Omaha, Nebraska

Ed, Herewith some response to responses.

To the six correspondents in ThTh 332, Greetings. Thanks for the Eu Logoi. I am thankful for them, and have inwardly digested them. Having done so, let me assure you of my awareness of the following:

1. bad funeral sermons, devoid of both the deceased and the Un-Deceased;
2. folk, such as yourselves I sense, capable of giving a proper Eu Logos;
3. and yet still the many folk whose eulogies I've heard in the past (and who were ably represented in print by Kathy Bartholow) who have no clue what to say in such a situation, and who, in the context of the funeral, leave the gathered assembly [who have a need bigger than what they think they want] with a message [in my experience] that is "other gospel."

As the bishop in charge of my scattered, suburban flock, though few of them may be at any one funeral, I am divinely charged to urge Christ in the sermon and to guard against anything that would un-urge Him or urge something else.

In fact, I am so aware of the setting [a real mixed crowd to be sure] that I just don't want them to be a mixed-up crowd to boot. I am aware that words may seem judgmental, but in this instance allow me to reassure you to the

contrary. Ordained in 1973, I've done enough death work to be sick to death of it. But in my sickness of it, and my own death sickness that is taking me to the grave, I have hope, and a hope to share. That's why, when the sheep show up, I want them to safely graze [with apologies to J. S. Bach] and graze/grace to the full.

Peace & Joy,  
Pr. Bill Moorhead, Omaha