

Eulogies at Christian Funerals—Some Second Opinions

Colleagues,

Last week's posting about eulogies from Bill Moorhead [ThTh 331] elicited responses from some of you. Here are six of the "second opinions" I received. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

A. From Three Women on the Listserve.

1. Deaconess Hospital Chaplain in California I can't keep silent about the "Eulogies" issue. Of course, the Word must be among us as we travel through the rituals we have created in the wake of death and the promise of Eternal Life. I see death every day, families ask me to speak at funerals all the time. Often these are people I've met on their deathbeds 24 hours before they've died. Why do they ask me of all people? Because I'm there, and I'm supportive at the moment. As Woody Allen said, the key to fame is to "Show up."

I ALWAYS hasten to spend time with the family thinking about who they would really want to speak about their loved one at a service—someone who has known h/her a long time, and well....maybe one of them, the family members would be a good choice. When someone dies in a family, family members can't even think about that in the grief they are feeling.

People do strange things in the face of death. Kathy was apparently taken by surprise, and didn't think to work that through with the person who asked her. Yes, she was asked. "Why" is not the question.

When we have a death in the family—especially a sudden death of someone young—we aren't thinking straight. Let's not get on a roll about people asking people to do things inappropriately at a time like that. It sounds pompous and judgmental. We Lutherans can sound that way without a whole lot of prompting.

It matters not what the dictionary definition of the word "eulogy" is to most of us common folk. When we come to a funeral, we expect to hear the Word of God emanating from many places, in many ways. One of the places and ways that we hope we'll hear His Word is via the loving and sincere tribute(s) to the deceased and h/her life made by whoever has been picked or has offered. Period. In our town, no matter what the denomination, the "tradition" includes a short sermon followed by people in the congregation imparting a few words, as they are moved.

Some people stand up and recall a funny incident. Others tell of something moving. Whatever--when we come to the church we want to remember and talk about the person who died, for better or worse. Catharsis is the key here. That's what these services are about. Pain is fresh and we feel it and we want to talk about it, hear others talk about it, and experience it fully. Check around with any professional—that's a healthy way to deal with

bereavement.

Recently, I was asked to speak at the funeral of someone I barely knew. I work with her children at the hospital where I serve. I asked them why they were asking me, and finally realized that the family is very large, it is split up, lots of issues divide them, and they didn't want to have to argue over this one important thing...this sad death of a mom they all loved. They would not agree on a pastor, they would not agree on a friend to speak. So they picked someone "neutral." So I got all the phone numbers and visited the relatives I had time to visit and came up with a profile of this lady, some lives she touched, and added my own sense of who she was—very dynamic and incredibly alive. When I got to the church, I was astonished to find that I was the only one to speak, but I went ahead and it went well. Everyone recognized some of what they had told me in what I said about their mom-grandma-aunt-sister-wife-friend. That's all they wanted--just to hear about her once more without any aggravation of family dynamics intervening in their grief. They just stayed and stayed. It was sad and moving. They knew what they needed.

There are too many times when I have attended funerals (which I do all the time as a chaplain) and the pastor's spoken Word falls on deaf ears because nothing that anyone can immediately relate to the deceased has been uttered. I truly feel that Jesus's messages and promises to us can be imparted through the caring words echoed by His little ones as they express His love through their own, for another. Maybe I'm missing the point here, but I really don't

think that the issue is whether someone who shouldn't be asked to speak should speak or whether eulogies should be done before eating or after sermons or at the graveside or in a hospital room. Let's get off our high horses, put our noses back into joint, and leave our rush to theologies and correctness behind us. Let's repent our rush to judgment and ask our Lord to show us just who has the mote in whose eye.

2. ELCA pastor in OregonHi Ed – Thanks for all you give us in this forum. It was interesting to read Bill's struggles with the eulogy. Fortunately we do not have a set tradition here in Oregon for a eulogy at the end of the service. That, in my mind, is definitely out of order. What I have found very useful, though, is to have the eulogy (if the family wants one offered) and any personal sharing (more common) presented in the time of the lessons. I consider it the prime story which is my duty to follow with The Story as the preacher. I prepare remarks beforehand based on my visits with the person, the family members, and other people who know the person, Scripture study, and prayer, but listening in the context of the service to people's comments also informs what I say. People have commented to me that they find what I do extremely meaningful – to have the Word of God (law and gospel) proclaimed with reference to the context of the person and family before me. To me this is the most appropriate place for those remembrances of the person, similar to the comment by one famous preacher (I cannot remember by name!) about preparing to preach with the Word in one hand and

the newspaper in the other. Thanks again for all you offer.

3. "Armchair Theologian" in MississippiThis is one of the best guest articles! It should be required reading for every person in every church. LOL As old-timey Presbyterians, we have always thought that weddings, funerals, baptisms, and Eucharist should be solemn events that offer a time of reflection and introspection, and worship of Holy God. Not self expression of humanity. When I married 25 years ago, one of my relatives explained to some of the silly bridesmaids why grinning, giggling, and simpering were not appropriate during the ceremony. That the marriage ceremony was a high holy moment that joined two people for a calling of Christian service through family life. As your guest commented, there are plenty of opportunities at the related social events for fun and foolishment.

One of the best sermons I have heard was preached at the funeral of a young person who committed suicide. It was so full of thoughtful concern and compassion for the family, and enveloped them in love and hope. It also included the strong words of assurance that God's love and grace are available to all in a presentation of the Good News. The practical show of compassion coupled with the proclamation of the gospel had an effect that was far reaching. It was the first time that many of the attendees had been in a "church" setting, and a number later embraced that good news.

Thanks as always for the finest in Thought Provoking Theology! Your Armchair Theologian

B. From Three Men on the Listserve.

1. Presbyterian pastor (PCUSA) now in Bangkok, Thailand
There are eulogies and there are homilies. Some funerals have both and some don't. But there is a middle ground. There are homilies that make reference to particular persons in the process of recalling relevant aspects of the Gospel at significant points of passage. There is no need to create a harsh dichotomy between eulogies and homilies. Doing so is not only unnecessary for a preacher, who should always be skilled in finding the points of relevance between current events and the Gospel. It is also detrimental to the pastor's relationship with persons in the parish and community.

When I was younger and greener I steadfastly held the line on the doctrinaire side, defending the liturgical integrity of one and all worship services. But it was nearly a disaster for my pastorate in that small county seat town. Somebody was going to have to make reference to the deceased. It was a clear and obvious fact. There were sometimes family members who were nominated or volunteered, but that often led to the type of trouble Pastor Moorhead lamented. The solution was not as troublesome as I had imagined. I sat with the families ahead of time and collected their reminiscences and then used them as points of reference or springboards to jump into the Gospel passages. With a little practice it worked well. It was less of a compromise than I had dreaded, and it restored my reputation as a caring pastor who knew the people.

2. LCMS pastor in Michigan
For what it's worth: Though

some might expect a eulogy as a matter of course, I expect for a lot of folks the request for a eulogy is a reaction to the unfortunate tendency to completely ignore the deceased in the funeral homily. This is not an accusation against the writer, just an observation that when people gather for a funeral, it is well to preach the Gospel, but can we not also inject some humanity without compromising our witness? That is, I want to hear/preach not only who died and rose but also want to celebrate the life of a child of God who died and whom I expect to see rise at the last day. Just a thought.

3. Industrial Cyber Guru in St. Louis, also Crossings VeteranThis reminds me of the funeral sermon I once preached to myself instead of the one the pastor gave (as Bob Bertram was said to do, when a preacher missed the point). A son of the deceased had said a few remarks, and then turned the podium over to the pastor with the words, "and now, , who does this for a living." The pastor then gave his prepared sermon. I thought the pastor missed a nice opportunity to capitalize on the introduction, something like this:

"Yes, I do this for a living."But more, I do this for THE living. We're not here to help . He's beyond anything we can do now. We do this for the living, for each other. ...

"But even more than that, I do this for The Living. For the Living God, Jesus Christ. Because he, who was once dead, is now Living, I can do this, we can do this. ..."

How to Give a Eulogy

Colleagues,

It's late Wednesday evening. We've just watched the third debate between the U.S.A. presidential contenders. Though funereal thoughts come to mind, the word "eulogy" does not. Threnody and elegy seem more appropriate. Perhaps Alan Paton's "Cry, The Beloved Country." But rescuing me (and you) from a jeremiad for this week's ThTh posting is a guest essay on eulogy. It comes from Pastor Bill Moorhead of Pacific Hills Lutheran Church in Omaha, Nebraska. Bill's responding to an article in a magazine that inexplicably showed up on his desk, he says. Here's what he sent me.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

How to Give a Eulogy ***by Kathy Bartholow***

THE LUTHERAN JOURNAL Vol. 73 No. 2, Fall, 2003, pp. 10-11. "A family magazine dedicated to providing wholesome and inspirational reading material for the enjoyment and enrichment of Lutherans" Published by Apostolic Publishing Co, Oakdale, MN

I don't know where this issue came from. It was just on my desk one afternoon. Well, I will at least quickly page through something before I add it to my reading pile or toss it. It was

then that I spotted the word: eulogy (from the Greek, eu=good, and logos=word, therefore "good word"). The etymology is promising, but my personal pastoral experience with eulogies has not been. And it was that history that caused me to stop and pay a little attention to the article.

A little context. I've noticed over the years that more and more people think a funeral service is more or less a personal family statement in the same way that many weddings have become. One aspect of this is the eulogy, usually delivered when everything else in the sanctuary has been concluded, but before we all leave for the cemetery or the parish hall. Since you never know what's going to be said in one of these eulogies, and having been dismayed too many times by what has been said in one eulogy or another, my parish actually now has a policy against eulogies in the sanctuary at the conclusion of the liturgy. We suggest that such eulogies be done at the visitation the evening before, or at the luncheon in the parish hall, or wherever. But not at the conclusion to the liturgy. Or, horrible dictu, instead of the sermon.

If Kathy Bartholow's "lessons learned" are any indication of the kind of eulogy she gave, read on to find out why I think about eulogies, etymology notwithstanding, the way I do. Along the way I hope I do justice to the Reformation Law/Gospel lenses I started wearing during my seminary days.

I will quote the entire article by sections/combined paragraphs and offer response. I'll precede each section of Kathy's material with "Kathy says" and each section of my response with "Bill says".

Kathy Says

My friend and co-worker, Terry, died of leukemia at the age of 46. When his wife asked me to give a eulogy at his funeral, I

was honored but worried. I did not know if I could do it. I told her this, but because Terry's work was important to him, she wanted that part of his life recognized and remembered. So, I said yes, hung up the phone, and quickly panicked. What have I gotten myself into. What do I do now?

Bill Says

So, are we to believe that this eulogy's purpose is to highlight what has really been important for Terry throughout his life; namely, his work? And will it be the last thing worshippers hear before they leave the sanctuary, or worse, a substitute for the real Eu-Logy, the word of the Gospel in the sermon? Where's the pastor as this arrangement is being hatched? Does he know? What does he think?

Kathy Says

I called a friend for advice. She told me, "If you write from your heart, what you say will be true." I had only a vague idea what this meant, but with nothing else to guide me, I clung to her words as I tried to sort out my thoughts. Not until the funeral was over did I realize, this was the best advice anyone could give me.

Bill Says

If that's the best advice anyone could give her, she should have asked someone else. "If you write from your heart, what you say will be true." What was it that Jesus said? "For out of the heart come evil intentions..." (Matthew 15:19). No recognition here that the human heart is judged by God and found so wanting. Kathy should have been steered toward Christ whose heart is towards us in mercy. Trust in the Promiser should have given her something to say and some courage to say it. I'm not saying she has to give a second sermon. But as a Lutheran (read on) she has something important to give.

Kathy Says

Here are five lessons I learned: Focus on the nature of your friendship, however limited it may feel. My first thoughts were to talk about Terry as a person: his intelligence, his willingness to work hard, his sense of humor. But did I know Terry well enough to talk about him in a meaningful way? We never socialized, and I met his wife and children only a few times. I feared that nothing I could say would be important. Some people may have a totally different face they put on for work, but most of us bring a large part of ourselves to our jobs. Even though the setting in which I knew Terry was separate from his family and social life, the personality traits were constant. I learned that by focusing on what I knew, I could illustrate for his family and friends that he was as hard-driving and fun-loving at work as at home.

Bill Says

"I feared that nothing I could say would be important." A well-founded fear, unfortunately. Somebody tell me again why she was asked to give this eulogy. "Focus on the nature of your friendship." That "nature", whatever it was, has been cut off by death. There's a big, resounding "No" spoken by death itself to everything Kathy and Terry had as co-workers. But she's going to charge ahead as if that hasn't happened. As Elert said, God's Law is an operational reality in our world. Kathy's really bumping into it here. She suspects she has little to say before the aspect of death, and she just may be right.

Kathy Says

Tell stories no matter how insignificant they may seem. As I tried to write about Terry, everything sounded repetitive and trite. Of course he was a wonderful person, I thought. But how many times can I say that without sounding stupid? Isn't there a way I can show how wonderful he was? I tried to think of workdays in the office, of events or moments from which our

friendship had grown. I realized I could tell these stories and, hopefully, paint a picture of Terry at work. The stories involved no monumental events. In fact, they barely qualified as events at all: a conversation in a hallway, a meeting in a conference room, a break for ice cream in the middle of the afternoon. But they were stories, and stories have a setting people can imagine and action that holds their interest. I learned one simple story can illustrate what you want to say better than a thousand words of description.

Bill Says

Bingo. And not just “illustrate.” One “simple” Story can be the reason why everybody’s gathering around Terry’s dead body. But I’m guessing that Story didn’t get mentioned, at least not from anything I can detect in Kathy’s words. Stories? Once upon a time, God sent His Son, who loved Terry enough to die for him. Kathy’s paragraph is screaming for help here. She’s afraid of sounding stupid, repetitive, and trite. What she has to say seems insignificant. Most does before the aspect of death. The better lesson here? Tell the most significant Story of all. Proclaim it. Offer it. Promise it to those who can trust Whose Story it is. But not without recognizing that death has stripped away everything to which we cling except the living Christ.

Kathy Says

Don’t be afraid of humor, but don’t force it. As I reflected on the stories I might tell, some were funny. I felt unsure whether that was appropriate for a funeral. I did not know his family well enough to know whether humor would be welcome. I decided for myself that we were there to remember all that Terry had been, and that because of his quick and hearty laugh, humor had a place. To my surprise, what I considered the unfunny stories were the ones that generated the most laughter. Because I did not know Terry outside of work, I could not know

my stories would parallel family times at home and social get-togethers with his neighbors. The stories rang true not because of their details, but because people related them to their own memories. I learned it was not important whether my story was funny as long as it spoke to the person Terry was.

Bill Says

So tell me again why Kathy was asked to deliver this eulogy. And why did she attempt humor with stories that she herself thought were not funny? She says they were there for remembrance. Rather than remembering what Terry had been, how about remembering what Christ has done and continues to do for his people? Ask God to remember (and to act) while we are being slaughtered all the day long (Romans 8). Offer it to the living. The lesson here is to remember that we gather at a funeral to remember all that God has done in Christ. Death strips away all that life in this world has given us. The life and death of Christ, stripped bare on a cross, means life itself from the midst of death. Tell how we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. As we stand around the casket, because of Christ we get to think "outside that box", so to speak. "Spoke to the person who Terry was" would better be "[speak] the Person Who was for Terry."

Kathy Says

Don't be overly concerned with the religious setting. I knew little of Terry's religious beliefs. I knew he was raised Lutheran and his wife was Roman Catholic. I knew they attended mass as a family, and that the funeral would be held at that church even though Terry never converted to Roman Catholicism. I did not know the history behind these facts, or whether, I, a Lutheran, should act a certain way. I decided I could not worry about any of this. My responsibility was to remember my friend and celebrate his life. I learned it was not important whether I was less or more religious, or religious in a different way.

We were all united in our love and respect for Terry, and that was all that mattered.

Bill Says

What really matters is that they (we) are all united at such a time in memento mori [Latin: remember that you must die]. The question is not about the “religious setting,” but about appropriate God talk. Does Kathy mean to say that she couldn’t be concerned about God talk? I’m not sure. Her piece is very much “I”—I learned this, I learned that, I decided this, I decided that. She decides that all that matters is being united in love and respect for Terry, but their love and respect can’t help him now. Her responsibility is to connect her friend and His Friend to everyone in this Eu-Logistic setting. All that matters is the One who gave His life as a ransom for many. Is that Matter represented here? Self-evidently not. No wonder Kathy struggles. She has nothing to offer but what she has experienced—God’s Law and her/our awe-full speechlessness before the aspect of death.

Kathy Says

Don’t be afraid of your emotions. They may not be as selfish as they seem. Terry was an energetic and dynamic person who never spoke of dying. When his treatment began to fail, it did so quickly, and his death was sudden. I realized at the visitation there were many of us who were bolstered by his positive attitude. Now we are left shocked and angry. How could this happen? What are we doing at this funeral home? Although it felt selfish, I decided to speak of this anger in my eulogy. Of all the things I said, this was the thing people thanked me for the most. Somehow I managed to give a voice to the wild mix of emotions many were feeling. Talking about my anger somehow gave people permission to admit they felt angry too. And I learned that in some indefinable way, when you say painful words out loud, the power they have over your thoughts is lessened. You

feel less overwhelmed by grief, and can begin to remember the joy. I thought my eulogy would be the last gift I could give Terry, but instead, I was the one to receive the gift.

Bill Says

She's on to something here. But she falls short. First, emotions are as selfish as everything else about us. They may even be more selfish than they seem. But second, the question, "What are we doing at this funeral home?" cries for an answer. And her answer is anger! Hmmm. I'm aware of the prophets expressing anger at God (Jeremiah comes to mind), but somehow—especially if the eulogy is at the end of the service—leaving people angry is not the way I'd want these folk to exit the church. What is the anger about? To whom is it directed? How about the anger in those who (when they figure it out) aren't being offered anything remotely genuine in this eulogy? What about fear, or worse yet, denial? "...when you say painful words out loud, the power they have over your thoughts is lessened." Really? Then imagine how much more powerful the true Eu Logos is. "...the last gift I could give Terry...", I suggest, would be to tell his friends and family about Christ's victory over the last enemy. That can be the last gift to any dying sinner, but proclaiming it to the assembly of fellow dying sinners and encouraging their trusting it seems not to be here.

Summa This is not how to give a eulogy. Rather, to present Christ, God's promise made flesh, God's Good Word to be trusted and clung to above all else—that's a Eu-Logy. Tell how and why this Promise/Promiser can be trusted. Offer it to the people. They're dying to hear of it.

Bill Moorhead

Pacific Hills Lutheran Church

Omaha, NE

Faith as Surrender (Revisited)

Colleagues, ThTh 328 [Sept. 23, 2004] challenged the claim in the September issue of the ELCA magazine THE LUTHERAN that one fundamental facet of Christian faith is surrender. That posting elicited some response which went out last week as ThTh 329. One of those responses was this:

6. From a Lutheran University prof (math and English lit.)— One context for “surrender” is war: we fight and fight, until we can’t fight any more and either we die or we surrender. [cf the sonnet, John Donne I think but wouldn’t bet on, that begins, “Batter my heart, three-Personed God,” which I admit I don’t really like all that much but he’s got this sense of surrender.] In that way, we fight and fight against grace because we want to do it ourselves (we want to be really, really good and earn God’s favor thereby) or we want not to have to be graced (we’re not really all that bad, are we?). But ultimately we can’t do it ourselves and we can’t get by without grace, so we die or we surrender to a God who never was fighting, just offering, just promising, only we couldn’t see it until we exhausted ourselves to the point of despair .

Comes now this:

“I have struggled with what seemed to me to be Schroeder’s assertion that there is no ‘surrender’ taught in Scripture. The response from ‘a Lutheran University prof (math and English lit.)’ encapsulates my thinking. Donne’s sonnet has seemed to me to express well the truth of our absolute inability to respond to God. Even though we might think we desire surrender,

our surrender is only because God ravishes us. He must act forcefully against our self will or we can/will not respond. It may not be expressed in 'Lutheran phraseology,' but how is that not Biblical?"

Which prompts this from yours truly:

John Donne (1572-1631) was an Anglican priest, for the last ten years of his life dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London. He grew up as a Roman Catholic and moved to Anglicanism by conviction in the midst of the Roman Catholic vs. Anglicanism hullabaloo of the English monarchy during that time. Called "leading poet of the English Metaphysical school" (Encycl. Brit.) his poetry and sermons—about which I am just a commoner—reflect the brightest and best Anglican theology of his day. So it seems to me, although on this slice of theological history too I'm no expert. His word-smithing in that poetry and those sermons is brilliant. They also are patently autobiographical, reflecting his own life's "Sturm und Drang."

The statement above favoring surrender focuses on the will—human will vs. God's will. That antithesis, I suggest, is central to the Anglican paradigm of faith. So Anglicans have a prominent place for surrender when talking about faith. (See parallels in C.S.Lewis, a 20th century convert to Anglicanism—not from Rome, but from scientific atheism.) Seems to me that this is so because Anglican theology—even in its manifold variations—holds to a monolithic notion of God's will. God's will is by definition a "good and gracious" will. It is not critically parsed, not differentiated into God's will as Law, and God's will as Gospel. Here is indeed a fundamental difference between the Reformation in England and that in Germany. Here is a fundamental difference from Luther—not simply "Luth. phraseology." Which pushes the question back to the Bible and to

hermeneutics, those lenses used for reading the Scriptures: Is surrender central to the Biblical paradigm for faith—or even “one possible” Biblical paradigm for faith?

If all of God’s will is fundamentally “God telling us what we should be doing [viz., our believing, our behaving, our praying], but aren’t doing because of our own self-will,” then faith as “surrender” to the divine will is plausible as the proper response of faith. “OK, three-personed God, batter my heart—ravish me.” I surrender: Thy will, not mine, be done.

But if God’s will needs to be distinguished as twofold—law and promise (and these two finally contradicting each other: “Sinner die!” vs. “Good cheer, your sins are forgiven”)—then surrender doesn’t fit for forgiveness-trusters. God in Christ never “batters” human hearts, least of all, batters them into surrender. “Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven” is hardly a call to surrender. Can anyone name one NT text about faith that signals surrender?

The issue about faith as “surrender” is not whether or not it is “Luth. phraseology.” It’s about the Bible’s way of talking about faith and what Christian faith is “in,” what faith’s object is. Since the Bible never once—from cover to cover—uses the word surrender (or its synonyms) for faith, doesn’t that signal something?

“Surrender” was central to the monastic piety of the Middle Ages, surrendering to the will of God (all of it understood as law, God’s laundry-list of “you gotta’s,” specifically the three super ones of poverty, celibate chastity and obedience). Luther knew it well from his many years as a monk. But if faith, according to the NT, is always faith in Christ’s promise of forgiveness, what sense does it make to talk about “surrendering” to a promise? Promises, as good news, get

trusted, not surrendered to.

Unless the other party in the faith-transaction is some sort of opponent, only then, it seems to me, would surrender talk make sense. But in Christ God is friend of sinners, not the sinner's opponent. Christ is on the sinner's side, dying for sinners. So what sense does it make to "surrender" to Christ's fabulously friendly offer?

Closer might be to say that Christ "surrenders" his life to the fate of sinners, the cross and death, and then offers us his surrender "for us" to that law of sin and death, along with his invitation: Trust me for it. What do Christ-trusting sinners surrender in this transfer-process, this sweet swap of Christ's righteousness for our sin? Surrender is the language of power and law. It signals the "servile obedience" the law calls for, as Melanchthon says in Apology 4. Clean contrary, so Melanchthon, is faith's "filial obedience" coming from the language of promise.

God does indeed "act forcefully" against persons and nations with his legal left hand, but with his promissory right hand—and the One who since Ascension now sits there—never. Yes, never is God's good and gracious will in Christ a forceful act. That's why it's such Good News. No coercive force at all. It's an offer. It's an open-handed invitation. You can take it or leave it. You don't "hafta" trust it. But when you do trust the offer to make it your own, you are not saying: I surrender. Faith is a "jumping for joy" Aha! When it happens, you sing Easter hymns. About Christ's Easter and your own.

And shouldn't this be a clincher for all Bible-serious Christians? "If the Bible never once—from cover to cover—uses the word surrender (or its synonyms) when it's talking about faith—doesn't that signal something?" Surrender-faith is a

different faith from faith in Christ. Ask any Muslim.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Faithful Teaching, but Religious?

Robert W. Bertram

[In By Faith Alone: Essays on Justification in Honor of Gerhard O. Forde, ed. Joseph A. Burgess, and Marc Kolden, William Eerdmans Press, 2004, p. 332-340. Permission given by Eerdmans Publishing Company 10/6/04]

This tribute to Gerhard Forde is prompted by a reminiscence. The two of us were flying back from a meeting of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue USA, where the theme – and the controversy – had been justification by faith. But now on our way home thoughts turned forward to Monday morning's classes. By way of last-minute homework Gerhard was rereading the book he had assigned for his seminarians' reading, Karl Barth's commentary on Romans. On this much of Barth he and I could both agree, Gerhard more Barthianly than I: religion is the enemy. But what, the reader may ask, does that have to do with justification by faith, a subject which was hardly a favorite for Barth though it is for Forde and many others of us, only some of whom are

Lutherans? Let us see.

Gerhard Forde, blessed by God, is a faithful teacher. What makes his kind of teaching faithful is that it teaches faith. Surely that is what Paul the Apostle means by “teaching” (*didache*) in his Letter to the Romans.(6:17; 16:17) And one of Forde’s favorite samples from that epistle, Romans 3:19-28, is a classic instance of such faith-constraining *didache*. Let that pericope serve as the source of this essay. Given Forde’s preference for preaching, this “essay” will not hesitate to wax sermonic. But the test of the essay’s faithfulness will be not only whether it agrees with the pericope (that at the very least) but the same test which the pericope itself must meet: What it does for our faith.

What makes teaching faithful is that it teaches faith. It teaches unbelievers to believe. What makes teaching faithful is not, or not most importantly, that the teaching itself is “faithful” to a doctrinal norm. It is that, too, but only as a matter of course, in the course of doing one’s teacherly duty. Faithful teaching is not ultimately a mark of the teachers, namely, that they are “faithful” to, i.e., in compliance with Scripture and confessions. That, at the minimum. But ultimately the faithfulness of their teaching characterizes *those whom* they teach. Thanks to their teaching the learners believe, are “full of faith.” Paul tells his Corinthians that the only letter of reference he will ever have to show any future employer, presumably including God, is the Corinthians themselves. Therefore, if only for his sake, they had better believe.

Even if the opposite should happen, God forbid, if instead the hearers should reject the teaching, then in that case too the teaching may still have been faithful if what it caused the hearers to reject truly was faith. For even in that case the teaching still characterizes *them*, the audience, though now as

unbelievers conscious of their unbelief. Yet the very fact that we, the church's teaching apostolate, try every possible means to postpone and avoid such an explicit rejecting on the part of the learners only confirms the point. Faithful teaching is teaching which effectively is "faithing" the learners. ("Faithing" is my own coinage, derived from sixteenth-century use of "faith" as a verb.)

It is as the Lutheran confessors said about the biblical Word: their testimony is "normed" by that Word, the way a two-by-four has to square with a plumb-line, side by side, externally. But the deeper function of the Word is not to "norm" but to "form," internally. The confessors claimed to have been "formed" by the Word, that is, they were themselves recreated into believing it. If so, it is hardly surprising that the teaching of the Word which first "formed" them would then be echoed back in their own teaching, thus squaring them with the original, the "norm." What else was their confession but that prior formative Word now meeting itself coming back, meeting the norm? Where forming precedes, norming is almost anticlimactic. Conceivably, my public teaching may be faithful in the canonical sense of being obedient to the normative tradition, whether any of my students ever came to believe that teaching or not. But who would call that teaching? Faithful teaching is teaching that first and last is faithing the learners. How is this so in the case of Romans 3: 19-28?

The opposite of faith is what Paul calls "boasting" (3:27), boasting in "the works of the law." (20, 27,28) That is the enemy against which faithful teaching has to contend, our boasting in the works of the law. However, the antagonism between these two opposites, between faith and boasting, can be very subtle and hard to spot. For one thing, what Paul calls boasting often does not appear to be boastful; often it appears as despair. And as for the opposite, faith, it might very well

look like a kind of boasting. Paul calls it “the glory of God.” (23) That is, faith is *our* “glorying” in *God*. Still, isn’t glorying not a kind of boasting? Yes, except that now our boasting has been transmuted into our boasting in Christ. Faith is the christening, the Christ-ening of boasting. What begins as the diametric opposite of faith, namely, boasting in the works of the law, ends up under the gospel as a new and radical form of boasting, our glorying in the God of Christ Jesus – in short, faith.

What Paul calls boasting in the works of the law could as well be called religion. And once *that* is what we mean by religion we do not exaggerate when, following Paul, we see everyone as religious, even the most secular and otherwise irreligious. In that sense of religion, not primarily as religiosity or as belief in god or even as ultimate concern but rather as boasting in the works of the law, Americans as a lot are still quite religious. Sir Thomas Beecham, the symphony orchestra conductor, said about his British people that they did not really like music but they were absolutely wild about the noise it makes. I would say about us Americans that by and large we are not fond of the Christian faith but we are absolutely wild about the religion it makes. We would prefer the Christian religion without its faith. But without its faith, all the religion that is left is what Paul called boasting in the works of the law, that is, a religion of unbelievers. And that, as Paul knew better than we, is fatal.

That being the case, faithful teaching, teaching that is “faithing” unbelievers into believers, must expose and oppose their religion, even their ostensibly “Christian” religion. Yet we must do that not in order to eradicate people’s religion altogether but rather to radicalize it, to re-root it in Christ, to transplant it into the new creation. As Irenaeus would say, that religion which is a boasting in the works of the law must

be “recapitulated.” It must be decapitated but then salvaged by means of a *head*-transplant, the new head being Christ, who is ours only by faith. As Paul says of the law, grace comes not to destroy the law but on the contrary to uphold it (Rom. 3:31). In fact, religion never has it so good as when it is retrieved by the Christ of faith.

The best people are the same ones who know best that they are not the best people.

The better we become the better we realize we are not better after all. But realizing that takes the joy out of our betterment. Well, you say, that figures: if we truly are not better, then what’s to enjoy? Is that not to be expected as part of growing up? As we mature morally and spiritually, we mature also in our self-honesty. We give up our childish, inflated illusions about ourselves. Gone is the juvenile boasting and gloating. Isn’t that the mark also of mature religion, religion which gives all credit to God, *solī Deo gloria, sola gratia*? All glory to God, none – any longer – to ourselves.

The trouble is, as the gloating diminishes, so does our glowing, our radiance, our glorying. No longer can we glory in how our lives impress God, knowing that they don’t. We cannot revel in how tickled God is with us. We cannot bask in how our performance delights the Creator. Gone are the gratifying divine compliments, gone the Creator’s doting on our works and ways which we so need in order to thrive. Gone is the rollicking, shrieking glee of “Daddy, Mommy, watch me dive in without holding my nose.”

To put the matter in old Lutheran jargon, precisely as the first function of the law, its *usus civilis*, begins to succeed in us, socializing us and improving our behavior, simultaneously its second function, its *usus theologicus*, takes over and “accuses” us, like a reality check, reminding us once more of how far we

fall short. I had a rabbi friend who used to say, only half jokingly, that the law is a Jewish mother. Indispensable as the law is for sustaining life, it is always also a kill-joy. Kill, it does, and on extremely high authority. Those are “the works of the law,” civilizing and then condemning. The “works of the law” are not first of all the works which we do, to obey the law. No, “the works of the law” (subjective genitive) are those workings which the law does, perhaps in us or against us, those ubiquitous pressures upon us, driving us to meet obligations but then, all in the same process, faulting us for falling short. These are works of *God*.

Sometime ago my wife and I were strolling through one of those enormous enclosed shopping malls – the natural habitat, I find, of today’s teeny-boppers and pensioners. There we came upon a scene which illustrates what Paul in verse twenty- three of our pericope calls “the glory of God.” Coming toward us were a young father and, clutching his hand, his three- or four-year old daughter. She was adorable, as only a grandfather can appreciate. At just that split-second when my eyes took the picture, the father was breaking up with laughter, obviously because of something hilarious the little girl had just said. She, on the other hand, was beaming from ear to ear, pleased as punch at how she was delighting her dad. She was aglow in the confidence that he adored her. Her glow was like what Paul calls “the glory of God,” the “glow-ry” of God, that is, the radiance of our glorying in God’s good pleasure. That is also what Paul means by faith.

Is that not what life is meant to be, our being able to exult in how we thrill the fatherly- motherly Creator, and letting that show in how we glow? For good reason we cannot do that anymore, seeing who we truly are. We know better now, thanks to the sobering truthfulness of our religion. Of course, we could

always lie. But it is too late for that, too.

Thus it is with honest religion, not necessarily Christian religion, just any halfway truthful religion – what Paul calls the law. It promotes good work but then, by so doing, it also exposes how we idolize that work, to our shame. This religious law of life pushes us relentlessly to be better – better in our use of inclusive language, better in meeting deadlines, better in our prayer life, better in sticking to our diet, better in taking a joke, better in our political involvements, better in our concept of better. In a religious gathering like this book's readership, getting better is something we major in to the point of being professionals at it.

But then the same religious force, this law of God, turns right around and blames us for gloating over our betterment, or blames us for disdaining others who are not better the way we are, or blames us for begrudging others who are better the way we are not, and then blames us for feeling so blamed guilty. The very works the law promotes, until it gets us excited about them, it then *demotes*, because we overrate them.

We act as if those works could justify us, as if they were our right to life. As if, given a little more power from on high or a little more time to achieve them, they might just be good enough to live off of. This fallacy honest religion exposes in us, having itself helped to set us up for it. Where we go wrong on the works of the law, says Paul, is that we “boast” of them. That need not mean that we boast of having accomplished them. Usually we have not. No, even when we despair of accomplishing them, we “boast” them. That is, we boost them out of all proportion to their real purpose. We boost them into a salvational significance they were never meant to have. Exactly by despairing over the shortfall of our good works, by pining over the works we don't do, we “boast” a value in those works

which they simply do not deserve. *Religion* exposes that “boostfulness” in us at the same time as it incites it.

Recognizing that we do that will not cure us of doing it. Religion cannot eliminate our “boasting” the works of religion, not even with the most critical self-awareness. Not even the Christian religion, insofar as it is a religion, can eliminate such boasting. How, Paul asks, will such boasting ever be removed? “By the law of works?” Answer: “No.” (3:27) All that religion can do, or the law, is to exacerbate such boasting and then rub our nose in it. Among us today one of the most tempting ways to try outsmarting this law is to concentrate instead on “feeling good about ourselves.” I say “concentrate” because that in turn becomes just one more “work of the law,” something we must now toil to be good at. Feeling good about ourselves becomes hard work. And why? Because the law, that nimble nag, is just as quick to point out how unsuccessful we are being at feeling good about ourselves. We are never good enough at it. Exasperated, we may try one last dodge: stop worrying about it, be laid back, dismiss it all with “So what?.” To which the law need only whisper, Let’s see you do *that*. Or as Luther put it, “*Ja, tue es noch.*” “Yes, just go ahead and do it.”¹

That is exasperating. Paul puts it bluntly, “The law angers [us.]” (Rom. 4:15) And when the law does anger us, as Paul also says, it is simply compounding our sin (5:20), so furiously that we can taste it, empirically and clinically. And that, as Paul concluded, is not merely *our* anger but *God’s* anger against us. Are you getting the sneaking suspicion, as Paul did, that the works of God’s law (what we have called “religion”), whatever else they are meant to do, are not meant to save us? In this sense, as Bonhoeffer saw, there is no such thing as a “saving religion” or a “religion of salvation.” Not even the Christian religion can be that, *qua* religion.

But if that is what religion does for us, improves us so as to incriminate us, it hardly provides us what we so sorely need in order to go into life purring, namely, the doting good pleasure of the heavenly Father. If the better you are the better you know you are not better, try frolicking knowing that. With the law, Paul discovered, comes the knowledge of sin. And while the knowledge of sin does well to expose our boasting, it utterly devastates any self-confidence we might have had about how charming we look to our Maker. It stifles altogether any “Mommy, Daddy, watch us dive into Monday without holding back.”

That is how we “fall short” of glorying in God. (3:23) “Fall” is just the right word. Thanks to the paralyzing, muscle-cramping truthfulness of the law, we fall flat on our faces. The more religious we are the more critically honest we are, but also the more we dance before the Holy of Holies like klutzes. Good dancers never watch their feet. Religion compels watching your feet. And therefore we fall. No wonder religious communities – America is a case in point – often resort to such bizarre devices, even intoxicants, to pump up their spirits, to deceive themselves, really to counteract the bitter truth of their own religion. Frank Sinatra is supposed to have said that he was “in favor of anything that will get you through the night, whether it’s booze or religion.” We have news for Old Blue Eyes: Do not count on religion. It is not meant to get you through any nights, least of all the dark nights of the soul. I think more and more Americans are suspecting as much, but without any live options. Religion by itself, without the Christ of faith, is a dead end.

Faithful teaching, teaching which is in the business of “faithing” unbelievers, must brand religion for the dead end it is. I mean that religion of ours which is as yet and continually “unfaithed.” But how about when religion is redeemed, “re-headed” under the Lord Christ for the use of his faithful? Even

then, among the faithful, there must still be talk of “dead” – not dead end but dead. The faithful, too, are put to death, but in their case that is for them not the end anymore than it was for their Lord. For them dying, day after day, is only the beginning. Dying is only half of faith, yet that much it is. Faith is dying “to ourselves” or, shall we say, dying out on ourselves? That is something which religion by itself cannot bring off, though God knows it tries. The mortification that is part of every religion – or, in a secular age, the mortification implicit in our whole culture of criticism – that mortification is still essential to our being justified before God. But for the faithful in Christ dying is always only stage one.

The art of dying faithfully is in the Spirit’s restricting our dying (whether that be our dying in the coroner’s sense of the word or our daily dying) to only a beginning, not letting it finish us off. When left to ourselves, even our own most religious selves, we can only die *in* our sin; we cannot die *out* on our sin. Henry the Fourth was right, “We owe God a death.”² But how to pay off what we owe and still have anything left to live off of?

Paul’s answer, for all its archaic words, is still as fresh as at first: “The redemption [of our debt] is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith.” (3:24,25) Notice, the expiation is not presented *to* God. It is presented *by* God, and not only because we could never have come up with such an expiation but because *God* “takes no pleasure in the death of sinners but wills rather that sinners turn from their sinful ways and live.” In Jesus, therefore, in Jesus the expiating, sinner-suffering Christ, God puts forth the one adorable Child. Here is the Offspring to rejoice the heart of even the most exacting Jewish Creator: the Child unspoiled and selfless and brave, with breathtaking chutzpah. Here is the one well-pleasing Youngster worth boasting about. And does the

Son glow from his Parent's doting? Even in his darkest hour. Then especially!

At this point in the drama Luther has the Father now turning the question to us, somewhat as follows. "Are you also well-pleased with this my beloved Son?" God asks of us. We dare to nod affirmatively. "My, what good judgment you show!" exclaims the proud Father, who then adds, "Any friend of my Child is a friend of mine." And God continues, "Then be our guest. The Child is yours as well. If you are not too proud to have him, his blood instead of your own, his death – his 'Eastered' death – in exchange for your terminal, biodegradable death, then We would be pleased to have you as ours – your sin and your boasting and all. And We'll call it even. A *froehlicher Wechsel*, a delightful exchange, a sweet swap. Never another word about debts still owed. Redemption, complete! *Schluss!*"

Almost without our noticing, we find ourselves believing. It is better that way, looking toward Christ and not into ourselves. Yet Christ, as the story goes, is not content to let well enough alone. He does turn attention back upon ourselves. "What great faith you have," Christ exclaims. Presumably he is confident that we can now stand the publicity. We for our part are still inclined to be embarrassed, mumbling instead, "Help thou mine unbelief" (Mark 9:22, KJV). (Notice, never does scripture cite believers *themselves* saying, "Great is *our* faith.") The law's *usus theologicus* still has its place, keeping us humble. Still, Christ persists, trumping the law's *accusatio*: "Great is your faith" (Matt. 15:24). "Your faith has made you whole" ((Matt 9:22), KJV). "Your faith has saved you" (Luke 7:50). "This is the victory which overcomes the world, your faith" (I John 5:4).

"By faith the people of old ['of whom the world was not worthy'] received divine approval; that [namely, their faith] is why 'God is not ashamed to be called their God'" (Heb. 11:2, 38, 16). And

who was more emphatic about faith than Paul? Of course, says he, grace is sheer "gift." But the gift is never fully given until it is "received." And it is "received by faith" (3:25), our faith. Does it not just kill us to have to accept such compliments? But *this* is a killing we can live with.

We may still demur: What is so great about faith? Indeed, as we warned at the outset, is faith not just a subtle variation on our old "boasting?" Is Christian faith really all that different from that ambivalent, fatal boasting which the law of religion incites us to and then condemns? These are the skeptical questions which religious folk, especially the secularly, atheistically religious folk are right to ask. And are they not correct? Empirically there doesn't seem to be all that much difference between the old legalistic "boasting" and this same old thing in Lamb's clothing called "faith." The only conspicuous difference is what the boasting is boasting in: formerly our "works of the law," now our elder Brother's works.

Exactly, says Paul. That is what makes all the difference. That is what suddenly justifies our "boasting" or, better, our glorying: the One who is the object of our faith. Our faith rises or falls by him. Either the claims for him are wrong, in which case "we are of all people the most miserable," or he is vindicated and in that case so are we, his believers. Either way, rise and fall we do, continually. Everyone does, whether believer or unbeliever. But is it a rising and falling under "the works of the law" or a falling and rising with Christ? That, we believe and teach and confess, is what decides whether it is a dying "unto grief" or a dying "unto life."

Note, Paul explains, how the old "boasting" is eliminated. It is eliminated, "excluded" not by that paralyzing preoccupation with our own improvement and our own self-honesty but rather by what amounts to a substitute "boast," by the substituting of One who

is really Someone to boast about. Our old trusts and mistrusts have been refitted with a new Trustee, Jesus our Lord. And because in faith we are identified with him, all that we do, including our dying, even our despair, is done in the confidence that it delights the Creator. "So that all our doings and life may please Thee," as Luther's Morning Prayer puts it, and all on account of our Vast Connections.

The whole idea can be dizzying. We should not advise disbelievers to venture into it unless they are prepared to commit reformation. And there is no telling where that will end. For believers, on the other hand, that is exactly the glory of faith: there is no end that, with Christ, cannot be resurrected into a beginning. That is the constant miracle which Archbishop Cranmer claimed every believer still performs, even though The Age of Miracles is supposedly over: "Faith converteth adversity into prosperity." Faith makes sow's ears into silk purses. Faith, being itself a reformation which begins at home, is given to reform, not glumly but glowingly.

Now it is time to get down to some serious frolicking, especially on this occasion of celebrating one of the church's faithful teachers. And the way to do the frolicking (Bach called it *frohlocken*) is with all the resources (note well!) of *religion*. For as we noted, even the old wet blanket, religion, is redeemable by Christ. Through him the law, once so dead-ended and futile, comes into its own. All its works, its "good-doings" and its mortifyings alike, are at our disposal. Therefore in full view of the watching God, we dare to dive into the thickest religious ambiguities – ceremony, denomination, priestcraft, finance, bureaucracy, controversy – without so much as holding our noses or even our breath. For we are plunged into the deeps with Christ, baptismally, where we breathe from His Spirit and are "faithed" with the assurance that his resurrection is always at hand. Even religion's intoxicants and opiates are transformed

in the The Holy Communion by the blood of Christ, with whom his believers are now aglow. And what they “glow-ry” in, using, of all things, religion to do it, is the Father’s good pleasure, who gives them the Kingdom. Is not that the *didache* “to be received by faith” (3:25), whose catholic teacher Gerhard Forde is? And we his catholic learners?

Robert W. Bertram

Seminex Professor (emeritus) of Historical and
Systematic Theology, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago

1 WA 40/1:425; LW 26:272

2 Henry the Fourth, Part I, act 3, scene 2.

[FAITHFULTEACHING \(PDF\)](#)

Responses received to the last two postings: “9-11 on the Third Anniversary” (ThTh 327) and “THE LUTHERAN surrenders ” (ThTh 328).

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

I. "9-11 on the Third Anniversary" (ThTh 327)THREE NOT COMPLETELY HAPPY CAMPERS

1. ELCA pastor, former student—Right on – as always! The diagnosis on America is absolutely correct, although one I am reasonably sure will never usher from the mouth of a politician! However, it raised a question I have wanted to ask you for some time to make sure that I am thinking correctly.

I have often taught that God is absolutely good and that no evil can come from an all-good God. Trouble is, my hearers often cock their heads in wonderment as if I have taught a new teaching! . . . It seems so many of my hearers believe that God directly sends all kinds of evil and bad things, namely sickness, death, tragedy.

I have responded to their questions in the way I think you have addressed those things that have befallen America. I believe that God may well "use" these things to bring God's people to their knees, but God does not directly cause/send them.

Sin, death and the devil are the result of misused freedom and since the Fall we suffer from them and their consequences. It is out of this fallen state that suffering, sickness, and all sorts of evil come. The Good God is with us to see us through these things and may even use them in our lives to bring us back to Him.

Yes/No?

2. A first cousin—Ed, aren't you being one-sided? What about those people murdering in the name of Allah?

Don't they need to be called to repent too?

3. A Crossings colleague—Where's the Good News Prognosis stuff to meet the Bad News Diagnosis that you keep pounding away at in ThTh 327? Even Jeremiah with all his gloom and doom has a chapter 31 with Good News for the villains.

SOME DID HEAR GOOD NEWS

1. One of my own teachers (philosophy) at Valparaiso University in the late 1940s. [D.v., I'm soon to be 74. Imagine his antiquity!]Ed: Eucharisto polu [Ed: That's Greek for I give great thanks] for this cup of water in the desert.

You recall for us the tower of Siloam. The required response was not merely to name a Siloam Commission, certainly not to export violence to rid the world of evil—a war without end.

You cite Amos. Yes. I've been thinking Jeremiah, who saw it happen. Remember Niebuhr's "Test of True Prophecy"? He's clearer about how it's falsified. False prophecy promises security, usually wrapped in piety: "The temple of the Lord, ditto, ditto." ... And may God continue to bless the U.S. of A."

"Security" seems the word of the day. Preachers and candidates trade on it; Yet exactly such "security" causes deaf-dumb-and blindness to growing injustice and divisions, which cause frustration, envy, and vengeance in turn on the other side. That kind of security brings unsafety, unpeace. Jeremiah said, "Go to Shiloh and see!"—a hole in

the ground where formerly stood a people's shrine. Has no one said, "Go to the World Trade Towers and

see!" Would anyone dare breathe an American Shiloh?

All that end-talk in Amos and Jeremiah—borrowed from a biblical assumption that the world had a beginning and would have an end—was used by them [sc: the security prophets] for ends "within" history and specifically for those brought by empire. (Assyria, Babylon. Daniel added Persia, Macedonia, and the Seleucids. Mark and John of Patmos were talking Rome.)

Exile was a fertile state. It produced a redaction of the scriptions, brought inter-people engagement. Here people came to sing the greatest songs ever composed of a city to come. Marty has written about "pilgrims in their own land"—should we be saying "exiles in our own land," admitting a new captivity to empire? Jeremiah made no offer of simple land restitution to Israel. He spoke judgment on Judah, judgment on the nations, along the way to a future including both, to hearts of flesh and not of stone from the greatest to the least, no one any longer saying "know the Lord."

2. A California Deaconess—I've been keeping your last ThTh posting (327) for some quiet moments, and this week the quiet moments did not surface until early this morning. You remain the one consistent purveyor of the need for faith in the good news of Christ amidst the terrors of Iraq. Indeed, this empire most assuredly has had the chance to "repent and hear the good news" over and over again. It does appear that it will not, amidst the warnings. A return to our God does not seem to be in the works.

"Surrogate repentance" runs deep. In repenting, I

feel as though my body is covered with a burkah. I am stifling hot in its unforgiving folds, as I peer out from the grid before my eyes. Can I see others? Not very well. Can they see me? Not at all. A whirlwind of dust-words?-gathers beneath the heavy folds everywhere I walk, stirring up the atmosphere around me. Others simply avoid my whirlwind by stepping aside as I pass. The dust stings my lungs. My heart begins to hurt. Then, on a billboard I see it flashing, "HEAR THE GOOD NEWS!" Light and love flood the very warp and weft of my garment, penetrating right through my skin and into my soul. Thank you for --being that billboard today.

II. "THE LUTHERAN surrenders " (ThTh 328)

1. ELCA pastor in IN-Great stuff!!!! I needed that. Yes, too often THE LUTHERAN is not very Lutheran, as is all too much of the church that bears that name. I wonder if David Miller will respond to your invitation.
2. ELCA seminary prof-Thanks for continuing to be such a passionate witness of the radical good news which is God's gospel.
3. ELCA pastor in WI-Thanks (again!) for the Gospel, Ed. There's some FUNKY theology rampant in the ELCA.
4. ELCA pastor in WA-This week's posting is, as they say, "two thumbs up-way up!" Thanks for setting the issues so clearly before the Lutheran's editor. I can hope & pray for a written response by him in a future column.
5. Holden Village supporter (also Luth. university theology prof)-Thanks for your piece on the LUTHERAN column. If someone had read that column aloud to me and not told me where it came from, I'd have

guessed, with some sadness, that it had been a Vespers homily at Holden Village. That's the prevalent theology there, the sort that made [so-and-so] nearly nuts a few years ago, the sort [so-and-so] struggled against for years as Holden's director, and the sort a handful of us continually resist and try to counter or critique.

6. Another Lutheran University prof (math and English lit.)—One context for “surrender” is war: we fight and fight, until we can't fight any more and either we die or we surrender. [cf the sonnet, John Donne I think but wouldn't bet on, that begins, “Batter my heart, three-Personed God,” which I admit I don't really like all that much but he's got this sense of surrender.] In that way, we fight and fight against grace because we want to do it ourselves (we want to be really, really good and earn God's favor thereby) or we want not to have to be graced (we're not really all that bad, are we?). But ultimately we can't do it ourselves and we can't get by without grace, so we die or we surrender to a God who never was fighting, just offering, just promising, only we couldn't see it until we exhausted ourselves to the point of despair .

That wouldn't be my only choice of context for “surrender” though, and it might not be my first choice even. I think of surrender when I think of passion: sex perhaps, or any activity engaged in with total absorption, total passion, total obsession... Is that perhaps the sense David Miller had in mind in his editorial? But that's a Romantic sense of the word for sure.

I believe it was Gladstone speaking of Disraeli: “a

rhetician inebriated by his own verbosity.” Maybe the roses got Miller carried away on the wings of the words and missing the Word?

7. ELCA pastor in Ohio—Thanks, Ed, for taking the time and trouble to shout into the wind. I think there’s not a chance you’ll reach the intended target—David Miller; whatever other official folks are busy shaping opinions without reference to the thought of the confessors and the Word that backs it up—but then perchance the wind sends your words sideways where bystanders pick up on them and are encouraged by them and put them to use. Which I assume is happening this week, also here.
8. ELCA pastor in MT—Once again, Bravo!!
9. ELCA pastor in NE—Glad you are home from the hospital and on the mend, and now have the fever to take on “THE LUTHERAN!”
10. David Miller, Editor of THE LUTHERAN, also responded. Dear Ed,

A final thought related to my last note to you [Ed: David is referring to an earlier exchange we’d had on a related topic]:

That Paul frequently and decidedly could call from the language of sacral manumission, repeatedly referring to himself as *doulos* (slave, not servant, as English translations so genteelly cast it) suggests again that the language of surrender, “the obedience of faith,” is appropriate to explorations of the Christian life.

Peace, David

[And in a follow-up message—]

By the way, did you share my earlier response with

the people on your listserve, or did they only hear your voice? I regularly run articles with which I may not personally agree and letters to the editor that take me to task, sometimes abusively.

You have my permission to share my response with your digital community.

God's peace, David

THE LUTHERAN surrenders

An Open Letter to David L. Miller Editor, THE LUTHERAN, "the magazine of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America"

Dear David, This one is serious. Seriously wrong. To wit, your plea [p. 58, THE LUTHERAN, September 2004] for "the beauty of surrender . . . holy surrender . . . surrendered lives" as central to Christian faith.

Not so. Couldn't be more wrong.

- 1. Doubtless you know that "surrender" is the meaning of the Arabic root "s-l-m," central to the terms Islam and Muslim. The Quran calls for surrender, surrender to the will of Allah as revealed in the Quran. It is the center of that faith. Not so faith in the Christian Gospel. A pitch for "surrender to an inscrutable love" is a pitch for faith in deus absconditus (God with Christ's mercy hidden). The Quran hypes that sort of faith. Christian scriptures never.*
- 2. Apropos of those scriptures—I just checked my old KJV*

concordance from seminary days half a century ago. NOT ONE (!) listing for surrender either as verb or noun. Doesn't that say something? Sure does. Surrender is unknown, never mentioned, in "our" Holy Scriptures. It surfaces 7 times as you commend it on your editorial page.

3. Our Lutheran heritage says that the distinction between God-with-mercy-hidden ("inscrutable") and God-in-Christ-with-mercy-revealed is fundamental to all God-talk, and thus to all faith-talk. Your editorial fudges on that distinction, that arch Lutheran theologoumenon. Does it have a place anywhere in THE LUTHERAN, let alone as the last word in the issue? Don't think so.
4. Beneath that distinction of God-hidden-and-revealed, of course, is THE Lutheran cornerstone, the hermeneutics of distinctin about God's Law and God's Gospel. [In one table-talk Luther says: "When I discovered THAT distinction—that God's law is one thing, but God's Gospel something else—da riss ich herdurch." I.e., that was my breakthrough.]
5. "Surrender-faith" correlates to God's law-lingo and God's law-actions. No wonder surrender is so at home in Islam. And in the manifold versions of sub-Islam peddled today as "real" Christianity. But faith in the Gospel, like the Gospel itself, is "something else."
6. Because Christian faith is always "faith in the Gospel," you've got to go to the Gospel to learn what this faith is. And it is not surrender. The Gospel is a promise (St. Paul's favorite definition), God's promise of mercy-forgiveness in Christ crucified and risen. Promises—even among humans—do NOT call for surrender. They call for the promisee to trust the promisor.
7. Or again, Melanchthon's favorite, the Gospel-promise is an "offer." You do not "surrender" to offers. You either

take 'em or leave 'em. In Jesus' words [Mt.6:24], you either cling to the offer or despise it.

8. Surrender probably doesn't have to sound doleful, but it is a tad difficult to get any hoopla into surrender, even "surrender to God's beauty." By contrast Luther couldn't resist regularly linking "froehlich" with Christian faith. "Froehlich" in German is not merely "joyful," but "jumping-for-joy." Even if the word surrender did occur in the Bible—and remember it does not—jumping-for-joy does not immediately come to mind.
9. Your opening paragraph, David, marvelously crafted prose, signalled for me where the editorial was going. "Beauty converts the heart this day . . . and every day, saving my soul, again. The roses' ecstatic explosion of pink and red in front of the house sing psalms of morning praise to the inexpressible Beauty from which they spring. Can it be that this One is not gracious?" That's great Romanticist philosophy, but it's not Reformation theology.
10. Luther did not think that the Beauty you so beautifully celebrate was sufficient to document that "this One" was indeed gracious to folks like us. Not because Luther was an old grump. He too can revel in the sheer gift – and beauty – of creation. Even with ecstasy. But he was unable to conclude from that that "this One" is gracious to him. For the roses too are mortal. Their final witness is "memento mori." [Remember that you too shall die.] After all the ecstatic explosion of the lilies, they are, as Jesus reminds his disciples, "alive today and tomorrow are thrown into the fire." To conclude from roses or lilies that "this One is gracious," is a non sequitur.
11. Your opening sentence teases us to think about "Beauty saving your soul." We can probably let that one go as poetic license. For you know that we all need—and have—a

better Savior than that. If you're interested in seeing how the "Beauty of the World" can be linked to the Christian Gospel (and not just God inscrutable), go to the chapter by that name in Elert's "The Christian Ethos." It's the only Christian ethics book I know of that has such a chapter.

12. *Summa. THE LUTHERAN has got to BE Lutheran to deserve its name. God-hidden, God-revealed—God's law, God's Gospel—this is the primal Lutheran sieve for theology and preaching. "At every point of Christian theology," said Martin Chemnitz, Lutherans "sift" theology thus. Your surrender editorial doesn't do so. Why not "sift" surrender and beauty once more according to these Lutheran specs in a future editorial and tell us what you come up with. We'd all be edified.*

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

9-11 on the Third Anniversary

Colleagues, Just got home from a week in Barnes Hospital on Wednesday shortly before sunset. And good timing too, since both of my primary physicans—diabetologist and cardiologist—are observant Jews (one reformed, one orthodox, both "keep kosher") and with yesterday's sunset Rosh Hashanah began. Despite their genuine TLC for me over the years, they'd be taking time-out for the holiday—so better I get "better" and go home. Which they say I was after a final TEE (trans-esophageal-echocardiogram!) late afternoon yesterday.

The affliction—fever, chills, shakes—was never diagnosed with all the thousands of dollars (I'm sure) thrown at it, both to identify it and to make it go away. It has gone away, but nobody knows what "it" was. The highly probable case that it was a bug we brought back from SE Asia could never be verified even with a consult from Singapore, Dr Paul Ananth Tambyah, Associate Professor of Medicine (Infectious Diseases), National University of Singapore. Paul's a member of one of the Lutheran congregations in Singapore. We became good friends during our 3 months there earlier this year.

One Barnes staffer said I was "sick unto death" when Marie wheel-chaired me in last week Wednesday and I did reflect on that right from the beginning. I need more time for that and for self-crossings, self-examination, and—God's call from every trauma—for repentance. One thing I did do during the last happier days of the week was read Blessed Bob Bertram's doctoral dissertation presented to the University of Chicago in 1964 . Paul Tillich and Jaroslav Pelikan were his Doctoral Committee. Why I'd never done that before perplexes me. But I have now. It's quintessential Bertram. Sparring with the giants, Barth of Bob's own day and Erasmus of Luther's day. Taking the scenic route. Teasing the reader all the way into the Socratic dialogue he conjures. And the title too is a tease: "The Human Subject as the Object of Theology. Luther by Way of Barth. A Study in the Grammar of Theological Predication." D.v., I'll do a review for you soon. [You can read a piece of it for yourself on the Crossings website, www.crossings.org. Click under "Library" on the list of Bob's publications. Scroll down to "How Our Sins Were Christ's."]

No one volunteered to offer a text for this week's ThTh posting. And since we've not missed one for 326 weeks, my persona and psyche won't allow breaking the sequence. Maybe after ThTh #364 (= 7 years of 52 weeks) the time will have come for closure.

That's 37 more postings.

So finally back to the proposed topic: 9-11 on the Third Anniversary

1. The first ThTh posting after 9-11-2001 proposed that God's message to America in this unimaginable coup was really quite simple: "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." Those words come straight from Jesus in the face of a Siloam tower-catastrophe alongside a murderous slaughter of the innocents by the Roman governor Pilate. Jesus dismissed the question of guilt. [Luke 13:1-6, where Jesus says this twice!] Jesus does not say: first we must name evil for the evil it is. He does not offer pastoral care for the grieving survivors—although in the deepest sense he really does. He simply says: God's word to you survivors is one word: Repent. [And if you don't know what that means, ask.] In the last three years nothing has happened that signals repentance on the part of the USA. The current campaigns of both Bush and Kerry seem not to have a clue. Nor do the preachers to Americans.
2. The chronic affliction of those for whom Jesus weeps (and his Abba weeps too) throughout the Scriptures is deafness and blindness. Eyes pasted shut, ears plugged. And so it continues. Also in these United States. In Matthew's gospel [13:13-15] that diagnosis is so severe that no hope is offered for any reversal of the symptoms. The doom and destruction of the nation are sealed. It's just a matter of time. There will be others, the nobodies, who strangely will have eyes to see and ears to hear. But the folks that count couldn't care less about what these folks claim to see and hear.
3. The folly of America's response to terrorism. Super shallow diagnosis. But what else to expect from the deaf and the blind? Here's the word of God on the subject: God

is the ultimate terrorist. Jesus said so. Luke 12:4-7 is his diagnosis of terror. Listen to this: "I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!" But that, of course, puts God into the equation—right at the center of terror. And against us. But God against us? God the one creating terror in us? That is impossible. We are the nation of God bless America. It's our national religion. Since God ALWAYS blesses America, there is nothing about God for Americans to fear. God's for us, not against us. We're not evil people. That's those other guys. But... But if there is no fear of God in us, other fears move in. In American hearts, empty of God-fear, fear of terrorists moves in. With fear of terrorists in American hearts, God is actually being displaced from the turf he claims for his own. The locus for terror is patently the human heart. From one end of scriptures to the other God claims human hearts as his own turf, the place for the proper exercise of human "fear, love and trust," those fundamental "verbs of the heart." To let Osama or Saddam get in there to occupy that turf is to aid and abet one's own idolatry. Our national leadership has for three years been urging those "mini-terrorists" to occupy our hearts—and propagandizing us to welcome them as valid objects to be feared. Our national policy for survival is focused there. To which God says: I can tolerate that for a while, but as permanent policy, no way! By declaring war on these second-class terrorists, you guarantee that you'll lose the war against THE terrorist who confronts you. And waging war on Him is sheer madness. You'd think that even a born-again Christian president would know that. But not if he's a blind leader of the blind, a deaf leader of the

deaf.

4. Why does this sound so hopeless? Because it is. Isn't there any Good News? Only for those who can "hear" Jesus' Siloam-tower invitation: stop turning your back on God's word to you, turn around, listen, and do what he tells you—repent and believe the Good News. But the American masses give no signals of any interest in this. In which case we who do are called to do it—for the deaf and blind. Luther made a compelling case—at the time of the Muslim onslaught on Christian Europe in 1529—for "surrogate" repentance. That amounted to repentance on the part of a few having the quantum-leap consequence of "saving" the unrepentant masses. It was not a sure thing, he said, but God had been known to do so now and then in the past. And if there was no other option, then the few needed to do it for the many.
5. It's unlikely that any of these themes will show up in Bush's campaign speeches. Ditto for Kerry. But what if one of them did go public with something like this:
 - A. Empires are always unjust. Augustine demonstrated that. God has always finally destroyed unjust empires. America is the only one left. We too are guilty as charged. By God. The Roman empire claimed it was bringing "Pax Romana" to the nations they conquered. None of the conquered ever thought so. They experienced murderous oppression. America's imperial conquests are planet-wide, both military and economic. We say we're bring democracy, freedom, prosperity. None of the conquered think so. America has a God-problem. God is our enemy.
 - B. God uses villians to punish his chosen people. Isaiah and many of the prophets say so. God's use of "evil" terrorists to call America to repentance is God's standard operating procedure. Abraham Lincoln

organized a national day of repentance at the bloodiest depths of the Civil War. Repentance for both sides. It actually happened. And he was a Republican. One military advantage of repentance (so Luther) is that when God is using evil empires to punish his self-acclaimed “good” people, repentance removes God from the equation. The “evil empires” lose their divine ally. You can never predict the consequences of repentance. But they always turn out to be Good News.

- C. Three hurricanes on the third anniversary of 9-11-2001. Should we not add that to Amos’s list in his chapter 4?

“I gave you cleanness of teeth and lack of bread . . . yet you did not return to me.

I also withheld the rain from you . . . yet you did not return to me.

I smote you with blight and mildew . . . yet you did not return to me.

I sent among you a pestilence . . . yet you did not return to me.

I overthrew some of you [in a cataclysm] like Sodom and Gomorrah . . . yet you did not return to me.”

And now some suggested add-ons for the USA:

“On your 9-11 third anniversary I sent you three messengers: Charley, Frances and Ivan (and possibly some more this year), and yet you did not return to me. I frustrated your war against Vietnam, and yet you did not return to me. I frustrated your war on drugs, and yet you did not return to me. I frustrated your war on poverty, and yet you did not return to me. I’m currently frustrating your war in Iraq, your war on terror, and yet you do not return to me. I’ve been frustrating your penchant for “wars”

on everything, and yet you do not return to me.”

Amos’s conclusion for Israel is grim. Is it also for us? “Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel. I will indeed do this. Prepare to meet your God, O Israel.” That is not an invitation to a tea party.

No, that is not Good News. The penitential “return” it calls for, however, is (says Jesus in Mark 1:15) the first step that opens the gate for the second one: “Trust the Good News.” Trusting that Good News IS Good News,

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Missiology at the IAMS 2004 International Meeting – An Elephant in the Living Room, Part 2

Colleagues,

Today’s posting is the second half of my retrospective of the Eleventh Quadrennial Conference in August of the International Association for Mission Studies [IAMS] in Port Dickson, Malaysia, just south of the capital, Kuala Lumpur. If “Gospel A” and “Gospel B” seem confusing, refer to last week’s posting of the first half. I’m currently in Barnes

Hospital in St. Louis with some bug I may have picked up on our travels. No diagnosis yet. Prayers appreciated.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

BACK TO PORT DICKSON

Neither Gospel A nor Gospel B in the 8 presentations we heard gave focused attention to forgiveness, though Gospel B as we heard it from Tite and Chae Ok was close and could have done so with a little nudging—Tite in his personal confession of Romans 1:1-6 and Chae Ok with her plea for mission of emptiness, mission of comfort.

Gospel A has a different agenda. Philomena put it like this: “The Good News is about transformation of cultures. When a people have the Good News and turn to God in Jesus Christ they express their response creatively in new way of community, structures, rituals and celebrations, reflection and spirituality.”

Linked to such gospel-grounded cultural transformation is the expectation that the Gospel A can assist in another agenda, nation-building. How so? Gospel A has “Gospel values.” Not so Gospel B, I’d say. It “merely” aims to get sinners liberated from their sins, itself an epochal task signalled by God’s self-investment—not self-revelation—in the project.

One list of Gospel A’s “values” was Philomena’s “promotion of life, justice, love and integrity (the opposite of corruption).” Philomena cited Newbigin for support. “[T]he most

important contribution which the Church can make to a new social order is to be itself a new social order." Philomena thought such new social order among Christians could become the order of a nation state. Newbigin, I think, did not expect that to happen. A remnant in any given society might join such a Body-of-Christ new social order, a new order of "love and forgiveness," but Newbigin's own Gospel B would not ground a new nation-state. It could not. It was a different Gospel. So it seems to me.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN THE LIGHT OF GOSPEL A

In the paradigm of Gospel A "Gospel values" are also often designated "kingdom values," values generating words and actions that create the peace-and-justice society of a Gospel-transformed culture. Linked to Gospel A is a specific concept of the Reign-of-God, different, very different, from the Reign of God that comes with Gospel B. God's reign (I think "regime" is a better term) in Gospel A is a program, God's culture-transformation program to transform a frazzled world and fractious human societies into something akin to the primal paradise.

God's regime in Gospel B is a promise, not a program. An offer, not a blueprint. It is the God-was-in-Christ promise of mercy and comfort to sinners—that's all of us—from here to eternity. This promise will prevail (so says the Promissor)—even if all programs fail to transform human cultures into some semblance of primal paradise. Gospel B anticipates that they will fail, if for no other reason than that Jesus said so in such places as Matt. 24:35 and elsewhere, explicitly so in the apocalypse pericopes in the synoptic gospels.

Leo Kleden gave considerable attention to the "Reign of God" in his paper. At the very outset he tells us: "The model used in

this presentation is the paradigm of the Reign of God." Responding to misperceptions within his own Roman tradition, he "acknowledged that the Reign of God is greater than the Church." [Did he mean the Roman Church?] The church is not God's Reign, but "witnesses to the Reign of God . . . [which] embraces all humanity, i.e., all nations and cultures throughout history." Just as Leo "broadened" Gospel he also broadened God's Reign to include the "faith experience" of "the Hindus, the Buddhists, the Moslems, the Confucians, the followers of Tao, the adherents of cosmic religions, the humanists and others."

[I can't resist: Leo, why then did Jesus make such a broadside claim that "if you don't repent, you will never enter the Kingdom of God?" Do any of those whose "faith experience" you mention here enter God's Reign without repentance, some sort of 180-degree turn-around? If they can enter without such bridge-burning, why then was Jesus so hard on his fellow Jews? Whose notion of God's Reign should we believe?]

REIGN OF GOD AND GOSPEL

We heard A and B versions of both Gospel and the Reign of God at Port Dickson. But we didn't (couldn't?) talk about them. For an association eager to engage in dialogue with other world religions, why can't we dialogue about the differences, important differences, on fundamental theological topics within our own community? If we can't do it "in house," whence ourchutzpah in promoting dialogue out in the world?

When Chae Ok was in the chair on the second day and the two Latin Americans had made their presentations, she tried to make this happen in her own cultural way. As I recall it came like this: "I as a Korean was very modest in my response to Leo Kleden after each of us had made our presentation in

yesterday's morning session. We disagreed, but I did not pursue that with Leo. This morning we have had papers from two Latin Americans (Tito Paredes and Eleazar Lopez.—one Methodist, one Roman Catholic). We can surely expect some lively interaction from Latin Americans." But it didn't happen.

Why not? Both said they were in basic agreement with each other. And indeed they were. From what I heard they agreed on mission's integrity because they were in basic agreement about the Kingdom of God (a program) and about the Gospel (a revelationist model). As a Methodist Tito might have challenged Eleazar's love affair with *logoi spermatikoi*, if for no other reason than that his Wesleyan tradition wouldn't find it congruent with Christ's Good News.

THE FUNDAMENTAL AXIOM OF GOSPEL A

The fundamental axiom of Gospel A is the classical medieval mantra "*gratia non tollit naturam, sed perfecit*" God's grace does not conflict with (diminish or remove) nature, but brings it to fullness. That axiom also functions as the hermeneutic for classical Roman Catholic reading of the scriptures and for reading the world. God's grace is transformative of what is already there. Christ does not initiate any radically new enterprise, but brings to fullness what God has already invested in his created world of nature. Christ fills full all the other "*logoi spermatikoi*" (e.g., in other world religions) where God has been carrying out a similar Christ-like operation.

Real surprise was that some of the Protestant speakers—all of them in the "Reformed" tradition (though at various places on the spectrum of evangelical and mainline Protestant) but no Lutheran voice among them—saw their gospel in the same nature/grace paradigm. Not all. Not so Chae Ok. Her Gospel's

key terms were emptiness and comfort drawn from the NT text of Phil. 2, the ancient hymn of Christ's self-emptying and the Good News of comfort flowing from that. That's not grace perfecting nature, filling full a glass that is only half full. The glass is empty. Christ's mercy/comfort fills it.

Tite Tienou also gave us an alternative to the nature/grace axiom when he was presentor. In his response to Teresa's plea on the previous day, he cited Romans 1:1-6 as his wording for Gospel. Gospel is God fulfilling his promises in Jesus Christ. That's what "grace" is all about. Grace does not fill-full partially filled vessels of our human nature. It's a relational reality, God being merciful to sinners.

AN INTERIM CONCLUSION

I expect that not all IAMS participants will be convinced by this analysis of two different Gospels at IAMS Eleven. I know there are fellow American IAMS colleagues who aren't convinced. They tweak me good-naturedly about my "Lutheran hangup" with forgiveness of sins regularly at the annual meetings of our American Society of Missiology. One of them had a new publication at the Orbis book table. Continuing the banter from the ASM, he tweaked me: "Ed, you won't find forgiveness of sins even listed in the index." I smiled, but I wasn't cheered. Why the NT forgiveness texts cited above don't convince him amazes me—though I think I know why. We have different hermeneutics, different eyeglasses, for reading the Scriptures. So we get different messages. My lenses are ground according to the law/promise axiom of the Lutheran Reformation, his by the nature/grace axiom of classic Roman Catholicism. So forgiveness of sins does not HAVE TO show up in his book because there are many other grace channels. A Lutheran, however, couldn't avoid it in writing a book on mission.

But I digress. Back to Gospel A and Gospel B

PRAXIS – THE FINAL TEST FOR ANY GOSPEL

Final test case for the difference, and the significance of the difference, between these two Gospels came already with the first two of the 8 plenary papers—from Leo and Chae Ok. Leo presented first. He concluded with a story that left all of us speechless. He told of an Advent gathering in 1997 during the horror of East Timor. It was Adina's story—parents murdered by Indonesian soldiers, surviving elder brother tortured to death, she herself tortured and raped. And now Leo's final sentences:

“At this point Adina could not continue her story. Tears filled our eyes. There was a long silence in the chapel . . . it seemed like ages. Then Adina gathered all her strength, she looked at me and said in a faint voice: ‘Father, where is that salvation promised by the Lord?’ Again there was silence. I could not answer her question. Tears flowed. Slowly I raised my eyes and saw a wooden cross on the wall. I saw it and understood the solidarity of the Crucified One, but I could not utter a single word. Adina needed my solidarity, not my word. For several years I have been living with her question.” Leo's concluding two sentences followed: “There are millions of stories like this in Asia and many parts of the world. May the Spirit of the Lord help the disciples of Jesus in Asia to weave the narratives of Jesus with the living stories of people in Asia and thus transform the ‘Asian Drama’ into the Good News of Salvation.”

Who among us has not been left speechless by cries from the depths? But now that Leo has given us this narrative from hell and Adina's cry for salvation, it is a datum of our own experience. And we can reflect on it. If we were using Leo's story as a case study in a missiology seminar [wasn't that what

IAMS Eleven was supposed to be?], would these reflections be fitting?

- 1. That Leo was speechless for the moment is no surprise. That he's still speechless after "several years," still has no Good News word for Adina, that is another tragedy, Leo's own tragedy in the face of Adina's tragedy. And it will not let him go.*
- 2. But it is finally not a surprise. The reason lies in Gospel A. Gospel A failed Leo, failed Adina. Gospel A is speechless before such horror. It has nothing to say. Leo needs a better Gospel in his own priestly tool-box to be able to answer Adina's question.*
- 3. "After several years" he has yet to find such a better Gospel. And he agonizes about it. Might that signal priestly failure? Sounds like Leo himself needs Good News. He's still "living with her question," apparently still bereft of an "answer"— in the light of the Gospel in Asia. Perhaps there is none.*
- 4. In any case he found none in Gospel A. Had it been "broadened" to be a mile wide, but only one inch deep? I think so. Thus Gospel A is unable to reach Adina with her call from the utter depths of agony. No word for her own "My God, my God, why?" No Good News for Adina in Gospel A. It is patently too small. From its resources Leo could not carry out his own desired agenda to "weave the narrative of Jesus" into Adina's own lifestory.*
- 5. And "there are millions of stories like this in Asia and many parts of the world," Leo reminds us. That is terrifying if Gospel A is the only Gospel there is, speechless in the face of these stories with no threads of Good News to "weave" into the lives of the God-forsaken in Asia—or anywhere else in the world.*
- 6. In any other context of human affairs a resource so*

impotent would be called bankrupt.

- 7. Not so Gospel B. Its grounding in Christ's own self-emptying is a brand of Good News that does have an answer to Adina's question, an answer of comfort for Adina—and her millions of siblings in Asia and throughout the world.*
- 8. In our table discussion after Leo's and Chae Ok's papers someone quickly gave the caveat: "The last thing Adina needs is for someone to preach to her. Silence was the right response." Nonsense. Maybe not nonsense if Gospel A is the only option. But nonsense for sure in the light of Gospel B.*
- 9. Implicit in that colleague's caveat was the notion that "preaching" would amount to "giving Adina moral prescriptions, telling her what to do." Proclaiming the Gospel as Gospel B is nothing of the sort. It's not a program, but a promise, a proposal for "weaving" Christ's self-emptying into Adina's empty life so the end result is comfort for Adina.*
- 10. Proclaiming Gospel B is offering that promise. No prescription, no program, it is an invitation. Tailor-made for the God-forsaken. In Jesus' own words: "Come to me, all you who are weak and crushed by burdens . . . and you will find comfort." If that's true [aye, there's the rub: is it true?] then that's Good News for Adina.*
- 11. Which is precisely what she is asking for: "Father, where is that salvation promised by the Lord?" She is asking the God-question. Her relationship with that God is her agenda, her agonizing agenda. Is that Lord for me or against me? Silence in response to that plea is deadly silence. Mortifying. Lethal. It's a stone when the child asks for bread. Stony silence is no bread for the hungry.*
- 12. Silence fails Leo's own agenda about weaving "Jesus narratives" into "the living stories of people in Asia,"*

case in point, Adina's story. You cannot weave stories without words. Story-weaving is verbal business. Silence is not a weaver. Without words it is impossible to "transform" Adina's story "into the Good news of Salvation." The hardly veiled agony of Leo's own "several years living with her question" still unanswered is a call for the same Good News for Leo. It's there in Gospel B—both for Adina and for Leo.

13. Missionaries living their own lives under the rubrics of Gospel B have resources to respond to cries from the pits. Granted, they too may be jolted for the moment by Adina's agony, but they are not permanently tongue-tied when she asks for "the salvation promised by the Lord." And she's even using the language of promise to give voice to her plea!
14. It's the Lord's promise you ask for, Adina? There is such a promise. Its format is Gospel B, custom-designed for Adinas for such a time as this.
15. Leo was close to that promise at the time. In his own words: "Slowly I raised my eyes and saw a wooden cross on the wall. I saw it and understood the solidarity of the Crucified One, but I could not utter a single word. Adina needed my solidarity, not my word."
16. Not so, Leo, she was asking for a Word from you, not silence. Better said, she was asking for THE Word that wove the crucified one from that cross on the wall into the life-story she'd offered you from the floor. And it wasn't YOUR solidarity she needed, but solidarity with the one on the cross. Your solidarity with Adina isn't Good News enough when she's staring into hell. Yet your words could have supplied that. From that cross on the wall. You apparently got some solace from looking at the cross. Had you woven that into Adina's story, she might have too. It might have taken more than a "single word,"

but not too many. "He's for you" is only three words. Or you might have just repeated his words to the thief crucified next to him. That thief was asking for salvation. Jesus had such a word for him. "Today. You with me. Paradise. Right here in your God-forsakenness."

17. Christ's words for Adina are the same words.

FINALLY . . .

Our keynote address at the very beginning in Port Dickson by Hwa Yung was grounded in Gospel B. He drew his human data from Asian ground, the grass roots of Asian Christians. "What draws people to Christ?" he asked. His answers centered on the power of Christ in people's own experience, what he called "the gospel's power to change individual and personal circumstances." When he got specific he spoke of "millions [who] have found meaning, hope, healing from disease, deliverance from bondage to and fear of the powers of darkness . . . and ultimately forgiveness of sins [Yes, he said it!] and eternal life."

A SUGGESTION FOR IAMS TWELVE IN BUDAPEST

Keep the same conference theme: "Integrity of Mission in the Light of the Gospel: Bearing Witness to the Spirit." This time specify that the Gospel B will be the touchstone. If for no other reason than that Gospel A has been center stage at all the previous seven IAMS conferences I've attended. Call it fairness. And all the more so if/since Gospel A didn't deliver Good News to the Adinas of the world.

[And for ecumenical equity put someone on the program who consciously uses Lutheran lenses for reading the scriptures and for reading the world. Call that fairness too. She need not even have a Lutheran label. Could be an evangelical, could be Roman Catholic. As we saw among the Gospel A, Gospel B

proponants at Post Dickson, denominational labels nowadays do not identify hermeneutical lenses. You may have to ask the speakers what glasses they are wearing. It's possible that they may not even know.]

Budapest could pick up with Adina's story and move to stories of Eastern Europe, doing our own Gospel-weaving with that raw material. Better yet would be to have the local missionaries themselves tell us how they do that weaving—their successes, yes, and their failures.

Some of us from IAMS eleven, of course, will be present at IAMS 12 only as our names roll across the screen "in memoriam." Not to worry. Christ's promise still pertains—in Adina's words, the "salvation promised by the Lord."

And how might IAMS 12 get the forgiveness of sins on the agenda? Simple answer: Just do it. In the mission mandates from the New Testament cited above, that is the Gospel answer to Adina's cry, "the salvation promised by the Lord." If no one else is available, ask Hwa Yung to get us started. He claimed forgiveness was "ultimate." [I know at least three younger missiologists who could do likewise.] My real druthers would be to have "forgiveness of sins" itself be the theme at Budapest. Possibly something like this: "Forgiveness of Sins in Missiology Today—Ultimate (so Hwa Yung) or Not Mentioned (so the new Orbis book)." Ask proponents of each viewpoint to show-and-tell us why they've come to these opposite conclusions.

Starting the Budapest Assembly that way might also make our elephant happy. She's been standing in our living room for a long time and now finally we'd be giving her some attention.

Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder

Missiology at the IAMS 2004 International Meeting – An Elephant in the Living Room

Colleagues,

Marie and I have been back for a week from our second stint this year in Southeast Asia. After our 4-month gig in Singapore March – June, this time was just one month, mostly in Malaysia. First week was the Eleventh Quadrennial Conference of the International Association for Mission Studies [IAMS] in Port Dickson, Malaysia, just south of the capital Kuala Lumpur. Last week's posting, ThTh 324, was my contribution at the gathering. We were 200 folks from 40 countries. Second week was at Sabah Theological Seminary in Kota Kinabalu, East Malaysia, north end of the island of Borneo. There for a week I talked with pastors from 20-some Asian Lutheran churches. They'd come for a seminar on Mission and Evangelism sponsored by the Lutheran World Federation. After that came five days in Bangkok, Thailand, visiting former Crossings students and other friends, and finally 6 days in Seoul, Korea with two Presbyterian pastors—Keun Soo Hong and Soon Jin Choi—now Ph.D's, who'd been Seminex – Crossings students once upon a time in St. Louis. Preaching in Keun Soo's church on August 22 was part of the invitation.

Back to IAMS. IAMS is the worldwide “club” for mission scholars, mission managers, and some just plain missionaries. And nowadays—unknown to most of us—there are more missionaries from Asian & African churches to the West than vice versa. IAMS's organization and elected officers cycle around the triad of

Roman Catholics, Mainline Protestants and Evangelical Independents.

I've now attended the last 7 IAMS get-togethers—beginning with Bangalore (1982), then Harare, Rome, Honolulu, Buenos Aires, and Johannesburg (2000). We're a fabulously friendly ecumenical bunch. But ecumenical bonhomie—at least our perception thereof—makes it difficult for us to get too deeply involved in fundamental disagreements. Hence today's title: An Elephant in the Living Room.

This is my retrospective just sent to the conference participants. Thought you might be interested. It's ten pages long, so I'll divvy it up into two parts for more modest ThTh posting—this Thursday and the next.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Some Thoughts about IAMS Eleven, Port Dickson, Malaysia, July 31 – August 7, 2004
AN ELEPHANT IN THE LIVING ROOM

“Integrity of Mission in the Light of the Gospel: Bearing the Witness of the Spirit.” That was the conference theme. But the middle term of that theme—the Light of the Gospel—got no serious attention. It was “an elephant in the living room.” That strange English expression may need definition. “An elephant in the living room” is a huge problem that everyone acknowledges, but no one seems able to talk about. Example: An alcoholic family member often becomes an elephant in the living

room. All family members know “Papa’s an alcoholic,” but they maneuver around Papa’s problem in silence. Possibly out of fear or shame, no one ever addresses Papa directly. Nor do they speak to one another about it. No one ever says: “We ought to talk about this elephant—and do something about it.”

Two conflicting claims about “the Gospel and its Light” was our elephant at Port Dickson.

This wasn’t the first time in the history of IAMS meetings that we’ve had elephants. Christology was the “elephant in the living room” at IAMS Ten (A.D. 2000) in Pretoria. Alternate christological proposals, yes, antithetical christological proposals, surfaced in the major presentations. But we didn’t talk about them. Seemed as though we couldn’t talk about them.

That was true at Beunos Aires (1996) as well. IAMS president Michael Amalados’ presidential address with its widely inclusive proposal for God’s saving work in all religions stood alongside a “narrower”(?) proposal that God’s work in Christ was distinct and different from that same God’s word and work elsewhere in human history. In the second proposal “God was in Christ” doing something unique, something not done before by the same God anywhere on earth. Though granting the topic’s fundamental significance, we didn’t manage to talk about that either at Buenos Aires. Seems we just couldn’t. Another elephant in the living room.

So it was really no surprise that “the Light of the Gospel” was the elephant this time. Alternate, yes, antithetical, proposals for “the light of the Gospel” popped up in the 8 plenary presentations. And equally unsurprising was that those differing Gospel proposals (basically two) had contours similar to the differing doublets we’d had at Pretoria and at Beunos Aires. But it was an elephant in the living room. We just could

not address it directly, couldn't engage each other to talk about it.

THE TWO GOSPELS AT PORT DICKSON

Teresa Okure called that to our attention at the midpoint of our 8 major presentations. “‘Integrity of the Misison’ is given full attention in the 4 papers we have heard so far,” she said, “but no one yet has attended to ‘the light of the Gospel.’ What is that Gospel? What its Light?” And then she gave her own answer focused on Jesus’s life and work and, as I recall, in her view an event both “new” in God’s work in the world and “necessary ” for gospel to be Gospel – and for mission to have “integrity.” She was offering us her version of the Gospel, a version I’ll call Gospel B below. But that wasn’t the version we began with in the first of the 8 papers. Call that one Gospel A. Here are its contours.

GOSPEL A

Gospel A (articulated crisply by Leo Kleden, and thereafter by Eliezar Lopez and Philomena Mwaura) was a clear alternative to Teresa’s. Most clearly it was a clear alternative to the Gospel we heard in Chun Chae Ok’s paper.

To us a technical term from systematic theology, Gospel A is fundamentally “revelationist.” In revelationist theologies God uncovers for the benefit of humankind aspects of Gospel that otherwise would not be known, not be available, to us apart from these acts of God’s self-disclosure. In most revelationist theologies all of these self-disclosures are acts of God’s grace. They are fundamentally Good News. For Christian revelationists the highpoint of God’s self-revelation came, of course, in Jesus the Christ. But this Christic Good News is not so distinctive (or so scandalous!) that it cannot be “broadened” [Leo’s own term] to include God’s self-disclosure

in manifold venues—not only to a long list of OT heroes of faith that Leo offered us, but finally also to “God’s self-revelation in many other religions and cultures.”

Eliezar’s essay offered us that same Gospel A, a self-disclosure of divine grace also permeating Mesoamerican indigenous religions—not at all different, but rather congruent with God’s self-unveiling in Christ.

Philomena did not use revelation as a major term. Her focus was on the “Gospel values” made known in God’s self-revelation “promotion of life, justice, love and integrity in proclamation and service.” They arise from Gospel A’s paradigm. These she then spelled out in her final 4 pages “A New Vision for the Church in Africa.”

Gospel A is a revelationist Gospel, Good News made known to humanity in many and various ways throughout history. And all of it Good News basically congruent with the same grace of God revealed in Christ.

Leo Kleden’s paper spelled out Gospel A in some detail. Its first section [“Listening to the Word of God”] articulated that Gospel. “According to Christian faith, the most original existential Word of God is Jesus Christ. . . so original and so transparent that in him and through him the presence of God is fully manifested.” Again “Jesus is the most transparent and full manifestation of God’s love for humanity.” Significant in this Gospel version is a quantitative uniqueness for Christ [“most original. . . most transparent” . . . “full manifestation”], but not so “original” as to make God-in-Christ qualitatively different from all other “self-revelations of God”—both throughout the Old Testament and then, as Leo proposed, “broadened” to “acknowledge” the revelation of that same Gospel “in other religions and cultures.” God’s self-

revelation in Christ, though a “full manifestation,” is not something brand new. God was in Christ not doing anything substantively different from God’s self-disclosures everywhere.

Eliezar offered us this Gospel A in his paper on the light of the Gospel in Latin America. He appropriated the notion of “logoi spermatikoi” from the ancient church to show us that the same “seed” that flourished in Christ’s revelation was alive and well in Mesoamerican indigenous religions. He gave many illustrations to support that claim.

GOSPEL B IS DIFFERENT. HOW DIFFERENT?

Gospel B was “on camera” and “on mike” with several speakers. Although the three proponents for Gospel A cited above were Roman Catholics, there were also Roman Catholic voices for Gospel B. One such voice came in Teresa’s intervention mentioned above. Gospel B was also the center of the sermon by local Roman Catholic bishop Paul Tan Chee Ing, S.J., at our opening liturgy Saturday afternoon. I have no copy of his sermon text, but the Gospel he proclaimed was model B, not A. Orbis Books honcho Bill Burrows noted the same thing as we discussed the bishop’s sermon later on. The elephant is not a classic Catholic vs. Protestant standoff.

>From the 8 plenary speakers we also heard Gospel B explicitly from Chun Chae Ok and Tite Tienou. Not quite so clear to my ears were Tito Paredes and Parush Paruchev in their promotion of Gospel B. To my knowledge all four of these colleagues are evangelical Protestants from the Reformed tradition. And way at the end in our final conference session Anglican Andrew Kirk’s brief comment pointed toward Gospel B once more, I thought.

THE SUBSTANCE OF GOSPEL B

I’ll try to sketch the contours of Gospel B from Chun Chae Ok’s

presentation. In her first two pages we heard this: "The light of the Gospel [is] the life and work of Jesus Christ." "The nature of mission [is] to hold on to Jesus Christ." "Evangelism is the core, heart, and center in mission . . . Evangelism is testifying Jesus Christ just as he is testified in the Bible. Central task in mission in the light of the Gospel is to reveal and to witness Jesus Christ who is still hidden to many eyes of Asian traditions, cultures and ideologies." "Justification of mission is in seeking to help people to encounter ...Jesus who is the truth, the way and the life in this suffering world, death-prevailing world, and fear-prevailing world."

Chae Ok concluded by incarnating Gospel B in "women's approaches in mission as from the poor to the poor." Her own double-label for this was a mission of emptiness and a mission of comfort. In fleshing out these two terms she did not capitalize on the clear Christo-centricity of the paragraph above. But she could have. With her word "emptiness," she was patently drawing on the ancient Christ-hymn of Philippians 2. Not that she ignored the explicit Christ-connection of emptiness and comfort, but she took us on a different path, a women's path—to finally get back to the self-emptying Christ ["kenosis" is the technical term] at the end. She led us 1) into "the hidden faces of women who have precious mission stories" regularly ignored by church historians. 2) into the plain arithmetic of Korean church life where 75% of the members are women, women who carry the bulk of "church work" on their own shoulders "witness[ing] with the Gospel to the world . . . in weakness and selflessness." 3) into Dana Robert's jarring words: ". . . that statistically speaking, world Christianity is a women's movement."

In Chae Ok's portrayal of these women it became clear that their self-emptying service arises from an alien fullness bestowed on them by Someone Else's emptying his life into them.

Re-enter the Kenosis Christ of Phil. 2.

The Kenosis Christ and the Holy Spirit that keeps this Christ operative in our “groaning ...afflicted ...suffering ...broken” world are the grounds for Chae Ok’s final section on “Mission of Comforting.” Along the way she critiques theologies of glory [might that be Gospel A?] that have overshadowed the “emptiness/comfort” Gospel of the theology of the cross in “much of Protestant mission in Asia.” The main defect of such mission is the bottom line that it has little to say to the “groaning ...afflicted...suffering...broken” world. That broken world sets our agenda. It is an agony agenda: “There is longing for comfort from God.” Chae Ok’s Gospel B claims to have a Good-News word for that agony agenda. She re-worded Phil. 2. It amounts to rewording Jesus’ own “Come unto me . . . ” of Matthew 11:28ff.

Summary: Gospel B is not revelationist. What comes in Christ is not something already present in the cosmos, needing only to be brought to our attention, un-covered (the literal meaning of re-velation “take away the veil”). Nor is Gospel B the quantitative filling-full of other revelation not yet 100% complete. Gospel B is performative. Before it was done, it did not exist. In Christ God is doing something that God has not previously done. Where else in creation history has God ever done this: “die for sinners?” But now once done, that Good News is available and in this sense unveiled and “revealed.” But before this performative action it was non-existent. In Christ God is not taking off the veil covering something that was already there, but merely unknown. God’s action in Christ is brand new. As God’s performative action in the first creation was brand new, so God’s performative action in Christ is a second “brand new.” Call it God’s new creation. Revelationist categories cannot describe it—unless like St. Paul (after Damascus) you specify TWO revelations from God, wrath and

righteousness (Romans 1). In no way is the second one congruent with the first.

THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS AS “THE LIGHT OF THE GOSPEL”—NOT ON THE AGENDA AT PORT DICKSON

The 8 major speakers at Port Dickson came from the Roman Catholic and the Reformed Protestant traditions. Had the Lutheran tradition been represented we’d have heard another voice in the direction of Gospel B, but articulated with Gospel-substance hard to find in any of the 8 major papers including the Gospel B proposals. Here’s a cardinal Lutheran axiom for wording Gospel B: If you have to articulate the Gospel in only three words it’s “forgiveness of sins.” Significant by its general absence all week long in our discussion was the forgiveness of sins. Even Gospel B presenters gave it scant attention.

The heritage of the Lutheran Reformation hears scripture hyping the forgiveness of sins as the center, the nuclear substance, of mission, the generator of the Gospel’s light and the post-Easter agenda of the Holy Spirit. To bypass the forgiveness of sins, and to focus on other centers for Mission, for Gospel and for the Witness of the Holy Spirit is to sacrifice not only mission’s integrity [our BIG word for this conference], but also to sacrifice the Gospel, and along with it to sacrifice the Witness of the Holy Spirit. [One colleague told me at the closing session: Ed, the Roman Catholics and the Calvinists have carried the day.]

In the 7 IAMS gatherings that I’ve attended—from Bangalore 1982 onward— forgiveness of sins has received little serious discussion. Some IAMS colleagues have “comforted” me saying, “Oh, we take that for granted and now we want to move on to mission agendas.” But to take the center for granted (and

therefore unattended) when focusing on mission's "integrity" rings hollow. I've been around long enough to know that not all agree that forgiveness of sins is center stage for mission. Gospel A theologians have told me that more than once. Even from the Gospel B proponents at Port Dickson forgiveness of sins got scant attention. So why should it? Thought you'd never ask.

THE CASE FOR FORGIVENESS AS "THE LIGHT OF THE GOSPEL"

Here's my feisty claim: Forgiveness of sins is at the center of all, yes ALL, of the major mission mandates in the New Testament—including the overworked (and overburdened?) Matthew 28.

Start with Luke 24:49: Jesus's parting words: "That repentance and the forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations."

John 20:21-23. Jesus on Easter afternoon: "As the Father sent me, so send I you. Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you don't do it, it won't happen."

Paul in Acts 13:38f. "Through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you . . . [sins] from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses."

Paul's own words in the classic 2 Cor. 5 that he is an ambassador (missionary) for God's reconciliation project, reconciliation that came when God in Christ was "not counting our trespasses against us," but getting rid of our sins "by making Him to be sin for us." How does that forgiveness get to places where it's unknown? "God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." Reconciliation is God forgiving sinners.

Finally the warhorse text Matt. 28. But “forgiveness of sins” is not mentioned there, you say. Maybe—but then again maybe not. Check out Matthew’s cardinal term “authority” which often gets passed over lightly in “Great Commission” discussions. Jesus’ “authority” is a BIG word, a conflicted word, in Matthew’s Gospel. Matthew’s mission mandate begins: “All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me.” That is authority now “given” (Mt. 28:18) by virtue of Jesus’ Good Friday and Easter.

And what is that “authority?” Go back to Matthew 9:1-8. It’s his “authority on earth to forgive sins.” Such authority was already signalled in chapter 1 where “the angel of the Lord” signals to Joseph that “you shall call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins.”

In Matt. 9 Jesus exercises his sin-forgiving authority for the paralytic proleptically – a before-the-event action ratified by something later. Had he not gone to the cross and been raised by the Father, his critics in Matthew 9 would have been right in calling his bluff. But after Good Friday/Easter his authority is no bluff. It’s now “given” and it’s worldwide.

Already in Matthew 9 the evangelist does another prolepsis to be ratified post-Easter. He expands Christ’s sin-forgiving authority (v.8) to “anthropois”– Greek for “human beings plural!” Christ finally passes sin-forgiving authority on to his disciples. [Perhaps that was not always clear to the first hearers of Matthew’s Gospel. Might it then be that John in his Gospel makes it “perfectly clear” with his mission mandate from the mouth of Jesus: “You have my authority. The assignment is forgiveness of sins. That’s it! If you don’t do it, it won’t happen.”]

Forgiveness of sins is also at the center of Matth. 18,

triggered by Peter's common sense question: How about a 7-time limit on forgiveness? Equally explicit in Matthew is "forgiveness of sins" in the pericope of the Last Supper. That authority to forgive sinners is the authority Jesus is talking about in Matthew's Great Commission text. How else do you "make Jesus-disciples" of all nations if not by getting their sins forgiven? Sinners whose "God-problem" is not healed are not Jesus' disciples. Forgiveness of sins heals the problem. The touchstone for God's forgiveness is Christ. "Forgiven sinner" and "Christ's disciple" are synonyms. What else is it that Jesus wants his disciples (past, present, or future) to "observe?" What else is it that he "has commanded?" What but forgiveness of sins is the gift that Trinitarian baptism bestows?

CHRIST'S OWN MISSION AND THE FORGIVENESS OF SINNERS

Christ is "sent" (a mission term) to get sinners forgiven. Forgiveness of sins signals that a sinner's root problem is a God-problem. Sin is not bad action. It's a broken God-relationship that precedes the bad ethics. In the language of the Lutheran tradition the dilemma is this: sinners "don't fear God, don't trust in God, and are turned into themselves." Christ's cross and resurrection constitute the mechanics whereby he "fixes" the sinner's God-problem. Call it the forgiveness of sinners. God wills that all sinners should "have" it. Therefore Christ's mission mandate. As the Father sent him to carry out the fixing, so he sends his disciples to keep the project going. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you don't do it, it doesn't happen."

The mission mandate could not be more clear. If forgiveness of sinners is not on the agenda at a mission study conference, then Christ's mission is not on the agenda. There were "other" gospels already in the time of the apostles. Some elicited an

apostolic anathema. "Other" gospels bring with them "other" missions. The conclusion is inescapable: if forgiveness is not on the mission agenda, then some "other" mission must be.

To talk about "integrity of mission," while ignoring forgiveness of sins, is akin to filibustering. If the project does not focus on "fixing" sinners' God-problem, it's not Christ's mission. It's somebody else's.

[Part II, d.v., follows next Thursday]

Deconstructing the Concept of MISSIO DEI "in the Light of the Gospel."

Colleagues,

God willing, we're to return to St. Louis on this very day, August 26, from a month-long stint mostly in Malaysia. At the Eleventh Quadrennial Conference of the International Association for Mission Studies, meeting in Malaysia the first week in August, I presented this paper. Not all of my paper for IAMS XI will be new to long-time ThTh readers. But some is. When jetlag subsides I'll attempt a report on the conference. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

IAMS Conference XI.

July 31 – August 7, 2004.

Port Dickson, Malaysia

Conference Theme: “Integrity of Mission in the Light of the Gospel”

Deconstructing the Concept of *MISSIO DEI* “in the Light of the Gospel.”

A paper by Edward H. Schroeder

1. Deconstruction is not destruction. I shall use the term as follows to 1) take apart a construct—*Missio Dei*—to see how it is put together, 2) seek to identify the theology that is the “mortar” which holds this construct together, 3) evaluate the foundations, the groundings, of the construct to see just how “good” it is “in the light of the Gospel.” In the process I shall propose an alternative construct—God’s Two Missions in our One World—and seek to show its value as a better mantra for “The Integrity of Mission in the Light of the Gospel.”
2. *Missio Dei* has been an ecumenical mantra, possibly the most widely acknowledged metaphor, in missiology since the Willingen Conference in 1952. I was privileged to attend the 2002 conference in Willingen commemorating the 50 years, and my understanding of what the *Missio Dei* metaphor means was confirmed at that event.
3. An overarching umbrella for *Missio Dei* is given by Vicedom in his book by that very name “*Missio Dei*.” He grounds *Missio Dei* in the Kingdom of God, and then gives this definition of that kingdom: “[I]t has to be pointed

out here that the kingdom of God embraces more than the saving acts of Jesus, namely the complete dealing [Vicedom's German term is "Handeln"] of the triune God with the world."

4. Vicedom's definition of God's kingdom is the mortar for *Missio Dei*. I challenge Vicedom's definition of Kingdom of God as impossible to match with the usage throughout the N.T. for the term. *Au contraire*, Kingdom of God is always focused on "the saving acts of Jesus," and not at all on the "complete dealing of the triune God with the world."
5. Of course, God has other dealings with the world. But in Jesus and the "regime" God is initiating in him, a new "dealing" has entered the world of God's "other dealings." This is the unanimous testimony of the N.T. E.g., John, who contrasts God's dealing in Moses [law] with God's dealing in Jesus [grace and truth]. Paul is another example, with his distinction throughout his epistles between God's two covenants—God's two "dealings" with humans. The synoptic Jesus also juxtaposes "mercy" with "sacrifice," both of them God's dealings with his people. The Hebrews writer specifies two authorized priesthoods—both from God. *Et passim*.
6. Sifting through all this "in the Light of the Gospel," our conference theme, necessitates articulating what the Gospel is—and what it is not. After examining all the N.T. references to that term (as noun and as verb) I conclude that Paul's summary in 2 Cor. 5 is overarching. Gospel is both a report [indicative] and an appeal [imperative], a Good News report linked to Jesus and an appeal to appropriate that Good News as one's own. "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself.... (=report) Therefore, we appeal to you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

7. When the *Missio Dei* construct is measured in the light of this Gospel, it falls short, on two counts. The full spread of God's "other dealings" with the world is diminished (especially God's critical dealings with sinners) and God's dealing with the world in Christ is itself reduced.
8. An alternate metaphor, better than *Missio Dei*, with better Gospel-groundings, is needed. It must be capable of encompassing, really encompassing, "the complete dealing ["Handeln"] of the triune God with the world." In the light of the Gospel itself a "Two Missions of God" metaphor is needed. If you say it in Latin, *Duplex Missiones Dei* is the mantra.
9. I will seek to articulate such a construct by examining a *Missio Dei* document from the history of my own church in the USA. It is the "Mission Affirmations" of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod adopted as the synod's mission theology in 1965. In substance it is a Vicedom model, and Vicedom's own theology factored into its formulation. It has strengths and weaknesses. Both would be improved—the strengths made stronger, the weaknesses repaired—with a *Duplex Missiones Dei* theology as new mortar for a new construct. My thesis is: there is more light in "the light of the Gospel" for constructing a better missiology than *Missio Dei*.

DECONSTRUCTION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF THE MISSIO DEI THEOLOGY IN THE "MISSION AFFIRMATIONS" (1965) OF THE LUTHERAN CHURCH – MISSOURI SYNOD.

[There were six affirmations in the original 1965 text. I take them one at a time. The original one-sentence mission affirmation from 1965 comes first. Then comes an "RSV," a "revised Schroeder version," a reconstruction grounded in a theology of "God's two missions" in the world.]

Affirmations of God's Mission

Adopted by The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (1965)

I. ORIGINAL: The Church Is God's Mission.[RSV = Revised Schroeder Version] The Church is Created by God's "NEW" mission to the world, God's unique mission in Christ.

The Church is both the product of God's new mission in Christ to God's old world, and thereafter its agent. God sends Christ on a MERCY mission to God 's own broken world. The depth of that brokenness signals God's "other" operation in the world, call it God's other mission with the human race. That "other operation" was first articulated in Gen 2:17 ["you eat . . . you die."], first enacted in Gen. 5 [". . .and he died; ...and he died; ...and he died" ad nauseam]. In this old mission, God's own "old" mission, mercy for sinners is hidden. Instead God "counts trespasses." No sinner survives such arithmetic.

In Christ God enacts a new mission, a new covenant, as Jesus labels it the night before his death. In Christ's death & resurrection God offers these same sinners mercy, call it forgiveness of sins. God re-connects with them as Abba. It defies moral logic, yet that is the Christian claim, "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." From which follows a simple definition of church: "Church = Christ-trusting sinners." All talk of "Christian" mission, namely, God's own mission #2, is grounded here in "the theology of the cross."

II. ORIGINAL: The Church Is Christ's Mission to the Whole World[RSV] Christ sends that church to replicate Christ-trusting throughout the world, where God's other

arithmetic is all-pervasive.

There is no technical NT term for mission as we use that word today. Closest is the language of God's "covenant," or again, God's "serving operation." The Greek technical terms in the NT are "diatheke" and "diakonia." But the way that God does covenant-service in Christ is very different from his alternate covenant-service apart from Christ. These two covenant-service-projects [hereafter CSP] are grounded in two very different—finally contradictory—words from God. St John differentiates them as God's "law coming through Moses" vs. God's "grace and truth coming through Jesus Christ" (1:17).

St. Paul and other NT writers use other contrasting terms for these two CSPs. One of Paul's favorites is law and promise. As Paul develops the contrasting characteristics of God's two missions, he asserts that God's old CSP is as different from God's new CSP as night from day, as death from life. There is no "generic" CSP that covers both. Thus they must initially be distinguished in order to be rightly related. This is the pattern: God's new CSP in Christ rescues sinners from God's old CSP with its bottomline bad-news for sinners. Christ sends those who trust him out into the world to replicate for worldlings what Christ has done for them. Simply stated: to offer them God's own new CSP in Christ. To wit, to offer them the promise of Christ's own cross and resurrection so that they too might move from God's old CSP to God's new one. Christ-trusters keep the project going: "As the Father sent me, so send I you."

III. ORIGINAL: The Church Is Christ's Mission to the Church[RSV] Christ-trusters continue to be agents of Christ's mission to fellow church members. Christ-trusters continually need maintenance service—from other

Christ-trusters.

Even though Christ-trusters are already “churchified,” they need constant nurture. For within their lives they too sense the “old Adam/old Eve” present – and operational. “Lord I believe, help my unbelief” is the standard, not the exceptional, admission of all Christ-trusters. In the language of Luther’s Smalcald Articles, they constantly assist one another with “mutual conversation and consolation” of the Gospel. In short, they continue to offer the crucified and risen Christ to each other, so that “repenting and believing the Good news” AGAIN AND AGAIN becomes their own daily regimen. [This is perhaps the most important ecumenical phrase in the Lutheran Confessions. There are no barricades of any sort for any Christ-truster to practice this “means of grace” (so Smalcald) with anyone—both to those who claim Christ as Lord, and those who don’t.]

IV. ORIGINAL: The Church is Christ’s Mission to the Whole Society[RSV] The Church carries Christ’s Mercy-Mission to the Whole Society conscious that God’s other CSP is already in operation there. Thus Christ-trusters of every age see society with binocular vision, and do so lest either of God’s two covenant-service-projects gets short shrift.

Apart from Christ, God has from the beginning been at work in human society with his initial CSP. As wondersome as that CSP is—yes, good and gracious—it does not bring mercy to sinners. It preserves and cares for creation, yes. But forgiveness of sinners, no. The sinner’s dilemma is healed only in the new CSP grounded in Good Friday and Easter. It is definitely something else. Ask any forgiven sinner.

Articulating that distinction for Christians in society

is crucial for both CSP's to be honored. Lutheran language has capitalized on the Biblical metaphors of God's left and right hands. Not two different realms (as territories), but God's two different operations on the same territory, in the one and only world there is.

Christ-trusters, even before they encounter Christ, already have assigned tasks in God's "old" CSP, God-given assignments as caretakers, stewards, in God's world. Such assignments arise already at human birth whereby God places people into specific spots in his creation. And along with that placement come multiple callings from God to "be my sort of person in all the relationships wherein I've placed you." When human beings also become Christ-connected, they get a second assignment: "Replicate your Christ-connection, offer Christ's redemption, in all the relationships you already have in your initial CSP." A frequently used collect in the liturgy says it thus: "We dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that you [God] have made." Care and redemption are two distinct jobs, not at all synonyms. They arise from God's own two CSP's. Yet, both care of creation and its redemption come from the same God, and both become the assignments for every Christ-truster.

V. ORIGINAL: The Church Is Christ's Mission to the Whole Man[RSV] The Church Is Christ's Mission to the Whole Person – but not forgetting the 2-CSP distinction. Like God's own self, God's human agents work ambidextrously in the world. People not (yet) connected to Christ are still agents of God's left-hand mission simply by virtue of being God's human creatures. Christ-trusters have another assignment in addition to God's left-hand mission which they share with all humankind. Their second assignment is to be agents of God's new CSP in Christ, God's right-hand

mission. Their right hand DOES know what their left hand is doing—and vice versa.

Already in New Testament times Christians were engaged in “left-hand” ministries—God’s work to care for and preserve God’s broken creation. Christians use the language of “social ministry, medical missions, inner mission, development” etc. when they engage in such left-hand work. Such care and preservation is also carried out by those who do not know Christ at all but are deeply involved in this particular CSP of God. They too are God’s left-handers. But they are not promoting God’s right-hand ministry, viz., getting sinners to trust Christ. If there is some doubt about that in certain situations, ask them.

Designating such missions and ministries “left-hand” is in no way derogatory. Those tasks are divine assignments, godly work. Labelling this “left-hand” is descriptive. It describes what God is achieving there, that is, caring for creation. That is not yet redemption. Left-hand CSP does not translate sinners into Christ-trusters.

In executing God’s right-hand CSP, Christ-trusters concretely offer the crucified and risen Christ to the receivers, God’s offer of merciful forgiveness encountered nowhere else in creation. Right-hand CSP is more than just speaking or offering “God’s love.” God’s love is already operating wherever God extends his left hand. Rain and sunshine are gifts of God’s love. Giving up One’s only-begotten Son into death to rescue other renegade offspring is something else. It explodes the “love” category—“scandalously”—as St. Paul sometimes said.

The right-hand CSP is an offer of Christ’s specific

mercy-promise to folks who, for whatever reason, do not trust it, so that they may indeed trust it. That offer occurs in concrete words and worded-actions (sacraments) designated as "means of grace." Luther's Smalcald Articles specify five such word/actions that offer this promise. They are visible and audible. You can record them when they are happening.

God's left-hand CSP—also assigned by God to folks who do not trust Christ—protects, preserves, restores human life in a broken world, though it does not heal a sinner's God-problem. Christians have no scruples in joining God's other left-handed workers in this CSP. They see it as their calling.

VI. ORIGINAL: The Whole Church is Christ's Mission.[RSV] All Members of the Church are on assignment in both of God's Missions.

If you are alive at all, you are God's left-hand missionary. If in addition you also trust Christ, you are membered into another body, the body of Christ. That gives you a second mission assignment beyond the first, God's CSP number 2. To be baptized is to be a CSP-2 missionary. When the congregation prays that offertory prayer IN UNISON, it is "all of us" who "dedicate our lives to the care and redemption of all that you, God, have made." All means all. Working out the strategies in any given place and time for this double mission of care and redemption is a major piece of the agenda when the Christ-connected gather for "mutual conversation and consolation." The overarching rubric is that none of God's TWO Covenant-Service-Projects suffer loss.

All members of the church urge people to trust Christ. That finally amounts to urging people who do not trust

Christ to switch gods, to “hang their hearts” [Luther’s phrase] on Christ, to abandon whatever their hearts have been trusting before. That is what St. Paul proclaimed to his audience on Mars Hill: “You worship many gods here in Athens. I urge you to switch. Hang your hearts on the one that is still unknown to you, the Christ whom God raised from the dead.” Christians do the same thing on today’s Mars Hills where other gods and other gospels abound. In doing so they do not argue about whose religion is “better.” Rather they simply make an offer. Their claim is that they too received it as an offer, an offer that is Good News. It is an offer both “good” and “new” that they too had never heard before. Nor have they heard it elsewhere on the many Mars Hills of today. They seek to extend the same offer to others. They urge them to trust it.

Conclusion:

This is my argument for a mission theology grounded on God’s own Two Missions in our One World. My claim is that such a mission theology is better grounded in “the light of the Gospel” than the regnant Missio Dei of the last half century.

I suggest this “double Missio Dei” does a better job in retaining the work of both of God’s two missions. The critical accent in God’s left-hand mission largely disappears in the traditional Missio Dei paradigm. The double mission motto restores the reality of God’s judicial role in the old creation whereby sinners are not only preserved, but also judged for their unfaith: “the wages of sin is death.”

This larger picture of God’s left-hand mission points to the larger picture of God’s right-hand mission in the person and work of Christ. Christ is “necessary” for sinners to cope with God’s judgment. That necessitates not just a “merciful Messiah”

but a Messiah so merciful that on the cross “he is wounded for our ttransgressions... so that we might be healed.” The old Missio Dei model underplays this necessity, and therefore the full Good News of a crucified and risen Messiah is blurred.

“In the light of the Gospel” Christ comes to our world to rescue us not only from our sin, but also from the deadly consequences of God’s mission number one. As the Father sent him, so he sends us.

The two-missions paradigm also gives clearer focus to what faith is all about “in the light of the Gospel.” Faith in the Gospel is always faith in the promise of forgiveness from the crucified and risen Christ. It is not generic belief in God’s goodness or even simply trusting God. Christian faith is always Christ-focused, focused on the Good News he offers to sinners. The sinner’s stance before God is that of the tax collector in Christ’s parable: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” Christ’s word to such a sinner is: “Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven,” not by God’s generic kindness, but by virtue of Christ’s authority arising from Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Sinners trusting that offer, which is what faith is, “go down to their house justified.”