

Theology of the Cross. A Singapore Congregational Presentation

Colleagues:

Here's an item from our three months in Singapore. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

THE CROSS FOR THE MODERN WORLD

A Presentation at Queenstown Lutheran Church in Singapore

March 24, 2004

INTRODUCTION

- 1. Is the Cross "old" and the world "modern?" Or is it just the opposite? Depends on what you think "Cross" means, and what "modern" means. St Paul claimed that the Cross was "new" and the theologies of the world into which that Cross came were very "old." Such theologies have been around forever in human history. "Theology of the cross" was "new," in the early experience of Christians. So new that they associated it with all sorts of other "new" things that came with the Crucified and Risen Messiah—a new covenant, a new creation, even a new commandment. So what's old and what's new?*

2. What does “modern” mean in today’s world? Are East and West the same in their “modernity?” What about “post-modernity?” Actually our so-called “post-modern world,” at least in the West, may be more open to Christian theology, since some “post-moderns” acknowledge that everybody has a “meta-narrative,” a “big picture,” a blueprint, from which they construct their worlds and find their homes, their meaning, their significance. But no one “meta-narrative” is any more “scientifically” warranted than the next one. An almost pragmatic yardstick is the norm: which blueprint works best for “covering the waterfront” of our lives as humans. “Meta-narratives” function not only for making sense of one’s world, but slide over into being objects of trust. People “hang their hearts” on their own meta-narratives. That looks like an open door for Christian theology.
3. Martin Luther’s words (in the Small Catechism on the First Commandment) about “having a god” sound just like that. So here’s a connector with the post-modern world. What people “fear, love, and trust” is the REAL god they have, regardless of what they say they “believe” – or “don’t believe.” “Fear, love, and trust” are verbs of the heart. In the Large Catechism at this point Luther speaks of “hanging your heart” on whatever god you have. Meta-narratives do not stay merely cerebral, they regularly become cardio-vascular. They pump blood into our lives.
4. That is people’s “practical” theology in any age—modernity, post-modernity, included.
5. Finally, said Luther, in his famous Heidelberg Theses, there are only two sorts of theology. That is true of any age or time. The “modern/post-modern” world too, he would say. The two alternatives are “theology of the cross” or “theology of glory.” [The full text of the Heidelberg Theses—and my comments on each one of them—is below.]

INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS "THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS?"

1. Theology of the cross for Luther is not primarily focused on suffering – either God's or our own. At least, that is not Luther's main point. Medieval theology before the Reformation had already "celebrated" suffering in monastic life, in "humility" theology – and turned it into a glory-theology, a super-way to be saintly.
2. The contrast – cross-theology vs. glory-theology – came from Paul's language in 1 Corinthians, chapters 1 & 2. Christ's cross is the very center of our "righteousness, sanctification and redemption." Theology of the cross is about the salvation of sinners.
3. Just six months before the Heidelberg meeting of the Augustinian monks, Luther's 95 theses on indulgences had been a bombshell. When the Augustinian monks gathered for their annual meeting that year, they asked Luther: "What are you doing up there at Wittenberg? What's the fuss all about? What's this business about justification by faith ALONE?" [hereafter: JBFA]
4. Just as Paul was not wrestling with the problem of suffering in his debate with the Corinthian Christians, so also Luther in his work of reformation. Theology of glory is not the opposite of suffering—for Luther or for St. Paul in 1 Corinthians. Instead it is the antithesis of JBFA. It proposes a different way for the salvation of sinners.
5. When Luther uses the term theology of the cross, there is pain and suffering involved. But the focus of the pain, (on GOD'S side) is the cross of Christ. Here the second person of the Trinity accepts the suffering that sinners deserve. The focus on OUR side is the crucifixion of the Old Adam/Old Eve in every one of us, the crucifixion of

our sinner-self.

- 6. This double crucifixion (Christ and our sinner self) is needed for JBFA to happen at all. Thus the theologian of the cross “tells the truth” about the deepest human need, the topic of “us and our salvation.” The glory-theologians have no understanding of this, neither of the sinner’s deepest sickness, nor of the work of Christ to heal us.*
- 7. St Paul contrasts his own “theology of the cross” with the “theologies of glory” in his day. He does this in his opening chapter of I Corinthians. Let’s read it and study it.*

1 Corinthians 1:18 – 2:5. 1:18 For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” 20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. 22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 22 but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. 26 Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the

world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, 29 so that no one might boast in the presence of God. 30 He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

2:1 When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. 2 For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. 3 And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. 4 My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

DIAGNOSIS: The Bad News in Theologies of Glory

1. DAILY LIFE IN GLORY THEOLOGY

Living by "wisdom of the wise, discernment of the discerning, the scribe (scholar) the debater (philosopher). Seeking SIGNS (of achievement), desiring WISDOM, lofty words of wisdom."

2. TRUSTING GLORY THEOLOGY.

Having "faith" in this wisdom, these signs, their power, glory. Trusting them from the heart. No faith in the "foolish" Cross. Christ crucified a stumbling block.

3. THE GOD-PROBLEM IN GLORY THEOLOGY.

Not knowing God. Perishing. God shames the wise, shames the strong. God destroys the wisdom of the wise, reduces it/them to nothing. Glory-theology leaves you dead in relationship to God.

NEW PROGNOSIS: The Good News of the Theology of the Cross

4. SAVED BY THE WEAK POWER OF CHRIST AND HIS CROSS.

Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. God's

foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. The foolish wisdom, the weak power, the shameful glory of "Jesus Christ and him crucified." The consequences: "righteousness and sanctification and redemption." [Paul's own proclamation of Christ and his cross also carries the same trademarks—weakness, trembling, no lofty words of wisdom.]

5. CALLED TO FAITH.

Called by God to find the "source" of your life in Christ Jesus. Resting your faith in the power of the crucified Christ.

6. BOASTING IN THE LORD.

Living from that Source in a world full of theologies of glory. Demonstrating the Spirit and power in your own weakness and in fear and in much trembling. Living the cross's "wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption" in daily life "in the modern world.'

The Heidelberg Disputation

Brother Martin Luther, Master of Sacred Theology, will preside, and Brother Leonhard Beyer, Master of Arts and Philosophy, will defend the following theses before the Augustinians of this renowned city of Heidelberg in the customary place, on April 26th 1518.

[Introductory note: The 28 Heidelberg Theses come in four topical groups: 1-12 Good Works. 13-18 Human Will. 19-24 Contrasting Theologies of Cross and of Glory. 25-28 God's Work in Us: the Righteousness of Faith. Remember that Luther calls them "paradoxes." Webster's dictionary defines paradox: "Contrary to expectation. A statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet true."]

THEOLOGICAL THESES

Distrusting completely our own wisdom, according to that counsel of the Holy Spirit, "Do not rely on your own insight" (Prov. 3:5), we humbly present to the judgment of all those who wish to be here these theological paradoxes, so that it may become clear whether they have been deduced well or poorly from St. Paul, the especially chosen vessel and instrument of Christ, and also from St. Augustine, his most trustworthy interpreter.

[GOOD WORKS]

- 1. The law of God, the most salutary doctrine of life, cannot advance man on his way to righteousness, but rather hinders him.*
- 2. Much less can human works, which are done over and over again with the aid of natural precepts, so to speak, lead to that end.*
- 3. Although the works of man always seem attractive and good, they are nevertheless likely to be mortal sins.*
- 4. Although the works of God are always unattractive and appear evil, they are nevertheless really eternal merits.*
- 5. The works of men are thus not mortal sins (we speak of works which are apparently good), as though they were crimes.*
- 6. The works of God (we speak of those which he does through man) are thus not merits, as though they were sinless.*
- 7. The works of the righteous would be mortal sins if they would not be feared as mortal sins by the righteous themselves out of pious fear of God.*
- 8. By so much more are the works of man mortal sins when they are done without fear and in unadulterated, evil self-security.*
- 9. To say that works without Christ are dead, but not*

mortal, appears to constitute a perilous surrender of the fear of God.

- 10. Indeed, it is very difficult to see how a work can be dead and at the same time not a harmful and mortal sin.*
- 11. Arrogance cannot be avoided or true hope be present unless the judgment of condemnation is feared in every work.*
- 12. In the sight of God sins are then truly venial when they are feared by men to be mortal.[HUMAN WILL]*
- 13. Free will, after the fall, exists in name only, and as long as it does what it is able to do, it commits a mortal sin.*
- 14. Free will, after the fall, has power to do good only in a passive capacity, but it can always do evil in an active capacity.*
- 15. Nor could free will remain in a state of innocence, much less do good, in an active capacity, but only in its passive capacity.*
- 16. The person who believes that he can obtain grace by doing what is in him adds sin to sin so that he becomes doubly guilty.*
- 17. Nor does speaking in this manner give cause for despair, but for arousing the desire to humble oneself and seek the grace of Christ.*
- 18. It is certain that man must utterly despair of his own ability before he is prepared to receive the grace of Christ.[THEOLOGIAN OF GLORY, THEOLOGIAN OF THE CROSS]*
- 19. That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the "invisible" things of God as though they were clearly "perceptible in those things which have actually happened" (Rom. 1:20; cf. Cor 1:21-25),*
- 20. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.*

21. A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.
22. That wisdom which sees the invisible things of God in works as perceived by man is completely puffed up, blinded, and hardened.
23. The "law brings the wrath" of God (Rom. 4:15), kills, reviles, accuses, judges, and condemns everything that is not in Christ.
24. Yet that wisdom is not of itself evil, nor is the law to be evaded; but without the theology of the cross man misuses the best in the worst manner.[GOD'S WORK IN US: THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF FAITH]
25. He is not righteous who does much, but he who, without work, believes much in Christ.
26. The law says, "do this", and it is never done. Grace says, "believe in this", and everything is already done.
27. Actually one should call the work of Christ an acting work (operans) and our work an accomplished work (operatum), and thus an accomplished work pleasing to God by the grace of the acting work.
28. The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it.

Schroeder's Commentary—

Theses 1-12: Good Works

1. God's law (actually a very good thing) makes human righteousness unattainable.
2. Yet without God's law, just on our own efforts, righteousness is even more impossible. Paradox.
3. Even "good-looking" works carry a "deadly" label, because they are produced by sinners, people "dead in sins."

4. God's works don't look "attractive" (e.g., Christ on the cross), yet they are of eternal value.
5. Human works are not deadly in the sense that they are wicked actions, such as crimes.
6. The works God does through humans are not of value in the sense of being untouched by sin.
7. Works of faith-righteous people would be deadly sins if done apart from "pious fear of God."
8. Even more are human works "deadly" when arising from my own "self-confidence" and not from fear of God.
- 9/10. Some say: Works done without Christ are "dead," but not "deadly." Not true. Fearing God is absent in such works, and that is "deadly."
11. Without acknowledging God as the critical judge of every work, arrogance arises in sinners, hope in God flees.
12. In the sight of God sins are then truly 'venial' [= non-damning] when we fear that they may be mortal (damning).

Theses 13-18: Human Will

13. After the fall "free will" is a fiction. Even "doing the best it can," it always does "deadly" sin.
- 14/15. After the fall "free will" can theoretically do good, but in actual fact always does evil. For it is now the will of a sinner, someone who now is God's enemy. That enmity marks every action of that will. There's no innocence.
16. Such a person, believing that God will give rewards for "doing your best," is doubly guilty.
17. Is this just super-pessimism, super-negativism? Promoting despair? No. It's simply a clear factual diagnosis to arouse a sinner's desire for Christ.
18. Despairing of one's ability to be OK with God opens us for humility, and then for Christ's grace.

Theses 19-24: Contrasting Theologians of Cross and of Glory

19. No “genuine” theologian looks into creation for “invisible” things about God (supernatural power, glory, wisdom).

20. The “genuine” theologian centers the search for God in [Christ’s] suffering and cross.

21. Glory theologians call bad things good and good things bad. Cross-theologians speak the truth about what things really are.

22/23. The wisdom that glory-theologians are seeking results in making them even greater enemies of God. They never find the Cross-of-Christ center. Thus they are defenseless before law. The law criticizes them to death.

24. Yet wisdom and law are not bad things in themselves. But without the theology of the cross we use good things for evil purposes.

Theses 25-28: God’s Work in Us: The Righteousness of Faith

25. Righteousness comes not from “much doing,” but without any “doing,” it comes from much Christ-trusting.

26. Law says: Do this, yet it never gets done. Grace says: Believe this, and everything is done!

27. In good works Christ is Doer and we are the Done-deed, God-pleasing because of the Doer.

28. [Contrary to what Aristotle says] God’s love is not activated by lovable-ness in the object of God’s love. God loves what’s unlovable, namely sinners – and makes them lovely. Human love is completely different: it arises when we encounter something inherently lovable. Examples: I love ice cream. But God loves sinners. That’s the center of the theology of the cross.

The Dark Side of Humanity – a Lutheran Take, a Pastoral Caution and Counsel

The following article is written by Paul Goetting. It was written originally for this July edition of THE LUTHERAN, but a time dead-line prevented it from being printed. Instead, it is appearing on THE LUTHERAN's Web Site. Dave Miller, THE LUTHERAN editor, has granted permission that it be posted here also. Ed Schroeder and Paul have been friends, very close, since their student days at Concordia, St. Louis, then as classmates, later as colleagues on the faculty at Concordia and Seminex. They have remained in close contact through these many years. Like Ed, Paul has traveled extensively abroad on behalf of the church. In addition to trying to write a book, he is serving in his eighth Interim ministry since retirement.

Paul's email address is pgoetting@charter.net. Please feel free to contact him about his article if you wish to discuss it with him.

Enjoy!

Robin Morgan

The Dark Side of Humanity – a Lutheran Take, a Pastoral Caution and Counsel

The nation has stood in shame; shocked at scenes of atrocities

conducted and orchestrated by Americans. The pictures from Abu Ghraib prison are repugnant. Politicians scramble for superlatives to express their disgust. Many insist the prison behavior is not representative of Americans. Only a few among us are not surprised at what has been exposed.

The Jim Lehrer NEWS HOUR (Tuesday, May 11) featured four distinguished scholars in an interview, each speaking to the dark side of humanity. They were not surprised. They seemed to speak in unison, in effect, in every person you'll find a good and bad side. Every human is capable of succumbing to unanticipated, deplorable behavior when subjected to life in certain unique and particular conditions – especially where controls are absent.

At this moment, many of us are quick to insist “I would never allow myself to do that.”

Wait a moment; look again at a Lutheran understanding of our fallen condition, how radical evil within one can be a serious threat to each of us and to others, even within the local congregation, in fact, the Christian home. Let's also explore the role of God's law embedded within creation, and our hope through it all in the Gospel of Christ.

But first let's listen carefully to four scholars on the News Hour panel. They are keen observers of human nature in God's worldly Kingdom, the Kingdom on the left, as called by Luther. Dr. Lifton, Harvard psychiatrist, speaks first. His work centered on extensive interviews of Vietnam soldiers – those who were guilty of vicious atrocities. His conclusion: these men were persons displaying two sides. Back home they were known to be persons of quality. Unanticipated behavior so easily erupts when placed in what he calls an “atrocious producing situation,” often experienced in Vietnam. Indeed,

given similar situations in Abu Ghraib prison, there are no surprises that deplorable behavior would erupt. Let there be no question: each individual is still responsible for one's acts.

Dr. Zimbardo, Stamford psychologist, continues the point. He is known for his research on prison behavior, particularly a simulated experiment at Stamford University. Students were placed into a prison; some were identified as prisoners; others were prison guards. The professor was the prison superintendent. The students were carefully selected as persons of quality. Their instructions: absolutely no violence. Indeed, acts of violence were not seen while the warden was present. At night, the warden went to a separate room and slept. In those dark hours the guards became guilty of behavior strikingly uncharacteristic of their known campus character. As guards they displayed behavior toward their charges nearly as disgraceful as that at Abu Ghraib. They clearly acted without accountability – and for the moment.

Dr. Jan Wink, the panel historian was able to recite – what most of us do not like to read in American history – those shameful atrocities carried out by seemingly law abiding citizens. Remember the South prior to Civil Rights legislation. Perhaps most memorable and disturbing are those pictures made into post cards and mailed as souvenirs, showing a crowd of people, young and old, well-dressed, laughing and smiling as at a circus, only in these cases the focus was on a black man, hanging from a telephone post – a lynching!. On the following Sunday these white southern Christians would be in their churches, If you sat beside them in their living room (unknowing of the atrocities), you might easily find much to admire.

Col. Grossman, Professor, West Point, related that the US military is very cognoscenti of the capability of any soldier

committing an atrocity in certain combat conditions. For that reason he emphasized our military's insistence on strict discipline and accountability. Another important point he made – self-interest. It is assumed in any war, some of our own soldiers will also be taken captive. For this reason our military demands that those whom we capture and interrogate must be treated fairly and decently. We do not want to give the enemy any excuse for mis-treating our own when captured. Enlightened self-interest underlies most international treaties, especially evident in the Geneva Accords. As a result of Abu Ghraib our soldiers in the field understandably feel threatened by the possible reversal of roles should one be captured. This factor underlies the horror of what our nation's leadership recognize in the exposures, and its effect on the world scene, especially among Muslim people.

For Luther sin is always self-serving. In this earthly kingdom, God uses the drive of self-interest as an instrument for justice. However, God's law embedded in creation insists on our doing more: that we do good, live decently, see visions of life beyond the self, see the beautiful, avoid the ugly. President Kennedy's inaugural call: "ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country" challenged us to go beyond the cynical; his call energized countless persons to enter politics and volunteer services to achieve noble ends. There followed government programs giving substance to the call – the Peace Corps, Head Start, and many others. Because our nation's history has at times held out such noble challenges, men and women became honorable as they sacrificed to achieve such goals. So, given one side of our nation's history, we can say Abu Ghraib is not expressive of American values. And yet in all honesty we must also say Abu Ghraib is expressive of a dark dimension of our history which we dare not sweep under the rug.

Here in this earthly kingdom the greatest gift for movement

from chaos to a better life is reason, and as Luther could say in his Small Catechism, First Article: for that we give thanks to God. Through working together reasonably we can achieve good government. We are humanly capable of organizing prisons and interrogations in a civil and decent manner. God wills it!.

So far we've been speaking of God's law that leads to civil righteousness as the Reformers identify the phenomenon. As Christians we also speak of the other use of God's law: the accusing law – the same law strips us naked before God, sheds us of our self-righteousness, and drives us to our only hope – God's mercy known in Christ. Here reason is the enemy. Faith is the treasure. Only faith grasps this wonder. Faith exchanges one's own sin for the gift of God's forgiveness and Christ's righteousness. Strange as it may seem, this is God's way of conveying the reign of righteousness on earth – the Kingdom on the Right. The Word, law and gospel, creates through the Spirit a holy people, a righteous community among the nations of the world. While the church is not itself the reign of God's Kingdom, it is the sign and instrument of God's grace and mercy entering this fallen world. The power of Christ's love calls us and moves us, not to live any longer as the fallen world lives – but to live for others, including those who would hate us, even our enemies. If the dominant character of life in the Kingdom on the left is self-centered; the Christian, made new in Christ, lives not for self but for others. Christ's love is the compelling drive wherever our calling and in whatever context we find ourselves.

Are persons who live in the righteousness of Christ free from the Dark side of human experiences? No, not at all!. While baptized into Christ's holiness, we remain flesh and blood, living, working, worshiping, suffering, serving in a world of sin and deception. We are indeed citizens of this fallen world (we sometimes know this all too well), even as we live in faith

in Christ's kingdom on the right.

Several illustrations (not in a military context) where Christians are just as susceptible to finding themselves in an unusual evil producing context that leads one to never-expected behavior.

A highly respected Christian, a father, from every viewpoint a decent, God-fearing person, happens home from work early one afternoon while his wife is at work and daughter should be in school. As he enters the house, he hears noise in an upstairs bedroom, concerned, enters only to find his daughter in bed with a student much older. He knows him to be a "trouble maker." He "loses it." Shouts "get out of the here!" Follows him through the kitchen toward the back door. The boy glancing back, curses the father who in turn, in his rage, picks up a knife on the table, and lunges toward the young man, stabbing him in the neck. A dark side? Every Christian should realize how extreme rage can engulf one, leading to seemingly uncontrollable actions.

When the unexpected happens, as soon as the situation allows, leave the scene; go into another room, lock the door. If possible, call a friend, a spouse, your pastor. Talk it out, try to cool yourself. Don't be afraid to express your darkest feeling, even the urge to kill. Tell them you need someone beside you and now! Don't re-enter the scene until you are fully in control of yourself; perhaps wait for the friend to arrive. Take seriously the prayer: Lord, lead me not into temptation! You are not a "chicken" to avoid the fray.

Another illustration, one so common in our churches. Highly respected Christian leaders, honored and elected officers of the church, are exposed embezzling church funds. Let no excuse be given. It is a crime! Although not an atrocity, it is an act

on the dark side! Judgment of state and of God is in order – whether Christian or non-Christian.

However, knowing the nature of our fallen world, as a congregation we may want to pray: Lord, let us not lead others into temptation. Leadership must insist on accountability as the West Point officer says of the military. Practices are proscribed: Let no one count the money alone; always two persons; never a married couple. All funds are to be audited annually. And let no one say: “We’re Christians; we trust each other.” The state has its calling to bring civil justice. The church, while supporting the state, has a calling to counsel each person with the God’s Word – judgment and assurance of God’s forgiveness. Shaken with embarrassment, the church – the Christian community – must welcome the murderer, the embezzler, the prison guards, the generals – each of us when confessing and repenting. Welcome to the community of Christ’s redeemed!

*Paul F. Goetting, Worcester, MA
May 23, 2004*

What about Jesus’ Miracles?

Colleagues,

Two summers ago we were back in Lithuania where we’d been as ELCA Global Mission Volunteers in 1997. On the morning of our departure to head back home, a dear Russian friend came to say farewell. But before he got that far he said: “I want to be baptized.” After the shock wore off, we checked the precedent of Philip and the Ethiopian royal officer (Acts

chapter 8) and followed through on his request—kitchen basin, remembered order of baptism, Marie's hand-made certificate, the two Christians taking us to the airport as witnesses. We're still not clear about what sort of local Christian community gives Sasha [not his real name] a Christian context, but we continue to push that envelope with him. And we stay in e-mail contact. Now and then he even telephones us—even once here in Singapore.

One of his recent questions was about miracles. Here's what he said and here's what I said.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Dear Sasha, I'm sending copies of this to X and Y, because I want to enlist them onto my "team" for continuing conversation with you in Klaipeda. I don't know if you have any Christian community—even two or three folks—surrounding you. So, if not, you need one. Even an independent thinker as you are. For after the baptized confess Jesus as their Lord, they [you] are "stuck" with all the others who also call him Lord. That is not MY idea. It's HIS idea. So capitalize on it.

We received your e-mail last week in which you say this:

"I need your direction in one question, which is of some importance for me. Unfortunately, this importance is only intuitive, so I can't explain it yet. I need to know someone's opinion about the Miracles Jesus made. Of course you know what I mean. Not How he healed the blind, or resurrected Lazarus, but WHY?"

Here are some thoughts just off the top of my head.

- 1. To ask WHY is a very good question. For my students I have distinguished between the word Miracle and the word Marvel (in Latin, miraculum and miribilium). The marvel elicits wonder. The issue is not HOW something happened, but WHY it happened, why it happened at all. And especially why did it happen for me? The word serendipity, a relatively new word in my English vocabulary, is close to that. Serendipity is always surprising good things that I never expected, and they happen to me.*
- 2. So let's talk about Jesus' marvels, which I think is the best way to translate that word, especially since they are regularly called "signs and wonders." That already signals the marvel element. In fact, in John's gospel the word sign or signal is the primary word he uses for such actions of Jesus. Thus as rescue operations they are something different from what is usually happening, even from what God is usually doing.*
- 3. The rescue operations are obviously for people in need. One regular focus for such operations is that the people need release from something that is "possessing" them. This is often expressed as demonic possession. But here we need to bridle our Enlightenment mentality ["Nonsense. Demons don't exist."] and focus on the word possession itself. Not just in ancient superstitious ages did "powers" take over people's lives. Sometimes a whole nation gets "possessed" by an ideology. But as a Russian you know that. And as an American I know that too. Because today our country is possessed / obsessed with a Messianic mentality to save the world. All such possessions are finally demonic. They are finally destructive.*

4. *In the New Testament Jesus engages the ownership issue to release people from alien owners and put them into a new life-giving ownership. The plot usually runs like this: some destructive power – physical, mental, social – has “ownership” of the victim. The person is helpless to break free from that destructive owner, and comes to Jesus for help. The deepest need expressed is to be set free from that affliction which is “owning my life.” Jesus regularly consents. “Ownership transfer” is his own Messianic mission, not just to liberate the folks from the destructive owners, but to get these folks re-owned by God, who was the original owner / creator of all these humans in the first place.*
5. *God’s ownership mediated by Christ is the opposite of destruction. It is life and health and peace. Put all three of these together and you get what the word “righteousness” means. The frequently-used words Redeemer, Redemption, regularly mean just that: restored to the original owner. New Testament talk about Kingdom of God is exactly that. It is not about heaven or going to heaven but it is re-connecting with God as my “owner,” the one to whom I belong. And Jesus’ role is as God’s agent for this. He is God’s son who “lays down his life” so that such ownership transfer for sinners [for all of us who are “owned” by other “lords”] can happen. That’s what Holy Week in the western church calendar is all about. Good Friday and Easter Sunday are God’s work of cosmic ownership transfer.*
6. *Central here is the “marvel,” not the “miracle.” It is not HOW did this serendipity happen, but WHY did it happen at all? And the answer is simple: God wants his lost kids to be brought back home. So Son Jesus is sent by the Father to save the lost kids, to bring us back home to “Papa.”*

Well, those are some first thoughts. It's now time for me to head out for my Sunday morning chores at the Thai Good News Center, a Thai-speaking Lutheran congregation here in Singapore. These Thai people (50,000 of them in Singapore) are mostly cheap labor used for S's booming economy. They are prime candidates who need to be redeemed from alien owners. But that's also true for many of us rich folks. And possibly also for you.

Marie sends her love.

Peace & Joy!

Ed

The “So What” Factor

So what? is a question I've asked myself many times in the last months as I've tried to figure out how to minister from law/gospel theology in a context that doesn't look anything like a traditional Lutheran congregation (a new city ministry, Faith Place, in the Fox Park neighborhood of St. Louis). Is it really going to make any difference if I adhere to what I was taught by my theological teachers as I try to do the best I can working with people who haven't grown up and been trained in an Americanized northern European way of thinking? As I've struggled with these questions, I remembered what brought me into this part of the church catholic in the first place. It wasn't listening to theologians argue amongst themselves, as entertaining as that can be at times, but it was Crossings semester long classes. In those classes we first took time to look at a scripture passage, got our

grounding in the Bible, and then looked at a slice of church history that pertained to the topic at hand. The clinchers for me came next – we tracked a slice of our own lives, meaning we looked closely at a portion of our own lives that we needed help understanding. Finally, we laid the Biblical grounding over the tracking, our own slice of life, and experienced the movement of the Holy Spirit as we saw at this intersection how our unfaith/faith did indeed impact every molecule of our lives.

Grounding, tracking, crossing – those classes were half Bible study, half group therapy, but it was in that connection between faith and daily life made plain that I found my vocation as a pastor and continue to wrestle with theological issues because I know in every fiber of my being that it matters.

So, in trying to figure out how to do ministry where I am now and after some conversation between Ed and I, an idea occurred to me. Could we do similar work, grounding, tracking, crossing, with our respective ministry contexts? Those of us who are walking out into unfamiliar territory or even those of us who are in traditional territory which isn't the same as it used to be – would a grounding, tracking, crossing of a slice of our ministry lives be helpful? For those of us who don't depend on the third use of the law for an ethical compass, what do we do?

Ed and I gave it a try, more or less accidentally. He critiqued something I'd written (surprise, surprise!) and I wrote back with a little slice of life, more or less daring him to make sense of this context. He did a crossing on it and a glimmer of hope sprung up inside of me that this still might be a good way to make sense of what I'm doing and help me give the best I can to the people with whom I work.

So, we offer as exhibit A of a theological experiment our exchange in hopes that some of you might like to try your hand

at this. Do you have a slice of life from your context that you'd be willing to share with the THTH community and allow Ed or me to do a crossing using your experience? Of course it won't have the depth of face to face contact over a semester, but it might spark some thoughts and open some ways of ministering that heretofore hadn't come to mind.

This isn't about academic combat. This is about people doing ministry helping other people doing ministry. If you are pastor of an old Swedish congregation that worships in a building in a neighborhood that is now mostly Hmong, you probably have some questions about how to proceed. Can we help each other?

Peace and Joy,
Robin Morgan

How would you preach the law to a nine year old who lives with her mother, (who gets into cars that drive up and emerges a little while later with money), her six or seven siblings (who all have different last names) in a house that the police know well because of the gang members and "uncles" who hang out there. Would you say God hates you because you are a sinner? She already lives in hell. Even Luther's "we are all beggars" is only a description of her day to day existence. How do you speak the law to such a person? This is important because it's part of the reason Lutheran theology gets rejected by people doing such ministry. What if you are now living the consequences of the rebelliousness against God of our society? Through no fault of your own, you were born into a family that lives in the midst of the off scouring of our culture that allows some people in the St. Louis area to live in million dollar houses in gracious country settings while you sweat it out in an old

brick apt. building that hasn't been updated since it was built in 1904.

A Luther quote that might be helpful here is something Martin Marty used in his latest MEMO in the Christian Century. "If you listen to the Law, it will tell you: 'In the midst of life we are surrounded by death,' as we have sung for ages. But the Gospel and our faith have changed this song and now we sing: 'In the midst of death we are surrounded by life!' Media morte in vita sumus."

Death is all over the place, these people know about death. Death is the norm, life is what's different.

In haste, Using John 20, Easter 2 Gospel.

Use specific terms from the Johannine text if at all possible. If he doesn't say Wrath of God, you don't need to either. Distinction between the comfortable and afflicted is no big deal in John 20, I'd say. Death just reigns in different ways.

D1 Daily life (even after Mary Magdalene types have preached Easter to us Christians) still living behind locked doors for fear of something or other. Something perceived to be deadly, probably IS deadly. Something that negates Christ's Easter. Its voice drowns out what Magdalene told us. Lots of that stuff going around in Fox Park doubtless.

D2 That's "being faithless, and NOT believing" not trusting that JC is God and Lord, also over death—not just his own death, but mine as well. Unfaith that he is Lord and God over my death and all that threatens me with extinction. And of course the death voices are powerful. So trusting them doesn't sound so crazy.

D3. But trusting them opens the door to their having the Last Word. Thus when we Christians do so, we are forfeiting all the goodies he's already bestowed on us (and offers to bestow here again when he breaks in to the disciples locked-door fear-FULL room—Sunday after Sunday according to this text!) What are those forfeited goodies? In this text specified as: Shalom (= Peace with God,) Having the very breath of God's own Spirit/Life animating our persons, having Forgiveness of sins. N.B. all these are God-problem solvers—Goodies to trump all D-3's everywhere. Their opposites are God-problems no shalom, no God-Spirit, no forgiveness. Or expressed otherwise: Having the "god-problem" that Death really is our Lord and God.

[John does talk about wrath of God—e.g., end of chapter 3 – shortly after John 3:16! But not here in Jn 20. Wrath of God is NOT mostly God getting pissed—though some texts (esp OT) render it that way. Rather esp in the NT it's God saying: If you won't let MY "good and gracious will" be done, I'll countersign your preference and say: OK, YOUR will be done. Jesus' own encounter with wrath of God—for us and for our salvation—was signalled in his cry of dereliction—forsakenness.]

Step 4. Good news is that JC comes through our locked doors, our "Death is the real God and Lord I trust" Sunday after Sunday! and says Lookee here. My death marks FOR YOU. My deathmarks signalling death conquered FOR YOU. Also the death stuff here in Fox Park. Touch and make them your own. Try them out here in FP [Hah!: FP = Fox Park and Faith Place!]

Step 5. Touching = believing/trusting, and when put into words, confessing this one as MY Lord and My God. Such confession (last verse in the text) conveys the Life that is in his name—cum all those goodies mentioned in D3 above as stuff forfeited when Christians switcheroo back into locked-door mode.

Step 6 *As the Father sent me....*

Go out and undo death's grip—wherever you meet it. Start in the Fox Park 'hood. Where there's lots of it. The core is getting peoples' sins forgiven, their God-problem healed. That's for starters. Other goodies come along with that package. Death's grip, of course, is also out in St. Charles [wealthy St. Louis suburb], but you don't live there anymore.

Discipleship—Lutheran Style

Colleagues,

We're but two weeks away from closure in our 3 months as ELCA Global Mission Volunteers with the Lutheran Church in Singapore. The calling card (everybody has to have one in Asia) they created for me says: "Theologian in Residence." So I've preached 16 times (two more to go), held 8 weekly seminars with pastors (one more to go) on the theology of the Book of Concord, taught six sessions for Lutheran students at the ecumenical (mainline denominations) Trinity Theological College on "Lutheran Distinctives," had 11 presentations on various topics for church-wide audiences (3 still coming), and done some consultations. Last week there was a five-day gap in our chores here in Singapore, so Marie and I flew northwest across the Straits of Malacca (70 minute plane ride) to the island of Sumatra (Indonesia) to Medan, the second largest city—so we were told—in the country after Jakarta. There we were the guests of retired bishop Armencius Munthe and his wife Floriana—both fabulous people—friends from ancient days when Armencius and we too were students in Germany at Hamburg University. Munthe was

bishop of one of the several Batak churches—"several" because of differing local languages (and also some church squabbles). The Bataks were missionized by the famous Lutheran Ludwig Nommensen back in the 19th century. [His "saint's day" is Sunday after next in the Lutheran calendar.] The whole countryside in this slice of North Sumatra (and we saw a fair slice of it) is dotted with Batak Lutheran church buildings. That part of Sumatra is "majority Christian" in an otherwise "majority Muslim" nation.

Of course, I didn't escape from being asked to sing for my supper. It was a two-hour presentation (basically how to do "Crossings"—a Lutheran way to read the Bible and also to "read" the world) at "STT Abdi Sabda," the Joint Protestant Seminary in Medan. Apparently it was a "y'all come" assembly with 300 students showing up plus quite a few faculty.

Last Friday it was back to Singapore for a Saturday workshop, Sunday preaching and the Monday clergy seminar. May 23 is the last task here. Thereafter we're "free at last." Well, sortuv.

Present plans call for a 2300-mile (one way) trip to eastern India to the state of Manipur where for two years now we've been hustling support for a mission up in the mountains with tribal folks. The local pastor and wife in this Manipur mission, Roel and Shangthar Moyol, were my students two years ago when we were working in New Haven, CT, at the Overseas Ministries Study Center [OMSC]. And they insist that since we are "so close," we visit the mission—and, of course, preach and teach. The place is in what's called a "restricted area" so that we need a special permit (besides our India visa) to get there. But Roel says he's got it all taken care of, so we're scheduled to be there May 26-29. Airfare there is not cheap, but we cannot say no.

Thereafter we've got two weeks before our plane ticket says: Go home. Invitations from 2 other OMSC students—one an Anglican

cleric, one a Baptist pastor—will take us to Yangon, Myanmar (formerly Rangoon, Burma). Also a visit to Hanoi, Vietnam (another former student), and possibly a few days in Jogjakarta (Indonesia) for a meeting with people we know in the Asian Christian Art Association, some of whose creations grace the walls of our condo in St. Louis.

All of the above is, “*deo volente*,” if God so wills. But now back to Singapore.

Even before we left St. Louis, the job description they sent from Singapore for work with the Lutherans here asked for sessions on “Lutheran discipleship and disciple-making” during our time here. My first response while still at home was “Huh? That’s not Lutheran language, not our vocabulary for faith and life. Those are strange wineskins. How easy or hard is it to put the Reformation Aha! of ‘promissory faith’ and ‘daily work in secular vocations’ into those skins?” But I said I’d try.

Luther’s catechisms commended themselves to me as the rock from which we are hewn, the place to quarry for Lutheran discipleship. The grand finale for this assignment comes next Monday and Tuesday at a concluding Pastors’ Retreat on that topic. It’ll be across the border in (majority Muslim) Malaysia—a mere five miles away from where I sit at this computer—at a retreat center there. Depending on what happens, I may tell you about it in next week’s posting.

In “practicing” on this topic at congregational events in these months I learned some things. There is no NT term for “discipleship.” So it’s a new wineskin. That’s not necessarily a demerit. But it commends caution. And the serious question: Is this skin capable of holding the New Wine that Jesus offers? Even more, of being a vessel for the New Wine that Jesus IS?

So far my answer is a mixed bag. Much of that arises from the

fact that these terms in contemporary church parlance come with heritages. They are not empty wineskins. If I didn't know that before, I have learned so here. Discipleship (and its beloved cognate amongst Lutherans hereabouts, "disciple-making,") comes with pre-packaged instructions. Since it is a borrowed term, it already has had wine in it, and some is still there. The vineyards for that wine are the conservative evangelical tradition, mostly "made in America," so with the skin some wine comes along.

Such as these items: "Discipling" Jesus comes with "some assembly needed," and the instructions are specific. The specifics are regularly behavioral. Disciples do some things that non-disciples don't do, and disciples do NOT do some things that non-disciples DO do. "Faith-in-Christ-as-SAVIOR" is seen as step one –usually called a "decision" or "giving your life to the Lord." And after that given we move on to "following Jesus as LORD." It's basically ethics. That's the difference between Christ as Savior and Christ as Lord. Au contraire Luther, of course, where they are synonymous. See the Small Catechism, 2nd Article of the Creed.

And because faith is taken as a given, as a presupposition, faith itself easily moves to the background as we now concentrate on ethics. But as the "Augsburg Aha!" insisted: when faith becomes a given, but not the constant and recurring grounding, then ethics become legal. Stuff you "gotta" or at least "really oughta" do if you are genuinely Christ's disciple. Melanchthon's agenda in Apology 4, "How to commend good works without losing the promise," is fundamental. And it is a clear alternative, seems to me, to the discipleship theology from American fundamentalism. It's finally the difference between a lawgiver Lord and a Gospel-giver Lord. Again in Apology 4 Melanchthon responds to Augsburg's critics by exposing their ethics of "law-obedience" and their cluelessness of the ethics

of “Gospel-obedience.”

Discipleship is a big item amongst Lutherans here. We’ve seen it regularly in the “vision statements” of several congregations—printed on the bulletin cover and bannered in the sanctuary. Here’s one: “Vision Statement: To Glorify God through a life of True Discipleship and Disciple making.” The pastor of this church told me he borrowed it from “Reformed sources” because discipleship is “big time” among Christians in Singapore and his congregation wanted to be in step. Another factor here is that only two pastors of the 20-plus in LCS have had a Lutheran seminary education. [Granted, a Lutheran Seminary does not necessarily make a Lutheran theologian.] Most all LCS pastors are grads of the two protestant seminaries in town: the ecumenical main-line-denomination seminary mentioned above or the more recently established Singapore Bible College with its “evangelical” commitments. The only Lutheran stuff offered to Lutheran seminarians at either place is a one-semester seminar in “Lutheran distinctives.” Thus the problem—and they all tell me it’s the reason we were invited here—is that if a pastor’s “theological cake” was baked by a “reformed recipe,” Lutheran icing is unlikely to sink in very deep.

Back to discipleship. I’m trying to mine Luther’s catechism to put a Gospel-vintage into the discipleship wineskin. We’ll see next week what happened. Some items are:

1. There is no “one-size-fits-all” of behavioral specifics for faith in Christ and a lifestyle that follows therefrom. There are a variety of gifts—though the same Spirit.
2. The variety of callings in the various placements (relationships) where God puts each of us also makes generic “do’s and don’t’s”—even when Gospel-grounded as “grace imperatives”—hard to envision.

3. The primal challenges Christians face in the world are challenges to their trust in Christ, not the ethics that flow therefrom. Even behavioral dilemmas, “ethics issues,” are faith-focused. It’s either to trust Christ in this crunch and act accordingly, or to trust some “other gospel” and “march to its tune.”

At my final seminar on the Book of Concord this week, I got sassy enough to hand out what I’ll append below.

Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder

Some thoughts about Lutheran Vision Statements for the LCS: Step 1. Give “discipleship” back to the Baptists. [Danger: wineskin with “old” wine still in it.]

Step 2. Use Lutheran Distinctives instead. Perhaps some of these—

- A. Pursuing good works without losing Christ’s promise (or, . . . BY using Christ’s promise) (Apology IV)*
- B. Dedicated to the Care & Redemption of All that God has made. (Luther: God’s 2 hands)*
- C. Proclaiming repentance & forgiveness of sins in Christ’s name to all nations. (Lk.24:47)*
- D. Sent into the World as the Father sent Jesus (John 20)*
- E. Ambassadors for Christ...with a message of reconciliation. (2 Cor. 5:19f.)*
- F. Easter people: Offering Christ’s hope in a hopeless world (I Peter)*
- G. Easter people: Offering Christ’s freedom to a world in*

bondage. (Galatians)

H. 100% free and 100% servants: Christ's Formula for Living the Good Life. (Luther: Christian Liberty)

I. Dying and rising with Christ in our daily life callings. (Luther: Small Catechism)

J. Showing forth Christ's death—and resurrection—until he comes. (I Corinthians 11)

K. Saved by forgiveness. Sent to Serve. (Matthew)

L. "The time is fulfilled. God's kingdom is here. Repent and Believe the Good News." (Jesus' own "vision statement" in Mark 1:15).

Some spin-offs from Justification by Faith Alone

Colleagues,

We are in the last month of our three months working with the Lutheran Church in Singapore. For my last seminar session with pastors, I've been asked to show how the "Augsburg hermeneutic" works when addressing three topics—Biblical authority, church and ministry, and ethics. Anyone of those is already enough for more than one session, but I'll try to respond to their request. Here's my first draft. Y'all actually get to see it before they do with this Thursday posting, since the seminar session is May 10. So if you detect some bloopers, let me know before then. ***Peace & Joy!***

Ed Schroeder

Lutheran Church in Singapore

Monday Theology Seminar

May 10, 2004

Addressing Issues—New or Old—Using the “Wagon Wheel” of the Augsburg Confession

With farmboy memories I’ve used a wagon wheel as visual image for the organizational pattern of the 28 articles of the Augsburg Confession. The hub of the wheel is the Gospel. There is only one doctrine, says AC 5, the doctrine of the Gospel itself. All the remaining doctrines [plural], the many articles of the AC, are but articulations of the one doctrine at the hub. They are spokes coming out from the hub. They “articulate” [pun intended] the Good News at the hub when you move on to discuss other topics—church, sacraments, ministry, civil righteousness, even the doctrine of sin! The rim of the wheel that holds the doctrines firmly anchored in the hub is the “proper distinction between law and Gospel,” the Augsburg hermeneutic for reading the Bible, for reading the world.

Introduction



If the topic, the issue, is already a spoke in the wheel, then look and listen to how “they” did it: a) keeping the spoke grounded in the Gospel hub, and b) using the “proper distinction between law and Gospel” (the rim) to keep the spoke anchored in the hub. The purpose is that finally this article of faith or practice “articulates” the Good News centered in Christ crucified and risen.

If it’s a new topic—something that was no problem in the 16th century—then put that into the wheel as a “new spoke,” and do the same thing with that topic that they did with their topics. Many new topics—often controversial—have come since then: human slavery, authority of the Bible, women in church leadership, church growth, “contemporary” worship, charismatic gifts, tithing, prayer, global capitalism, homosexuality, lay and clergy relationships, etc.

1. Example of a New Spoke: Authority of the Bible.

There was a debate on Bible in the 16th century, but it was not about Biblical authority. Both sides in the Reformation struggle agreed that the Bible was authority. Both said: "scripture alone" (*sola scriptura*). Evidence: the Roman Confutators criticize the Augsburg Confession severely and the main source for their criticism is the Bible passages. See the last 2/3 of Apology 4. They say "We are arguing from *sola scriptura* and you Lutherans are wrong. Scripture contradicts your teaching, especially your teaching about justification by faith alone." Melancthon begins at that very point of Bible interpretation in the Apology Article 4 ("Justification"). He presents the Reformers' "law/promise hermeneutic" and contrasts it with the Roman Confutators' "law-only hermeneutic." A law-only hermeneutic simply says: "That's literally what the Bible says! So believe it. Teach it. Practice it." But if it is all "law," then you will never get to the Gospel—even when you are speaking of Jesus. Apology 4 says you first have to discover the law/promise lenses, and then use those lenses to do your "*sola scriptura*." There are two ways to practice "*sola scriptura*." The Confutators are also doing "*sola scriptura*" but they never get to, they never find, the Gospel. One reason is that using their law-lenses they aren't even looking for it, so no wonder they don't find it. And when they do stumble upon it in a Biblical text, they still read it as law.

Case study #1-

Both Jesus and his Jewish critics agree on *sola scriptura*. The Hebrew scriptures are authority, the word of God. His critics simply point to passages [If she is caught in adultery, stone her to death] and they say: "*Sola scriptura*. That's clearly what the Bible says."

Jesus says "You are reading it wrong. The lenses you're supposed to be using as you search the scriptures are lenses that show how the scriptures point to me." John 8:1-11 is a classical example.

Case study #2-

Paul is fighting the same battle with his Galatian Christians. Both sides say sola scriptura. Paul, no surprise, says the law/promise lenses are needed to read scripture aright. And then in Chapter 4 he illustrates his hermeneutic: "Tell me, you who are so Torah-addicted, what does Torah (first five books of Moses) say? It says 2 covenants already in the OT, both with Abrahamic roots. One is law and Sinai, one is promise leading to Christ. One is slavery, one is freedom. One is death and one is life."

Case study #3-

The conflict between the Lutheran confessors and the Roman Confutators on justification is a repeat performance of this classic and constant either/or ever since Jesus came to earth. It continues today—both in liberal and conservative evangelical churches. The Galatian heresy, their "other gospel" in conflict with the genuine Gospel, happens over and over again throughout church history. The Bible is read as a law book—by Christians! And the same thing happens that Paul said to the Galatians: "If you read the Bible as law, Christ's death means nothing."

Reading the Bible as a law-book simply will not fit as a "spoke" in the Lutheran wheel where the hub at the center is the "theology of the cross." Such Bible-reading is a spoke in a different wheel, a wheel Luther called "theology of glory."

2. Old Spoke: Church and Ministry

See Augsburg Conf. and Apology Art. 5, 7, 8, 14, 15, 28. Introduction

Ecclesiology was central to the conflict in the 16th century. The Confutators claimed that the Bishop of Rome as Peter's successor was at the center of Christian ecclesiology. The Confessors said: "No way. Christ is the center. Pope not really necessary. Could be tolerated if he didn't compete with Christ and Gospel at the center of the wheel." But if/when he does compete with Christ, as happens when we HAVE TO accept his authority—no matter what he says—then that's a new law, new legalism. Then it's an either/or. Lutheran ecclesiology is "gospel-grounded" in the hub, and the distinction between Law and Gospel is used to keep legalism, coercion, and other "false Gospels" out of the fabric of the Body of Christ.

3. AC/Apology Article 5

Ministry is God's "second" action after Christ's work of salvation to get that salvation distributed to sinners who need it. "In order that we may attain faith" God set up the "pipeline system" of preaching and sacraments as "instruments" [as "media," says the German text] to mediate Christ's benefits so "that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." There is no mention here of clergy, of "ministers." There is no "spoke" in the wheel for "called and ordained pastors." The word "ministry" means the process whereby the benefits of Christ (from the first century) get to sinners of later centuries "so that we might receive the promise." Of course, humans will be the agents for this pipeline work. But the pipeline-working, not the pipeline workers, is what ministry is.

AC/Apology 7& 8: What is the Church?

Art. 7: Church is wherever ministry (as defined above) is

happening. Wherever Gospel proclamation and sacraments “administered according to that Gospel” is happening, there is “church.” That also defines the church’s “unity.”

Art. 8: Church is wherever people are trusting the action described above. In any given congregation, there will quite likely be people "mingled..remaining" with the believers who do not trust what Gospel and sacraments offer. That is no surprise. The Donatists (back in the fourth century early church) were wrong. Preaching and sacraments done by unbelievers, if they are done according to Christ's "institution and commandment," are "effectual, efficacious." They work to make faith happen. The unfaith of the person preaching does not make Christ's promise invalid.

4. Old Spoke: Lutheran hermeneutic for ethics

Lutheran hermeneutics alerts us to the fact that legalism is implicit every time someone asks you: "Pastor, what is the right thing to do in this case?" When Jesus was asked such questions, he NEVER answered them. Instead he often asked a counter-question.



-Stoning the woman caught in adultery? "Which of you is sinless? Throw the first stone."

-Taxes to Caesar? "Whose image is on the coin?"

-Make my brother divide the inheritance fairly with me! "Who made me a judge in such matters?"

-Healing on the Sabbath? "What do you do when one of your animals falls into a pit on Saturday?"

5. Why does he do that? Lutheran answer is: All these questions are legalist questions. The "fuller message" behind the question is: "Tell me what is right, so that by doing it I will be righteous."

Strictly speaking “ethics” is discussion, investigation, about our “ethos.” About the value, the quality, that comes to persons and their actions by some evaluator, some measuring stick that determines whether it is good or bad, right or wrong, OK or not-OK. Final measurer, evaluator, of course, is God. But according to our Lutheran hermeneutic God measures us in two very different ways: Law or Gospel. Law measures our thought, words and deeds and gives the “ethos” verdict, the value judgment, according to law’s way of measuring. The law says “sin” when the action is contrary to God’s rules. It says “righteous” when the action conforms to God’s rules.

Gospel ethos (value judgment) focuses on the human heart. Does this heart trust God’s promise in Christ? Then this is an OK-person, righteous. Distrusting the promise leaves you still “not-OK.” Notice how Jesus re-defines “sin” in John’s Gospel. “Sin = that they do not believe in me.”

This is at the center of Jesus’ constant conflict with his fellow Jews (often with his disciples too). They always ask: “Is it permitted?” But that is always a law-question. There is no Gospel-answer to law-questions.

So Lutherans always “do” ethics from the fundamental base of the difference between law-ethics and Gospel-ethics. That’s what Melanchthon is talking about in Apol. 4 when he says the whole debate might be expressed as follows: “How to commend good works without losing the promise.” So at one place he spells out the difference between law-obedience & gospel-obedience. Let’s look at some of these Apol 4 texts.

We can also observe such law-Gospel ethics present in the

AC/Apology articles 6, 20, 26, 27. These articles keep ethics grounded in the hub and use the distinction between law and gospel to keep legalism out of the picture even when they talk about “fulfilling” the law and “keeping” the law. Fulfilling and keeping are not the same thing. Only Christ-trusters “fulfill” the law. Sinners can “keep” the law, at least some of it that comes in the law’s “second” table.

AC 6 “New Obedience”

“This faith” (= faith-trusting-the-promise) “is bound ...should ... must ... is necessary to ... bring forth good fruit.” The image is that of a fruit tree. The “must, should, is bound, necessity” language is not the language of coercion [=law], but the “necessity of consequence” in the language of the Gospel. If you ARE a mango tree, you consequently WILL produce mangoes. That’s what mango trees do. If you ARE Christ’s “new creation,” you produce “new creation” fruits, “fruits of the Spirit” (Gal. 5).

None of these faith-fruits “merit favor before God.” “Faith alone” [term used for the first time here in the AC] has already taken care of that..

[There is no Apology Article 6 on “New Obedience.” That was all included in Apology 4:122-182 “Love and the keeping of the Law.”]



AC 20 “Faith and Good Works”

“We are falsely accused of forbidding good works” by our focus on faith alone. Which is not true. Just look at the things we’ve published on this topic. But, of course, we do it differently from the way our critics do it. We start with faith (which they ignore) and then show how faith produces good works. We keep “good works” away from the justification process, so Christ and faith are not lost. Instead of forbidding good works, as our critics claim, we “show how we are enabled to do good works.” Namely, the way to do good works is to start with faith-in-Christ’s-promise. Works that start anywhere else will never be “good enough” to please God.

Apology 20 “Good Works”

Melanchthon is very angry after reading the Confutators’ criticism of AC 20. “What can we say about an issue that is so clear?” “Those damnable writers of the Confutation . . . blaspheme Christ.” “We [will] gladly die in the confession of the article” about good works “Paul fairly screams” against what the Confutation says. What they do is “shameful.”

AC 26 “The Distinction of Foods”

Rules and regulations about fasting, other ceremonies, other traditions have been made a requirement, a “you

must do" in order to be a "real" Christian. All this is "in conflict with the Gospel." Here are the bad results. These requirements: 1) "obscure the doctrine of grace and the righteousness of faith;" 2) they exalt human commands higher than God's commands; 3) they bring great dangers to conscience . . . driving people to despair since they could not keep all these requirements. So "the Gospel compels us" to reject them.[There is no Apology Article 26.]

AC 27 "Monastic Vows"

Monastic vows claim to be a way to "attain perfection," to become super-righteous beyond the righteousness of "normal" Christians who stay in the world and work in their callings in the world of God's left hand. "What is this but to diminish the glory and honor of the grace of Christ and deny the righteousness of faith?"

Here is what "Christian perfection" really is: "honestly to fear God and at the same time to have great faith and to trust that for Christ's sake we have a gracious God; to ask of God, and assuredly to expect from him, help in all things which are to be borne in connection with our callings; meanwhile to be diligent in the performance of good works for others and to attend to our calling." Conclusion: Christian "perfection" happens by staying in the world where God has placed us to do his left-hand work and not running away from those callings to enter the monastery.

Apology 27 Monastic Vows

"The issue is the kind of doctrine which the . . . Confutation [is] defending, not the question whether vows should be kept." We respond using Luther's book on "Monastic Vows" of 1521.

1) *"It certainly is not a legitimate vow if the one making it supposes that by it he merits the forgiveness of sins before God."*□

2) *"Obedience, poverty, and celibacy [the three standard monastic vows] are not "more perfect services than other ways of life." They are not "counsels of the Gospel. . . . neither justifying services nor perfection."*□

3) *The vow of celibate chastity is a vow about something over which we have no control.*□4) *Monastic life entails "ceremonial traditions—e.g., selling masses for the dead—that obscure Christ."*□

5) *Scriptural support regularly cited for monastic vows violates the "rule" of "clear" Gospel passages of Scripture.*

"We ...reject the hypocrisy and the sham worship of the monks, which Christ cancels with one declaration when he says (Matt. 15:9): In vain do they worship me with the precepts of men."

Edward H. Schroeder
Singapore

Justification by Faith Alone

Colleagues,

For this week's ThTh some old-fashioned seminary classroom

stuff—but newly confected for Singapore Lutherans. Ever since we arrived two months ago I've had a Monday morning seminar with the pastors of the Lutheran Church here on "Lutheran Distinctives." This week the topic was "Justification by Faith Alone in the Augsburg Confession and the Apology to the AC." In an attempt to "cram it all in" into a mere two hours, I conjured up a "Guide Through the Text of Augsburg and Apology Article Four," handed it out and we walked/talked our way through what otherwise is 60 pp. of text in the Tappert Edition of the Book of Concord.. Here's what they got. Peace & joy!

Ed Schroeder

Lutheran Church in Singapore Monday Morning Clergy Seminar April 26 2004

"A Guide Through the Text of Article Four of the Augsburg Confession and the Apology to the AC"

Article 4 of the Augsburg Confession

Note: All three of these key terms are synonyms: "forgiveness of sin... justification... righteousness before God." This "cannot" happen by any human effort, but is "received" "by grace [= "freely" in the Latin text of AC4], for Christ's sake, through faith." The word "faith" [German text] means "believing that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us." [Latin text: Faith means to "believe that [we] are received into favor and that [our] sins are forgiven on account of Christ who by his death made satisfaction for our sins."] God says: "Such faith equals righteousness."

Note: the word “alone”— as in “faith alone”—is not in the text of AC4. Nor is the word “promise.” Both of these words are “big” words when we get to Apology 4. The response from the Roman Confutation [hereafter “RC”] to AC4 pushes Apol 4 to concentrate on these two words. Why? “Forgiveness of sins” [FoS] offered by Christ is a “promise.” A promise that our sins are forgiven now, but also “promised” in the future on the Last Day when God gives us his “final examination.” Since this Gospel-gift is a promise, faith in this promise [trusting it] is the only way it goes into effect. That is true of any promise. If the promise-receiver does not trust it, it doesn’t work. So faith ALONE is what makes promised forgiveness work. And since FoS = justification / righteousness, justification is by faith ALONE. Promise-trusters are 100% OK with God.

The first place that “faith alone” appears in the AC is in AC6 [New Obedience – Good Works]. AC6 says: Such faith does produce good works, as a fruit tree produces fruit. But the fruit doesn’t make the fruit tree. Good works do not make a person righteous. You first become a righteous person and then—like a tree—you produce righteous fruits. The last sentence of AC6 quotes St. Ambrose: “Believers in Christ shall be saved. . .have forgiveness of sins ... not through works, but through faith alone.”

The RC response to AC4 summarized in the Tappert footnotes: “It is entirely contrary to Scripture to deny that our works are meritorious All Catholics agree that of themselves our works have no merit but that God’s grace makes them worthy of eternal life.” “...ascription of justification to faith ALONE is diametrically opposed to the truth of the Gospel, by which works are not excluded [The Confessors’] frequent ascription of justification to faith is not admitted since it pertains to grace and love”

Apol 4 response to RC 4.

[The numbers below in brackets are the marginal numbers in the Book of Concord text. I'm using Tappert's edition of the BoC, Most often, but not always, these numbers are the same in the new Kolb-Wengert edition of the BoC.]

[1] At 4 places RC condemns us. Not when we say "grace alone" [they agree on that, but what they mean by grace is not what grace is in the scriptures]. It is "faith alone" they object to.

[2] This is the main doctrine of Christianity. It is the center of the controversy.

[4] Before we start our response we need to check the hermeneutics going on here: see how we read the Bible and how they read the Bible. [5] We use a law/promise hermeneutic. [7] They use a law hermeneutic: that justification comes from doing right [=just] things. That's how they read the Bible: looking for God's word about doing the right things. [9] Philosophers say the same thing: "Do good and you get merit. God grants grace [rewards] to those who do good things."

[12] Many errors are in this point of view. [16] Here's one: If this is true, "there will be no difference between philosophical righteousness [doing good things and getting rewards] and Christian righteousness [Christ's gift to sinners who do NOT do the right things.]"

[17] "In order not to bypass Christ altogether, they do require some knowledge of his life." [18] But they do not USE Christ as mediator, the free forgiver of sinners. So they actually "bury Christ," put him back in his grave.

[19] SINCE they talk about merit in their system, they need to distinguish different kinds of merit. But the whole notion of merit (=rewards) is wrong for the topic of justification. Remember: Justification is the same as forgiveness of sins.

Forgiveness is never merited. It is always an un-merited, undeserved "free" gift. Sinners merit / deserve punishment as their "reward." Instead Christ gives them the opposite—forgiveness—not deserved at all.

[21] The only righteousness they talk about is "law and reason" righteousness. That leads to contempt for Christ's free gift, and despair for "timid consciences," who "at last despair utterly."

[25-28] Four things are false here. 1) Works merit forgiveness. 2) God calls people righteous if they do reason's kind of right things. 3) That using our reason-strength, sinners can keep the first commandment. [AC2 said the definition of sinner is first-commandment-breaker: no fear of God, no trust in God, life curved into myself.] 4) That people keeping God's commandments apart from Christ are not sinners.

[Then follows "proof" from the Scriptures and the Church Fathers.]

[34] Our opponents concentrate on the second table of God's law (commandments 4-10). Yes, sinners can do many of these. Reason can understand. It is civil righteousness—doing right things in human society. But they ignore the first table (our relationship to God). [36] How can anyone òloveó God if there is no fear of God, no trust in God present in that person in the first place? It is impossible. [38] Thus this very first commandment of God's "law always accuses and terrifies consciences."

[The difference between Law and Promise—40 to 47]

[40] Conclusion: the law won't work to justify sinners. But Christ's promise can and does. [41] Law is always conditional ["IF you do this, then you get the reward."]. The promise is un-conditional [no prerequisites]. Therefore it is "freely

offered.” [In this section “promise” appears at least 10 times. “Free” also appears several times.]

[Here is the link between GOSPEL and PROMISE – 43] “The GOSPEL is, strictly speaking, the PROMISE of forgiveness of sins & justification because of Christ.”

[44] The different grammar of law and gospel: “The law **REQUIRES** our own work and our own perfection. . . the promise freely **OFFERS** reconciliation for Christ’s sake . . . accepted by faith alone. This **FAITH** brings to God a **TRUST** ...only in the **PROMISE** of **MERCY** in Christ.”

[45] “This faith regenerates us and brings us the Holy Spirit, so that we can finally obey God’s law, love him, truly fear him, be sure that he hears us, and obey him in all afflictions. ...Faith sets against God’s wrath not our merits of love, but Christ the mediator and propitiator. This faith . . . **USES** his blessings, regenerates our hearts, it precedes our keeping of the law.”

Final critique of RC: [47] “About this faith there is not a syllable in the teaching of our opponents. Therefore we condemn our opponents for teaching the righteousness of the law instead of the righteousness of the Gospel, which proclaims the righteousness of faith in Christ.”

Then follows sections on specific elements of justification by faith.

A. What is Justifying Faith? [48 – 60]

B. Faith in Christ Justifies [61 – 74]

C. We Obtain the Forgiveness of Sins only by Faith in Christ [75 – 121]

D. Love and the Keeping of the Law [122 – 182]

E. Reply to the Opponents' Arguments [183 – 400]

In this long section—60% of Apology 4—Melanchthon examines passage-by-passage the Bible texts used by the RC to argue that the Augsburg Confessors are wrong. Here we see the two different hermeneutics (mentioned at the beginning [5 -11]) in operation. Melanchthon uses the “law/promise hermeneutic” on every passage where the RC uses its “law-hermeneutics.” He seeks to show how the RC hermeneutic—with every text— “buries Christ and robs sinners of the Good News God wants them to have.” The Good News is lost—there is no Good News—when the Bible is read with a law-hermeneutic. [Paul: “The law’s veil must be taken away.”]

Some comments:

A. What is Justifying Faith?

Promise, promise, promise & mercy, mercy, mercy are the major building blocks.

[53] Whenever we speak of “justifying faith, we must remember 3 elements that always belong together: the promise itself; that the promise is free; and the merits of Christ as the price & propitiation of the promise.”

[55f] “At every mention of faith we are also thinking of its object, the promised mercy. For faith does not justify or save because it is a good work in itself, but only because it accepts the promised mercy.”

[Note the “Lutheran distinctive” theology of “acceptance” here. Not decision for Christ, not giving your life to the Lord, but receiving, trusting, having, Christ’s promised mercy. This is “conversion” Lutheran style. The posture is that of a receiver. Luther’s last recorded words: “We are beggars. That is the truth.”

[49 & 57 & 59 & 60] Lutheran definition of worship is spelled out in this section. Basic statement: "faith is the foremost kind of worship."

B. Faith in Christ Justifies [61 – 74]

[61] Four things we'll do here: 1) show how faith happens; 2) show that it justifies and 3) what this means, and then answer our opponents' objections at each point.

[62] Faith happens when people accused by God's law, terrified by its accusations, with real and serious fears, hear Christ's promise of forgiveness. Having heard it, they can trust it [=faith]. "This faith brings peace of mind, consoles us, receives the forgiveness of sins, justifies and quickens us...a new and spiritual life."

[63-68] Then come answers to the opponents on this point—both RC and Anabaptists—who are really the same on this point.

[69-70] "Now we will show that faith justifies."

To trust Christ —that's what faith is—is to trust him as mediator. But does God "agree" with Christ as mediator? That is included with "faith in Christ" — it "means to trust in Christ's merits [AND] that because of him God wants to be reconciled to us." To be reconciled and to be justified are the same thing.

[71-74] What this means. It is not that "faith" begins the justification process and the works finish the job. That's what RC claims. Because faith is always "faith in Christ" we are 100% righteous "by faith." No additions needed to get to the 100%. "To be justified"—according to the way Scripture speaks—is both "to make unrighteous men righteous" [a new creation] AND to be "accounted/pronounced" righteous [as by a judge in a courtroom] . "Scripture speaks both ways."

[73] Faith ALONE, trusting Christ ALONE, is how all this

happens. That's why we insist on the ALONE word when we speak of faith. Yes, works follow. But the "justification" project is 100% Christ's work, and we sinners become 100% when we trust Christ's promise. The "alone" wants to exclude any- and everything from competing with Christ here.

C. We Obtain the Forgiveness of Sins only by Faith in Christ
[75 – 121 This section expands the argument we just followed in section B. Melancthon argues using a classic syllogism. [76-78] Major premise: Forgiveness of sins is the same as justification. Minor premise: F.o.S. comes "only by faith in Christ (and not through love, or because of love works—although love does follow faith)." Conclusion: Therefore justification [too] comes "by faith alone (and not"

[80-81] "Proving the minor premise." In order to be saved, sinners need something to "set against the wrath of God." Our own works cannot possibly stop the wrath of God.

[82-85] Christ the mediator and propitiator stops the wrath of God against sinners. "This propitiator benefits us when by faith we receive the mercy promised in him and set it against the wrath and judgment of God."

[83-85] That's what the Promise is all about. The term is used 6 times here.

[86-101] Scripture testimonies that say the same thing.

[102-106] Church fathers Ambrose and Augustine say the same thing.

[107-121] Back to our opponents. They claim "faith fashioned by love"

[technical Latin formulation: "Fides charitate formata"]. With that they say "faith AND works of love" together produce a justified sinner. But that claim "abolishes the Gospel." Therefore we keep saying over and over again "faith alone." "Following our opponents and rejecting faith-alone" will "destroy the entire promise of the free forgiveness of sins and

of the righteousness of Christ."

D. Love and the Keeping of the Law [122 – 182]

Some points:

- 1. Faith comes first, then keeping the law follows. [141]*
- 2. Faith in Christ already "keeps" the first table of the commandments. [140]*
- 3. "God is pleased with us not because we live up to the law, but because we are in Christ."*
- 4. If you doubt that Christ has forgiven your sins, or if you believe you obtain forgiveness by your works of love, you "insult Christ." [149-150]*
- 5. On the contrary, "believing in Christ's forgiveness . . . is the highest way of worshipping Christ." [154]*
- 6. IMPORTANT. It is not that Christ once was our mediator back in NT times, but "Christ does not stop being the mediator after our renewal....Christ remains mediator. We must always go back to the promise. This must sustain us in our weakness" that Christ continues to be our mediator. [162-165]*
- 7. Especially when "the law accuses us [Christians]" of the sins that still afflict believers. See the list at [167].*
- 8. See the conclusion [177 & 182]*

E. Reply to the Opponents' Arguments [183 – 400]

[183] The conflict is all about hermeneutics. "With the acknowledgement of the fundamentals in this issue (namely, the distinction between the law and the promises or Gospel) it will be easy to refute the opponents' objections. For they quote passages about law and works but omit passages about the promises." Melancthon then looks at all the RC passages used to make their case.

One major criticism in the RC is that no Christians will do any good works at all if you keep saying "faith alone." To that

Melanchthon says: "We must see what the Scriptures ascribe to the law and what they ascribe to the promises. For they PRAISE WORKS IN SUCH A WAY AS NOT TO REMOVE THE PROMISE." That is Melanchthon's agenda throughout this entire section, 60% of the whole text of Apology 4.

Some individual items:

1. [204-205] The three failures of justification by works: Dishonor Christ, give no peace of conscience, separate people from God.
2. [206] "The wicked idea about works (works = righteousness) has always clung to the world."
3. [221] Where a Bible text uses the word "faith," the RC "always adds 'faith formed by love.'"
4. [244-253] The famous passage in James about "justification by works" was used by the RC against the AC. Here Melanchthon demonstrates that when read with a law/promise hermeneutic the results are this: "It is clear that James is not against us" [248]. In fact, James is "more against our opponents than against us." [245]
5. [256-281] "ADDING the Gospel" when there is none present in a Biblical text, especially a "law" text, especially when preaching/teaching an OT text. See the word "add" in 257, 260, 263, 281. This "adding" is commended by Christ. The RC does its own "adding" too, but what they add is a "legalist opinion" to Biblical law texts and "omit the promises." [264 & 265]

OBEDIENCE AND WORSHIP using the law/promise hermeneutic:

6. [308-311] There are two kinds of obediences: "to the law" and "to the Gospel." Two kinds of worship. "The service and worship of the Gospel is to receive good things from God, while the worship of the law is to offer and present our goods to God."
7. [332] It is easy to wind up "praying like the Pharisee," who says "I am not like other men." "Such prayer, which relies on

its own righteousness and not on the mercy of God, insults Christ, who intercedes for us as our high priest."

8. Besides faith and love, "hope" is one of Paul's trio in I Cor. 13. Here is what HOPE is. [332 and 344-347] It is "faith" focused on the future. Like faith, hope is built on God's promise, and that promise is the same promise faith trusts, namely, God's mercy in Christ.

9. [348 – 377] Eternal life is not a "reward." It too is grounded in God's mercy. There is no space in a "mercy-relationship with God" for any notion of reward—or of merit.

10. [[378-400] Summary and Conclusion.

[389] "Justification by faith alone" is not our invention. Not something we dreamed up on our own. "We know that what we have said agrees with the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures, with the holy Fathers, Ambrose, Augustine, and many others, and with the whole church of Christ, which certainly confesses that Christ is the propitiator and the justifier."

11. [400] So in this conflict "Where is the church?" Augustine's answer is our answer: "Wherever the Gospel is, the Gospel of the church's head, our Lord Jesus Christ, that's where the church is." We are not bothered by our critics with their opinions "contrary to the Gospel."

Edward H. Schroeder

“God-Sized” Task to Tame Fallujah

Colleagues,

That was the headline in THE STRAITS TIMES, Singapore’s flagship newspaper, a few days ago: “GOD-SIZED” TASK TO TAME FALLUJAH. They were quoting a US Marine commander on site addressing Navy chaplains. “The Marines have been given a ‘God-sized challenge’ to bring security and stability to the Sunni Triangle.” If he only knew what he was really saying, there might be hope. My pessimistic hunch is that he was using “god-talk” deemed appropriate for chaplains. Even more pessimistic is my hunch that although the dilemma was indeed “god-sized,” he was confident that the Marines would pull it off. That’s their tradition. They major in doing the impossible—which in Biblical days was reserved for God alone. But they speak for all of us Americans. “The difficult? Done right away. The impossible? In just a few minutes.”

One respondent to last week’s ThTh, with its passing reference to a Marine WWII vet whom I quoted, forwarded to me a chaplain’s Good Friday update about his Marine unit in Fallujah. It’s grim. And not clear whether the chaplain is commending, or repenting, the idolatrous hype. You decide.

” I don’t know how the Marines do it, but the Combat Operation Center is loaded with strack looking Marines. The senior NCO’s all look like NFL lineman. The junior officers look like marathon runners and the mid-grade officers look like NFL halfbacks. The senior officers are lean, tanned and serious, deadly serious. The place exudes the warrior spirit. If you are a civilian I can’t explain it and won’t apologize for it. If you are a veteran you don’t need to have it explained. The warrior spirit.... These Marines are in a street fight. They don’t have

the word “lose” in their vocabulary. They’ve been bloodied and their anger is up. The intensity in the COC is contagious. This is a tribe of warriors. They exist to close with and destroy the enemy. They have their tribal mores, rituals and rites. Their enemy has desecrated members of the tribe and taunted the Marines. They’ve asked for a fight. The Marines are in full pursuit and absolutely determined to annihilate their foe. I’m sure that sounds harsh to politically correct ears and those for whom this type of violence is anachronistic. It does not sound foreign here. It is status quo. We are in a violent land, with an evil element and they are having violence visited upon them. There is no room here for half measures. This is a test of wills. One side will prevail. That is clearly understood and never discussed. It is obvious. We aren’t playing paintball. We are at war.”

Comment—

The Marines speak for all of us citizens of the USA. They are confessing the fundamental “faith of Americans.”

“They don’t have the word ‘lose’ in their vocabulary. . . . Our side will prevail.”

It’s THE American faith, FROGBA, the Folk Religion of God bless America. It’s fundamental to being an American.

And it’s a false gospel. That’s what makes it a “God-sized problem.” Crossings veterans may remember that Irmgard Koch—of blessed memory—coined that term in our midst years ago when she came upon this Aha! “Step #3 in the Crossings text-study matrix pinpoints the “God-sized problem” confronting people in this text. It is always and only—so says the gospel—the crucified and risen Christ who can solve such God-sized problems.”

The God-sized problem at Fallujah is not the “Yankee go home” Iraqi warriors. It’s the American false gospel that the Marines—and who all else of us—are trusting. For false-gospel

trusters, Jesus's opening words in Mark's Gospel are his opening words to us: ""Repent. [Scrub your false gospels.] Trust THE Good News. [Me, the only solution to God-sized problems.]"

God notoriously opposes false gospels and false-gospel peddlers. All the more so when they say "No" to repentance and persist in hanging their hearts on their false gospels. Check the Bible for case studies—or dreadful quotes. Spurning repentance "they pile up God's wrath," says St. Paul (Romans 2:5), for the day when God pulls the plug and it all comes tumbling down, "when the righteous judgment of God will be revealed."

With God our enemy, even with the Marines doing the impossible, we WILL lose. God will force that word "lose" down our throats and into our dictionary. Although even then we just might paste that page shut. Paste it shut again as we did when God put "lose" ["lose big!"] in our dictionary back in Vietnam.

If we aren't hearing that message from "called and ordained ministers of the Gospel" in the USA today (I'm not sure. At 12K miles distance I don't get any such signals), perhaps we can hear it from an "outsider" voice.

I pass on to you Robert Schmidt's thoughtful essay about such a voice "from the other side." You've read Schmidt before in ThTh postings. [ThTh #162, July 19, 2001, "Ninety-Five Theses on Church Control"] Bob is Dean of Theological Studies (Emeritus) at the Portland, Oregon campus of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod's Concordia University. What he says makes sense to me. See what you think.

Even in these days of Apocalypse Now—especially in these days,
Christ's Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Al Qaeda and Us

By Robert Schmidt.

As we look at the struggles within our church bodies we may need to put them into a broader perspective of what is happening in our world. Even as the reaction against the excesses of the late sixties helped propel the conservative movement in the 70's that also changed our synods, there are movements in our world which will have profound implications for our theology, our church bodies, and our nation.

As Others See Us

It may be time to explore some of these forces and, if possible, deal with some of their theological implications. Behind much of radical Islamic fundamentalism is the theology of Sayyid Qutb. Qutb was an Egyptian intellectual who studied briefly in the United States. He was imprisoned by Gamal Nasser and while in prison wrote a 15-volume work, "In the Shade of the Quran." He was hanged by Nasser in 1966. His brother escaped to Saudi Arabia where he taught many students, one of whom was Osama Bin Laden.

Much of Qutb's work focuses on the failures of the Christian faith. He believed that western civilization has suffered through the years from a profound disjuncture between religion and morality on one hand and the world of politics and economics on the other hand. He traced this bifurcation to Constantine who continued the libertine lifestyles of his predecessors with his nominal Christianity. At the same time the Christians who were serious about their faith became hermits and monks. According to his reading of western history that same separation permeates life throughout western

civilization.

Religion is about “spiritual stuff” while the real decisions of life involving business, government, foreign policy, and even the institutional church are made on the basis of the values of the institution. As a result he sees in western, “Christian” people a terrible schizophrenia of seeking to be religious with part of their lives while actually making real life decisions according to those values which promote institutional survival and aggrandizement. Qutb reasons that this is why western people are so alienated from real life and depend so much on drugs and alcohol. This is why their marriages are so fragile and they glorify and export their sexual promiscuity – it’s good for business; it’s good for America.

While none of us would agree with Qutb’s prescription for joining church and state under Islamic law, his analysis of what’s wrong with western society begins to resonate with some of us. Yes, we are disturbed by the immorality that threatens our society and our institutions. Even though it is clearly manifest in the crimes of Enron and ill-gotten government contracts, it also permeates our church bodies. No, Qutb isn’t right, but neither are all aspects of western civilization.

Religion and Capitalism

Did David Benke pray with idolaters at Yankee Stadium? He sure did. Most of us pray with idolaters every Sunday in LC-MS churches as well. To put this into a wider context, let’s go back to Al Qaeda and us.

How shall we understand the events of 9/11 in New York? By this time a number of perspectives on the event have emerged. Even prior to Sept. 11th Samuel Huntington in his *Clash of Civilizations* hypothesized that the next wars would be wars between religiously oriented civilizations. This would put

Islam against Jew and Christian, Hindu vs. Muslim, Protestant against Catholic in N. Ireland. If there were Muslims or Jews in Yankee Stadium, Dave not only prayed with idolaters; he prayed with potential enemies.

Another perspective is put forth by Karen Armstrong in her Battle for God. All religions at one time or another have their violent times. 9/11 should be understood as one of those excesses of Islam which we have also seen in other religions as well. The implication is that over time such violence will fade into the background as it has in other faiths.

A third perspective is that of Benjamin Barber in his Jihad vs. McWorld. Barber argues against Huntington and says that there are not many civilizations; there is only one. That global civilization is dominated by multi-national corporations he calls "McWorld." The countervailing powers to this global capitalism are religious sensibilities. "Jihad" does not just stand for Islamic violence. Instead it represents the fervent belief that there is more to life than consumption of things, most of which we really don't need.

Building on the thought of Barber, is Al Qaeda really the violent vanguard of a world-wide movement of religious people against an idolatrous capitalism? Nearly every significant social movement has its violent precursor. Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland had the IRA. The African National Congress in South Africa had its Umkonto we Sizwe. The peace movement had its Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Yes, socialism had the communist revolution.

Isn't it interesting that the planes of 9/11 did not have St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York as their target? Neither were they headed for the National Cathedral in Washington D.C. There was a reason for targeting the World Trade Center. That was the

symbol of the enemy; that was the symbol of false religion.

If Al Qaeda does not merely represent an extremist Islam but also, to some extent, the sensibilities of many religious people the world over, it will not go away soon. Instead, it may well be the violent face of the anti-globalization movement around the world. And in our prayers, even in the privacy of my closet, we are probably praying with an idolater.

Why the Violence?

Why did Al Qaeda attack the World Trade Center and kill so many innocent people? Here it is interesting to read Bin Laden's long letter spelling out his reasons for attacking the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. To my limited knowledge Sayyid Qutb, the theologian of Islamic fundamentalism did not proclaim war on the west. Neither does Bin Laden. Instead Bin Laden writes that the reason he attacked the U.S. is because the U.S. attacked the Ummah (the people of Islam). According to Bin Laden we have attacked the people of Palestine which has been under occupation for 80 years with terrible loss of life to Palestinians.

He continues that the U.S. attacked the Ummah in Somalia, supported Russia in the attacks in Chechnya, supported the attacks of India against Pakistan, support Arab dictators for cheap oil, and starved 1.5 million children in Iraq because of sanctions. Bin Laden claims the Quran permits revenge when attacked.

In a more positive tone Bin Laden says, "we call upon you to be a people of manners, principles, honor, and purity; to reject the immoral acts of fornication, homosexuality, intoxicants, gambling, and trading with interest... It is saddening to tell you that you are the worst civilization witnessed by the history of mankind."

Again, "You are a nation that exploits women like consumer products...You are a nation that practices the trade of sex in all its forms, directly and indirectly. Giant corporations and establishments are built on this under the name of art, entertainment, tourism and freedom and other deceptive names you attribute to it."

And, "You have destroyed nature with your industrial wastes and gases more than any other nation in history. Despite this, you refuse to sign the Kyoto agreement so that you can secure the profit of your greedy companies and industries."

Whom Does Al Qaeda Represent?

If Al Qaeda is not simply a perverted Islam, nor the beginning of a civilizational war but the vanguard of a significant movement, whom does Al Qaeda represent? In reading around in the theology of Qutb or the letters of Bin Laden one might argue that Islamic fundamentalism represents only Islamic fundamentalism. If so, that represents a significant problem but one with which western civilization might cope.

However, it might also be argued that Al Qaeda is really the vanguard of the 5.5 billion people of the world who have been left behind or oppressed by corporate globalization. Many of those 5.5 billion people are very religious and find in their faith a profound connection with their humanity. Few of these people approve of the events of 9/11. Yet most would say they understand some of the reasons for it. In that sense they would be very similar to the many anti-abortion advocates who decry the killing of abortion doctors but understand why some might be moved to do it.

Across the globe the forgotten, the marginalized, the unrepresented are finding their voice and demanding changes to the international system. In the name of Jubilee, they want the

rich to drop the odious debt that keeps their nations locked in misery. They advocate fair trade, not just free trade. They bitterly resent U.S. and European subsidies to our farmers that undercut their farmers and force them off their farms into migration or urban chaos. They want protection for their workers and environmental safeguards for their communities.

Most interesting is the fact that they are increasingly using religious, rather than Marxist rhetoric. When one sees the followers of Sub-Commandante Marcos from Chiapas in Mexico, they parade behind the symbol of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Furthermore, representatives of these Mayan Indians are likely to show up at the anti-globalization rallies from Seattle to Cancun.

A focus for the 5.5 billion has been the World's Social Forums (WSF). The first of these was held in Davos, Switzerland with 20,000 people to counter the World Economic Forum held at that place. Next was a WSF in Porto Alegre, Brazil. This year over 80,000 showed up in Mumbai, (Bombay) India to advance alternatives to the "neo-liberal" economic agenda and strengthen the networks to make those alternatives real. At the WSF they also helped to plan the global protest marches held around the world on March 20, to commemorate the beginning of the war in Iraq.

And what does this have to do with Lutheran Churches? It is when we identify with Latinos, and Africans, and the South-East Asians in our communities that we will find a significant response. At a DayStar conference in St. Louis we were thrilled when Yohannes Mengsteab recounted the growth of the African immigrant churches around us. That's just the beginning. Among the marginalized people of our world the word of the Lord is growing and growing fast. But why don't we see this fervor in many of our American churches?

What's Wrong with Capitalism?

Why was the World Trade Center destroyed by Al Qaeda considered a symbol of the great Satan? Why does Benjamin Barber identify the target of Jihad to be "McWorld?" Why do the 5.5 billion people of the world who aren't doing so well see this quite clearly and we do not?

Transnational corporations are gigantic in the scale of the world's nations. General Motors has a greater economy and revenues than Indonesia, or Thailand, or Finland, or Pakistan. It is followed by Daimler-Chrysler, Ford, and Wal-Mart who have more revenues than Egypt, or Algeria, or Iran, and any of the countries of Africa.

Corporations and the communications industry they control are responsible for the twenty-plus ads we see for a half hour of national news. They pay for the violence and sex that make television the vast noisy wasteland it has become. They control the purse strings of both Republican and Democratic politicians. They push for free trade so that capital can move freely across international borders while workers lose their jobs in America and elsewhere. They are responsible for the growing gap between rich and poor in both the U.S. and across the world.

Because of the values they advertise, that happiness can be purchased, those who imbibe those values are far more likely to have abortions, to neglect their children, to pay more attention to the youth culture (young people will buy more) than the elderly (they don't spend as much). As an idol, corporate capitalism looks far more like Baal worship than does Judaism or Islam.

For every sermon actually heard by church members, there are hundreds, if not thousands of advertising minutes and images

selling us another vision of happiness and blessedness. Why do others see this and we do not? Corporations have literally "bought us out." Churches as institutions need money. Much of that money comes from people who are well off or from corporate foundations like Schwan. Money from the wealthy also buys air time for Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell and a host of conservative talk shows.

The alliance between corporate America and evangelicals has secured a corporate lock on Congress and the White House. It has also silenced the church's prophetic voice. We are left at the edges debating gay marriage and images of the Passion while 8 million Haitians struggle to live and millions more in Africa and Latin America live at the very edge. Yet, at the same time, those millions are turning to Christ as never before, and the faith of our people, weakened by the false gods in our midst, gets shallower day by day. Can Christians in America and other rich nations get in touch with the world-wide movement of Christians and other religious folk around the world?

An Internationalist Perspective

One of the most interesting aspects of Al Qaeda is that it is an internationalist movement, not dependent on any single nation, recruiting followers from many different countries including the United States. Furthermore, its goal is not to take over the United States but to accomplish its work through networks of committed followers.

While liberation theology had as its goal to take over governments (a la Castro or the Sandinistas) currently people working for social change often do not want anything to do with government. A humanitarian organization goes to Kenya, does its good work and hopes to get out before the government even knows it has been there.

This morning I spoke with a gentleman working with Iridium phones, which are directly linked to satellites permitting voice and internet connections from nearly any isolated area around the world to any other area. For the most part these communications are undetected unless one would have the resources of the CIA or some other sophisticated tracking devices. He believed these phones to be very useful for missionary and relief organizations working in isolated areas.

We all know how the internet has permitted moderate Missouri Synod folks to communicate and organize to challenge the conservative steamroller that has dominated the synod for the past 30 years. Now communications may enable a two-way dialogue between Christians in the U.S. and others around the world. In a very short period of time they may also enable religious and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to form networks challenging transnational corporations for a fairer, more just world society.

Corporate globalization and corporate influence on denominational affairs will not go away. They are here to stay. However, the 5.5 billion people in the world who are not doing so well are finding their voice and their networks to check the power of the corporations and limit the damage they cause. The question this raises for us is a significant one: Is our goal to be a successful denomination, with generous funding from corporations, sending out pith-helmeted missionaries? Is it not rather to be networking with global Christians, receiving their insights and gifts even as we share with them our love and resources?

If the latter, we are going to have to learn how to do church work on far more limited means and with the direct involvement of the people in our congregations. This means finding alternate ways of training church leaders and doing dialogical

mission work between congregations here and those abroad. For many of us our personal identity has been wrapped up in the institutions we have attended and those to which we belong. After 9/11 identities may depend far more on what we are doing than to what we belong. That might just be what the Kingdom of God is all about.

Bob Schmidt

Gibson's "Passion" film, one more time

We saw Gibson's film here in Singapore. Easter Monday. US\$2 each for goldie oldies.

My take:

The second hero (possibly the first?) is Mary. That's where Gibson's old-style Catholicism jumped off the screen for me. She too is a suffering servant. Hers is bloodless in contrast to the oozing blood of her son. And if suffering is the sine qua non of saving sinners, he presents her to us (almost) as co-redemptrix. Is Gibson proclaiming that when she mops up Jesus' own blood from the torture chamber and makes it her own? Even smeared on her face? And then adding more as she kisses the feet of the crucified?

The "Pieta" at the film's end, her holding the corpse, may not rival Michelangelo's in St. Peter's in Rome. But the message is the same: behold these two victims of the Via Dolorosa, two super-human sufferers—one now dead, one still alive. Both of

them paradigms of God's love. Is that one redeemer or two? Though this image is classic in the Latin piety of the Western church, it has no textual support in the four gospels. Ditto for other Mary items that Gibson put on the screen.

I've no desire to be bashing the Blessed Virgin. My point is that these Marian addenda are addenda. They are "the Gospel according to Gibson" even though he didn't invent them. But he powerfully puts them before our eyes.

There is a Lutheran style of veneration for Mary. It's spelled out in a Reformation-era classic, Luther's treatise on Mary's Magnificat in Luke's Gospel. The grounds for hyping Mary, says Martin, are twofold.

1. Mary is "theotokos," the Greek term from antiquity for "God-bearer." The divine Logos assumed our human flesh in her body. No other woman (or man) gets that predicate. Honor for Mary is saying: "Look what God did with that girl from Galilee! For us and for our salvation!"
2. Mary is the first example of Christian faith in the NT. A stunning example. Mind-blowing, Martin would say today, if he spoke English. She trusts the promise, the promise about Christ(!) and with sheer faith against all the evidence to the contrary—and all the trouble that she'll get for it (yes, a sword will pierce her too because of this pregnancy)—she clings to God's promissory word. We cannot mimic Mary in the first item. We are called to do so with the second, says Luther. Now note: not mime her suffering, her patience, her love, but imitate her faith—her sheer trust in God's sheer (sometimes so sheer that it's hard to see or hear) promise. Gibson proposes the former, Luther the latter. Are those differences different enough to be different gospels? Seems so to me.

Back to the movie. Pilate is no thug. He's an administrator

caught in a classic sticky wicket. And in this particular case a cosmic sticky wicket, according to John's Gospel. He can't do what he wants, what he knows is right, so he does what he doesn't want, since he has to do something. [I once chaired a theology department at a university. I've got stories.] I found Pilate sympatico.

Roman military occupation forces are sadists. They are indeed bestial beyond belief. Yet...

Think of American Marines in Fallujah these days. 600 Iraqi corpses in the streets to avenge the butchering of four from our side. We butchered at My Lai in Vietnam a generation ago. "We were trained to be killers . . . and to be happy in our work." That's what a U.S. Marine Corps vet told me the other day. Gibson's Roman occupation forces are no different. Doubtless demoralized by their senseless deployment, and grisly as it is to say so, for them the "simplest solution" for folks who won't stay under their heel is "to kill the bastards."

Given the torture we see inflicted on Jesus, he should have died several times before he ever got to Golgatha. That is where the super-human nature of Gibson's Jesus jumped off the screen for me. And if, as Steve Kuhl said last week, it is with such super-human endurance of suffering that Gibson signals Jesus' divinity, then here too we have an addendum to the NT witness. He "suffers as we do," is the uniform canonical message. No superman at all. His endurance is in the same measure as ours. In designating him "Son of God" the Biblical gospel is signalling something else. But maybe you cannot film that. Maybe this medium won't take that message.

We heard it on Good Friday. "If you ARE the Son of God, come down from the cross." But the Good News is that it is precisely because he IS the Son of God, this particular Son of God, that he does NOT come down. Jesus is no super-human, he's mortal. He

can die only once. Mel misleads us by having him beaten to death umpteen times and still strong enough (God-like enough?) to stand up and carry two logs (hundreds of pounds!) almost all the way up to Calvary's holy mountain.

In the NT witness his Son-of-God-ness is his being weak as we are, being mortal as we are, finally being "sinner" as we are, his emptying himself of all the divine perks –see Philippians 2–and doing it all for us and for our salvation. That's where the deity dimension is–divine mercy, not divine macho. That in this weak divinity "God in Christ was reconciling the world unto Godself—not counting our trespasses against us, but making him to be sin for us...so that we might become the very righteousness of God IN HIM." The divine super-doooper is in the sweet swap, not in the superman character of the swapper.

Suffering per se is not redemptive, and super-human suffering will not be super-redemptive either. It's all in who the swapper is.

But you probably can't get the really redemptive quotient of Christ's suffering on the screen. Someone like Paul in II Corinthians simply has to tell us, interpret to us in words, what our eyes are seeing. Promises are fundamentally verbal. Words, words to be trusted. Is it even possible to offer a promise only with visuals? I wonder. Can visuals elicit trust? Can visuals even encourage trust? And if so, who are you trusting? And what is the substance of such trust? What's the wine in a visual wineskin? Is the claim of II Cor. 5 accessible without words? I doubt it.

The Sanhedrin presented in the film is dogged once their decision is made. In a reversal of what I think is Jesus' favorite Bible passage, Hosea 6:6, they "desire sacrifice, not mercy." And they stick to that axiom. But apart from faith in

Christ, don't we all?

Someone from Canada told us there was no resurrection signalled at the end when he saw the film. Our version here in Singapore had one, a quick minute or two of stone rolling away, grave cloths settling empty on a stone slab and a brief glance at an unbloody Jesus, patently alive and showing his scars—as he does later to Thomas in the lectionary Gospel for this coming Sunday. Here too, I thought, someone has to say—in words—“For you!” Such words did surface once, as I recall, from the mouth of Satan (!) as s/he taunts Jesus in Gethsemane with the utter nonsense of his bearing the sins of all humanity. But no more credible voice articulates that in the film. We don't even hear it from Jesus, though Gibson could have flashed back to more than one such word from Jesus himself before he went up to Jerusalem.

My point is that without the “for us” the Good News of Good Friday and Easter remain veiled under those grave cloths—even if they cover no corpse.

That must be what Jesus is telling Thomas with “Blessed are those who believe without having seen.” Seeing is not believing. Especially not if believing means “trusting the Risen One, for us and for our salvation.” Mere “seeing” won't do. For such a promise to be offered to us it takes words. In fact, says Jesus, you don't have to see at all, as Thomas did. For the issue in believing is not: Do corpses revivify? Rather, as Thomas learned, it's this: Has this crucified Messiah conquered death—not just generic death, but MY death? Is that claim credible? If the answer is yes, then there's one proper response. It's doxology: My Lord and my God!

So even hearing is not (yet) believing. Believing is the step after hearing, namely, trusting what you heard.

It broke through to me on Easter Sunday that the Easter

exclamation and response

Christ is risen! Hallelujah!

He is risen indeed! Hallelujah!

should be parsed as follows: The first Hallelujah is for Jesus' Easter. The second Hallelujah is for ours.

Someone simply has to say the "for us." I didn't hear that message in Gibson's film. It may well be that this medium cannot carry that message. Faith comes by hearing, St. Paul said. The message itself is the medium.

In that Easter message, Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Another Look at Gibson's Film "The Passion of the Christ"

Colleagues,

Crossings president Steve Kuhl offers another look at Gibson's film. Steve's a farm boy, like me, who got educated. In his case, first as an aeronautical engineer, which brought him to St. Louis 30 years ago to work for McDonnell Douglas. He was there when Semtex happened. Curious, he came over to see what it was all about. He stayed. He also got involved in Crossings and did a Ph.D. linking Christian faith to the "culture" of American agriculture at the time of the farm crunch in the 70s. After many years of pastoring in the ELCA he recently was asked by Roman Catholics in Milwaukee to join their seminary faculty as church history professor with

emphasis on the Reformation. He's deeply involved in ecumenical work. You've seen some of that in earlier postings of ThTh. His essay below comes from such ecumenical work – in this case, with Jews as well as with Roman Catholics.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

***Finding Common Ground as God-fearers:
Reflections on “The Passion of the Christ”
By Steven Kuhl***

A Presentation given at Congregation Shalom, Fox Point, WI as part of a Jewish-Christian Dialogue panel discussion on the Gibson Movie, “The Passion of the Christ.” Dear friends,

I'm inclined to call you “Theophilos,” “God-lover,” as St. Luke addressed the audience of his famous gospel, because that is precisely what I assume we gathered here are: God-Lovers. Whether Jew or Gentile, male or female, clergy or lay, young or old, black or white, we are all God-lovers—and nothing can take that away. But just because we love God doesn't mean we understand God – at least, not in the same way. Indeed, it's obvious we don't – and that, on first glance, would seem to be the problem. But while that is a problem, I suggest to you that that is not the biggest problem. (I remember a reference to a time, whether historical or imaginative, I'm not sure, when there was unanimous, world-wide human consensus about God, and God declared them wrong. The story of the Tower of Babel, remember?) The biggest problem that faces us, then, is not whether we all understand God the same way, but whether we

understand God the way God wants to be understood. Do we love God for who God is or do we love God for who we want God to be? To ask the question that way unites us, I believe, but it unites us not as God-lovers but as God-fearers, indeed, as potential blasphemers: for nothing is more dangerous – and worthy of true fear – than to feign the love of God. But isn't that, namely, the "fear of God," precisely the beginning of wisdom, as both the Jewish and the Christian traditions tell us, in both the Hebrew and the Greek Scriptures? Indeed, I propose that the only place for us to find common ground is in the "fear of God" lived out as repentance, because true wisdom and love is borne only out of repentance.

In light of that, what has been most puzzling to me about the public reaction to Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" is the lack of wisdom borne out of repentance. Rather, the reaction has been triumphalistic and defensive, especially on the part of many Christians, but not only Christians, though it is to my fellow Christians that I wish to speak. Why is that? My own impression is that the film has become such a powerful symbol of the "culture wars" between (what I will call for lack of better terminology) "secular liberalism" and "Christian conservatism" that all sides read into the film what they want, see in it what they want, and ignore in it what they want. Defenders of the film do not see its success at the box office as simply another (though perhaps surprising) commercial success, but as a sign of a hunger for traditional "Christian" values in the culture. Defenders of the film don't just see Jesus getting beaten, but their values agenda for the nation being beaten; they don't just see Pilate capitulating to Jews but our government capitulating to liberalism; they don't just see Judaism plotting against Jesus, but liberalism plotting against them. By the same token, critics of the film also react with the same allegorical interpretation, as though the

villains on the screen are really meant to represent them. Now maybe my mind has been clouded by watching too many of those cable TV news programs to really understand the phenomenon of the movie. (You know, the ones that pit Conservative Protestants and Catholics against Hollywood critics and Jewish and Catholic liberals.) Nevertheless, so it seems to me, there is much of the "culture wars" at work here and that, I think, interferes with approaching the film and its subject matter in the "fear of God" borne out as repentance.

What I'm going to ask you to try to do now is bracket out the "culture wars" symbolism that the film has taken on and look at it critically, objectively, as simply a film about the Passion. What might we see if we look at it from the perspective of the "fear of God" borne out as repentance? Since my assignment is to share something of the Lutheran perspective on the topic, to do this I'm going to draw on the documents which the Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Jewish Relations has put out in recent years: not only the document called "Guidelines for Lutheran-Jewish Relations," but especially the document called "'The Passion of Christ': Concerns and Recommendations in Anticipation of the Forthcoming Film," which was issued in January of this year while the movie was still in production. The document reads, and I here synthesize the text:

The portrayal of the Passion of Jesus is one of the most difficult subjects in the history of Jewish-Christian relations. Whenever and however it is told, the Passion sets the Jew Jesus, his Jewish disciples, other Jewish leaders, a large Jewish community of considerable diversity, a Roman governor, Roman soldiers, and God in a complex web of relationships. Tragically, portrayals of the Passion over many generations have led to the virulent condemnation of Jewish communities, with Christians lashing out to punish those they had learned to call "Christ-killers." This doleful history

demands a special vigilance from any who portray the Passion today. The Passion has the power of the gospel, God's power to bring life from death. We must not allow the libels of former ages to compromise it in our time.

"[T]he New Testament must not be used as justification for hostility towards present-day Jews," and "blame for the death of Jesus should not be attributed to Judaism or the Jewish people."

Recognizing [Mel Gibson's] stature and influence as a film producer and celebrity, we can expect that Mr. Gibson's project will share and reshape understandings of this central Christian story for millions of viewers. It is imperative that such influence be exercised with due regard for the powerful heritage of the Passion as gospel truth for Christians and as human tragedy for many Jews.

We urge members of the [ELCA] to renew their familiarity with the Passion story by reading and studying the gospel portrayals [and] to become informed about the issues that surround the challenging task of portraying the Passion in dramatic or cinematic form.

We urge Mr. Gibson to give due regard . . . to its historical accuracy and to its portrayal of Jewish characters [which] requires that he give credence to the critique of historical scholars and [which] neither stirs antisemitism nor lends itself to antisemitic exploitation.

How well does "The Passion of the Christ" do relative to these Passion Play guidelines for depicting Jews and bringing understanding to the complex web of relationships that formed first-century Palestine? In general, I'd say not well. In Gibson's redaction of the story (where he draws on the

canonical Gospels, his own imagination, as well as other extra-biblical and speculative material) the Jews and the Romans both are presented very one-dimensionally. His account reflects nothing of the complexity that is variously reflected in each of the four gospels, let alone the way modern scholarship has been able to illuminate the cultural context.

For example, Gibson uses his imagination to create an extra-biblical scene between Pilate and his wife (extrapolated and redacted from parts of Matthew and John, as well as Anne Catherine Emmerich) to give us a picture of a Pilate, not as the ruthless ruler known to scholarship, but as a man who languishes under the weight of imperial responsibility. How is he to rule in "truth" this manipulating Jewish populace? Indeed, the Roman authorities cannot even control their own soldiers, who beat Jesus beyond the symbolic scourging the rulers intended him to get. Why couldn't Gibson have done something similar for Caiaphas and the Jewish leaders by drawing, for example, on the fears of the Jewish leaders as expressed in John 11? There, in response to Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead, the leaders fear that Jesus' increased popularity will create the perception of insurrection and incite the Romans to destroy both the "holy place and our nation." In that light, Caiaphas proclaims a central element in the gospel, namely, that "it is better for one man to die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed," showing how richly ironic and inclusive the symphony of grace is. In addition, the massive, mindless, arbitrary, bloodthirsty tenor of the crowd looks all too much like the caricatures of the Jews as presented in the ancient passion plays that at times led to violent actions against Jews. [On this observation I am heavily indebted to Matthew Meyer Boulton, "The Problem with The Passion," *The Christian Century*, vol. 121, No. 6 (March 23, 2004), p. 19.] This is precisely the kind of depiction of the

Jews that the Lutheran and Roman Catholic documents on Passion Plays are saying needs to be avoided. Even more, theologically, these one-dimensional depictions overlook the deep irony that permeates the Biblical accounts of the passion to the point of obscuring, if not obliterating, the reason why the Christ (as Jesus explains over and over again in his teachings) must be rejected, suffer, die and on the third day rise. Unless we can sympathize with the complex dilemma of all the people who are caught up in the events of that tragic, but good Friday (as Christians want to call it), the Jews as well as the Romans, then the account obscures the mind-boggling reason for Christ's passion: that Christ died for all, as Christians are wont to confess it. Anti-Jewish and anti-semitic portrayals obscure the gospel because they portray the event as a Medieval morality play, indeed, as a classical Manichean struggle of good guys and bad guys, we against them, and not as Christ's solemn plea and wrestling with God that God relent of his judgment and offer mercy (for no other reason than for Christ's sake) to the whole, complex, sinful world.

Besides the concern about latent anti-Jewish features in the film, concern has also been raised about the level of violence portrayed. It is in this regard, especially, that Gibson claims for himself the prize for historical accuracy and cinematic realism. Whether or not the flaying that Jesus gets at the hands of the sadistic, out-of-control Roman soldiers is historically accurate (and I have my doubts), the greater question is this: Does that historical detail and plot-line emphasis add to or diminish the meaning of the Passion of Christ? That depends on what you think the canonical Scriptures are saying the meaning of the Passion is. I don't think so, but Gibson does, and here is why he does, or so it seems to me. It has to do with his theory of atonement, the rationality of why God forgives.

It must be remembered that Gibson is avowedly not a Vatican II Catholic but a Tridentine Catholic and, accordingly, his film, so it seems to me, serves as an apologetic, though subtly, for that conviction. (Not only did he invest \$25 million to make this film, but he also built a \$1 million church so the Latin, Tridentine Mass could be celebrated.) Accordingly, Gibson interprets the Passion as predominantly a cultic sacrifice, using a kind of Satisfaction or Penal Model of the atonement (which has roots reaching back to the High Middle Ages), a model that seeks to link systematically, if not mathematically, the measure of Christ's suffering with the measure of our forgiveness. Moreover, an important part of his agenda is to show an explicit connection between that concept of the atonement and the Tridentine concept of the Sacrifice of the Mass.

Gibson's view of the atonement (how Jesus pays the price for our sins) is a quantitative and retributive view: that is, the greater the quantity of punishment Jesus receives, the greater the portion of sin's burden he carries. This idea is also very closely related to the substitutionary view of the atonement that is definitive of Fundamentalism. Therefore, it is important for Gibson that Jesus be portrayed as an extraordinary sufferer, a heroic sufferer. Jesus has to be able to shoulder more suffering than any ordinary man because his very purpose is to take onto himself the punishments that belong to the whole sinful world. Unless he is the heroic sufferer, he cannot succeed in carrying out the atonement, and Gibson makes Jesus' heroism in suffering so profound that even his sadistic torturers become exhausted in their efforts to overwhelm Jesus with suffering. However, for Gibson, as badly as Jesus has suffered in the ordeal of the Passion, the quantity of satisfaction for sin is not accomplished once and for all on Calvary, but is continued through the celebration of

the Tridentine Sacrifice of the Mass. That celebration is understood as the ongoing unbloody sacrifice for sin that has been established by the bloody sacrifice of Christ.

Gibson explicitly connects this atonement theory to the notion of the Tridentine sacrifice of the mass (an idea that would repel Fundamentalists if they could see it in the film) through a series of flashbacks. The scenes that I remember as making this connection are these: 1) While Jesus is before Pilate, Gibson has a flashback to Jesus washing his hands at the last supper, then returns to Pilate washing his hands to justify the offering of this victim – all an allusion to the action of the priest washing his hands at the Mass. 2) When Jesus gets to Calvary we have a flashback, again, to Jesus at the supper, where he rips the cloth off the basket exposing the bread for the meal, then a return to the soldier ripping off Jesus' sackcloth robe – all an allusion to the priest preparing the victim for the sacrifice. 3) After Jesus is nailed to the cross we have a flashback to Jesus at the supper lifting up the bread, only to return to see Jesus' cross lifted up –an allusion to the priest raising up the consecrated host, now the body of Christ, as the ongoing work of atonement through the unbloody sacrifice of the mass. My point here is not to disparage the Eucharist or the real presence, which I too see as central to the Christian's relation to Christ crucified and raised, but to show why Gibson focuses so graphically on the suffering, or more specifically the scourging, of Christ. He suffers the punishment we deserve, thus satisfying the demands of God's judgment on sin. It also explains why Gibson gives scant attention to the resurrection. It plays no direct role in this view of atonement, except to establish the ground for the ongoing offering of the sacrifice of the mass.

This, in my judgment, is clearly Gibson's theory of the atonement and his lens for interpreting in a simple

straightforward manner the complex story of the Passion. While that concept of the atonement has roots in medieval theology, it is not, in my judgment, the dominant paradigm for understanding the suffering, death, and resurrection in the New Testament Gospels, nor is it the kind of view that figured prominently in the Patristic Age, which Gustaf Aulen called the *Christus Victor Model*. While I cannot go into depth here on the New Testament “meaning” of the Passion (maybe we can do that more in our discussion) I’d like to close by making two points about the meaning of the “sufferings of Christ” that, I think, dominate the New Testament perspective and that contradict the major thrust of Gibson’s presentation.

First, in the New Testament, “Christ crucified” is not the Hero, not the strongest man, but the weakest man. He is not “Braveheart” but the “broken heart,” he is not exemplary in the way he confronts suffering, but ordinary, displaying a radical solidarity with every sufferer. [Boulton, p. 20. In addition, classical Christology saw in the suffering of Christ – including that he got hungry, thirsty, scared, ached, bled, died, etc. – the humanity of Jesus, not his divinity. Gibson wants to use Christ’s sufferings to show Christ’s distance, his divinity, how much he is not like ordinary human beings.]

Thousands of Jews were crucified by the Romans. Jesus was simply one among the many, from the perspective of the camera lens at least. What is surprising about the gospel (such that the New Testament writers cannot ignore it) is this: how can a man with such an unremarkable end to his life (dying as a common criminal) become the key to our relationship with God? That unremarkable ending, that mind-boggling mystery, “scandal” and “foolishness” of the cross, as Paul puts it, is central to the gospel. And here is essentially how the New Testament addressed it. Jesus as the Messiah of God, in his cross, identifies with those who are weak and lowly, obscure and

forgettable – indeed, those defined as God-foresaken – so that in his resurrection he can gather them and present them to God as those who are most precious, that is, set apart for mercy. Most people I know came away from the movie awed at the level of suffering Jesus endured. It was superhuman, and the fact that people came away with that reaction reveals, I believe, one of the major theological problems with Gibson's presentation. No one I know came away from the theater identifying with the sufferings of Christ, as the New Testament bids us to do. To the contrary, they were so awed at the level of heroic suffering that Gibson presented on the screen, that they were distanced from the Christ. For many, Gibson's presentation of the sufferings of Christ simply put their small sufferings to shame. That is not what the cross of Christ is intended to do in the New Testament Gospels' presentation – at least, not “simply” that, as I read those Gospels.

Second, Gibson presents the Passion as though the great nemesis that Jesus had to deal with was the devil, that spooky androgynous figure who floats throughout the film. In this regard, Gibson frames the Passion in a classical Manichean framework of good versus evil with the “good” and the “evil” easily identified on the screen. Jesus and a few others in the film, especially Mary, are easily identified as the good, while the bulk of the people, especially the Jews (amongst whom the evil one floats) are easily identified as the evil. While it is true that the struggle between good and evil is a common subtheme in the New Testament (God's judgment and death sentence upon sin and evil is well attested) the dominant theme in the Passion (and the gospels generally, as they interpret the passion) is not a good -versus-evil struggle. Rather, it is God's mercy versus God's judgment, the redemption of sinners, the plea “Father, forgive them [for my sake] for they know not what they do.” In the Passion, Jesus, the Son of God, takes the

side of sinners before God the judge, pleading for mercy. One can easily see here the Abrahamic tradition being carried forward: just as Abraham pleads mercy, not judgment, for Sodom and Gomorrah, now Jesus pleads mercy, not judgment, for the whole world. Here is a voice calling for the end of, not the exacerbation of, the culture wars by inviting everyone to die to self through him: in a word, to repent. Of course, the paradox and intrigue of this confrontation is mind-boggling and there is no way to depict it with the lens of a camera. It needs commentary! Something that Gibson doesn't do much of. As pure historical event, so it seems to me, as Jesus breathes his last dying breath, we have no way of knowing what the outcome will be. Has God abandoned him along with his cause? Or will the Father receive his spirit? That is, will the spirit of Christ's mercy (marked by forgiveness and life) trump the spirit of judgment, of retribution (marked by judgment and death)? For the New Testament the answer to this question is the resurrection and the proclamation of forgiveness in the name of Jesus. Moreover, the "truth" of Jesus' Passion, the way of mercy over judgment, can be presented to the world only as believers live humbly and repentantly in the world: not as crusaders of the culture wars, even though they find themselves in that war, but as cross-bearing servants, willing to be ordinary people, suffering quietly, obscurely, unimpressively, unheroically, for the sake of their neighbors and their world, regardless of who they are.