

Affirmations of God's Mission

Adopted by The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (1965)

Variations proposed by EHS, Jan. 27, 2004

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I. The Church Is God's Mission.

[RSV = Revised Schroeder Version]

The Church is Created by God's "NEW" mission to the world, God's unique mission in Christ.

The Church is both the product of God's new mission in Christ to God's old world, and thereafter its agent. God sends Christ on a MERCY mission to God's own broken world. The depth of that brokenness is God's "other" deal with the human race—first articulated in Gen 2:17, first enacted in Gen. 3:8ff. In this old mission mercy is hidden. Instead God "counts trespasses." No sinner survives such arithmetic. In Christ's death & resurrection God offers these same sinners mercy, call it forgiveness of sins. God re-connects with them as Abba. A simple definition of church is "Church = Christ-trusting sinners." All talk of Christian mission is grounded here.

II. The Church Is Christ's Mission to the Whole World

[RSV] Christ sends that church to replicate its Christ-trusting throughout the world, where God's other arithmetic is all-pervasive.

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

Thus God's old CSP is different from God's new CSP as night from day, as life from death. There is no "generic" CSP that covers both. Thus they must be specified, distinguished. It is always God's new CSP in Christ that rescues sinners from God's old CSP with its bad-news bottomline for sinners. Christ sends his trusters to replicate for worldlings what he has done for them, namely Christ's own CSP. To wit, to offer them the promise of Christ's own cross and resurrection so that they too might move from God's old CSP to God's new one. St. John quotes Christ as saying: "As the Father sent me, so send I you."

III. The Church Is Christ's Mission to the Church

[RSV stet]

Even though Christ-trusters are already "churchified," they need constant nurture. For within their lives they too sense the "old Adam/Eve" present – and operational. "Lord I believe, help my unbelief is the standard, not the exceptional, admission of all Christ-trusters. In the language of the Smalcald Articles, they

constantly meet this need in one another with “mutual conversation and consolation.” In short, they continue to offer the crucified and risen Christ to each other, so that “repenting and believing the Good news” AGAIN AND AGAIN becomes the daily regimen of Christ-trusters. [This is perhaps the most important ecumenical phrase in the Lutheran Confessions. There are no barricades of any sort for any Christ-truster in practicing this “means of grace” (so Smalcald) with any one who claims Christ as Lord.]

IV. The Church is Christ’s Mission to the Whole Society

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

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

Articulating that distinction for Christians in society is crucial for both CSP’s to proceed well. Lutheran language has capitalized on the Biblical metaphors of God’s left and right hands. Not two different realms (as territories), but God’s two different operations on the same turf, in the one and only world there is.

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

V. The Church Is Christ's Mission to the Whole Man

[RSV] The Church Is Christ's Mission to the Whole Person – but not forgetting the 2 CSP distinction

Biblical anthropology does not divide humans into body and soul. [Greeks in NT times majored in that point of view.] Bible language sees people made of distinct components, yes, but as one unified whole person no member of which is superior to the other. The Biblical focus is on relationships. How is this unitary, though multi-membered, person related to significant others in his/her God-given placements? That is the question.

The root relationship, of course, is someone's God-relationship. Where that is fractured, only God's right-hand CSP will do the job to bring healing. In all other relationships-with other humans, with one's own self, with other creatures, with creation

as a whole—God’s other hand is at work to care for and preserve what’s already created. Christians use the language of “social ministry, medical missions, inner mission,” etc. when they engage in such left-hand work. Such terms also apply to those who do not know Christ at all but are deeply involved in this CSP of God.

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

In executing God’s right-hand CSP Christ-trusters concretely offer the crucified and risen Christ to the receivers, God’s offer of merciful forgiveness encountered nowhere else in creation. Right-hand CSP is more than just speaking or offering “God’s love.” God’s love is already operating wherever God extends his left hand.

The right-hand CSP is an offer of Christ’s specific mercy-promise to folks who, for whatever reason, do not trust it, so that they may trust it. That offer occurs in concrete words and worded- actions (sacraments) designated as “means of grace.” The Smalcald Articles specify five such word/actions that transmit this promise. They are visible, audible. You can record them when they are happening.

God’s left hand CSP—also assigned by God to folks who do not trust Christ—protects, preserves, restores the other relationships mentioned above. Christians have no scruples in joining God’s other left-handed workers in this operation. In fact, Christ commends it.

VI. The Whole Church is Christ's Mission.

[RSV] All Members of the Church are on assignment in both of God's Missions.

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

All members of the church urge people to trust Christ. That finally amounts to urging people to switch gods, to "hang their hearts" (Luther's phrase) on Christ, to abandon whatever their hearts have been trusting before. That is what St. Paul proclaimed to his audience on Mars Hill: "You worship many gods here in Athens. I urge you to switch. Hang your hearts on the one that is still unknown to you, the Christ whom God raised from the dead." Christians do the same thing on today's Mars Hill where other gospels abound. In doing so they do not argue that their gospel is the best. Rather their claim is that it is Good News, an offer both "good" and "new" that they too had never heard before. Nor have they heard it elsewhere on the Mars Hills of today. They seek to extend the same offer to others. They urge them to trust it.

[AffirmationsofGod \(PDF\)](#)

Seminex at Thirty. Random Ramblings for an Anniversary

Colleagues, Thirty years ago this week, on January 20, 1974, John Tietjen was sacked as president of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. In the agonized history of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod it was a long time coming. But when it happened, Seminex started moving through the birth canal. That passage took 28 days. And then classes at “Concordia Seminary now in exile” started. Though the term “Seminex” was unknown on that Sunday evening as the news earthquaked through the campus: “The Seminary Board of Control (sic!) has just suspended John from his job. Martin Scharlemann is the new acting president.”

Some of you possibly know that John at this moment is coping with his third cancer. After lung and pancreas, it's now multiple lesions in the brain. Last Sunday he preached in Ft. Worth, Texas, what he thinks may be his last sermon. His text was the Gospel for the day: The Confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi. How fitting for the 30th anniversary of his confessing and its consequences. I have his permission to pass that sermon on to you, but I don't have it yet. Later, I hope.

Ten of us Seminex goldie-oldies here in St. Louis gathered on Tuesday for lunch to celebrate the day at Casey and Marie Jones' home. Casey read as our table grace what he'd read to the community 30 yrs before when we actually did march off into exile: Lamentations 3:21-26. Go read.

Six months before that January 20, at the Missouri Synod's national convention (New Orleans 1973), the die had been cast in

several resolutions—all of them with a 55 to 45 majority of the delegates—to discipline John for not disciplining us of the so-called “faculty majority” for our false teaching. There were three false teachings: 1) using historical critical methods [HCR] in teaching the Bible and thus undermining the authority of Scripture. 2) Practicing “gospel reductionism” (a new term in Missouri created “just for us”), thus hyping the Gospel over the Bible as bottomline authority instead of vice versa. 3) Fudging on the proper teaching of the “third use of the law” according to the Lutheran Confessions.

Interesting in this is that in the public’s perception, both churchy and non-churchy folks—then and even now—the fight was seen as centered on #1, the folks teaching the Bible. The fancy word there is the exegetes. Yet two of the three specified heresies were actually focused on the department of systematic theology at Concordia where the Lutheran Confessions got taught. I wonder if these two ever got mentioned in class by the exegetes. And the two villains fingered for those two abominations, though never named, were Bob Bertram and Ed Schroeder. They had brought such false teaching to the seminary from Valparaiso University. Nowadays Missouri hard-liners actually denounce it as “Valparaiso Theology.”

I thought about that last week while attending the conference of DAYSTAR folks, one of the groups within Missouri critical of the synod’s continuing legalism. On more than one occasion I was sitting but meters away from Ralph Bohlmann, now a DAYSTAR compatriot on the side of the angels.

Here’s the irony. Ralph was the one, 30-plus years ago, who identified these three heresies among his seminary colleagues, and wrote them up for the synod’s president. The synod prexy needed “false doctrine” to support his charge of malfeasance against Tietjen. And that malfeasance was John’s not

disciplining us false teachers, which was his job. These three heresies then became the core of New Orleans Resolution 3-09. That resolution concludes with the condemnation, quoting from the Lutheran confessions, that “these matters are in fact false doctrine and for that reason ‘cannot be tolerated in the church of God, much less be excused and defended.’” The resolution was adopted 574 to 451. The seminary’s Board of Control got the mandate to carry it out.

Back to the 3 condemned teachings. Especially the last two, so it seems to me, Ralph knew about from insider-trading. He too was in our department of systematic theology where we argued about these issues in the Luth. Confessions.

Excursus: there were three options for teaching Lutheran confessions in that one department of nine profs. One was reading the confessions through the lenses of post-Reformation era Lutheran orthodoxy [=kosher in the LCMS], another was reading them through the lenses of Luther’s own theology [guess who?], a third was viewing them as the “canon” for what is Lutheran and what isn’t, so that where the confessions are silent, one is free to choose the best of the ancient Catholic heritage [insiders will know who].

The real division between the faculty-majority (37) and faculty-minority (5) was within the dept. of systematic theology. Signalled, at the time the explosion came, when 4 of the faculty minority who taught systematic theology—profs NOT condemned by New Orleans 3-09—stayed loyal to the synod president while the rest of us in the dept. were deposed. In the biblical department there was no such division. All profs used historical critical methods for their work. Even the one exegete who stayed loyal to the synod president, and then became Tietjen’s successor, was the pioneer who had introduced HCM to the sem a generation earlier. Most of the profs in exegesis had learned it from him.

He had sent them off to the nations's best grad schools to get their doctorates in Scripture, learning HCM from the super-pros. Alice in Wonderland was right: "things get curiouuser and curiouuser." Always.

More ramblings.

Sitting with the DAYSTAR folk last week and listening to the continuing jeremiad about Missouri's "mess" —a genuine deja vu—got me to thinking. And linking what Luther said in his War Against the Turks of 1529 to what I was silently observing. [Yes, mirabile dictu, I never said boo in two and a half days of sessions!]

Why does Missouri stay "cursed" with conflict 30 years after its house was cleaned to remove the villains? In 1529 Luther claimed that God himself was in the mix of the Holy Roman Empire's dilemma—and not happy at all—actually allied for the moment with Suleiman the Magnificent AGAINST Christian Europe. Granted, Suleiman was a villain of the most murderous sort, but for the moment God was using him as "the rod of my anger" against a faithless "Christian" empire. Is that Missouri's plight? Not the moderates, nor the fundies, but God?

More than onc DAYSTAR speaker referred to "our beloved synod," standard Missouri etiquette since time immemorial. Which got me to wondering. Would God use that adjective about the synod? Just suppose the hereticized faculty majority really were God's "called and ordained" teachers at the sem. Suppose that God really wanted us to be there doing our work "faithful to our Lord and faithful to our calling." What jeopardy did the synod put itself in when it then declared that these folks were "not to be tolerated in the church of God, much less be excused and defended"? And then deposed them all? From what I know of the Bible, "beloved" is not God's word for folks who do that. NT rhetoric for this is shaking dust from one's feet, millstones

about the neck and woes for folks who murder the prophets. Beloved? Hardly. This is not sour grapes from a victim. It's in the Bible. Even more, all of the above harsh words come from Jesus himself.

What to do? Repent. So Luther in 1529 for the embattled empire. But will a synod ever repent? Will Missouri ever say: "3-09 was itself heresy. We confess our own "false teaching" in 3-09 and repent and ask God's forgiveness." According to Jesus that could do it to get God off of Missouri's case. But, as Luther even allowed in his day, it's hard to imagine empires—or synods—repenting. Well then, so ML, let a remnant, a minority, a handful, do it. God is notoriously pleased by such acts of even a remnant, and sometimes (as he was willing to do for Sodom and Gommorah) he draws back his rod for the whole mob when just a few are penitentially faithful. No longer to have God as your enemy is already a quantum leap forward for healing. Fact is, repentance makes God one's ally. How's that as a resource for missions!

The LCMS has a convention coming up in a few months. Could there be a repentance resolution for New Orleans 3-09? Remember, it doesn't need to get a majority vote. A remnant will do.

One more item of nostalgia.

Back on Jan. 20, 1974, I'm convinced, there was one thing the Bd of Control (and the synod machine behind the seminary purge), one thing they never thought of. The students. They apparently thought that they were just dealing with the false teaching profs. They thought that after Tietjen was gone and the acting president had fingered the ones who would indeed have to go (but only a few), it would settle down to business as usual. Ha! They thought the students would do what they were told to do. In reality it was the other way around.

Tietjen's sacking happened on a Sunday afternoon. Monday the student body assembly—with the faculty pulling no strings since we were not members of that assembly—psyched out the situation as follows: the synod officials tell us that some of our teachers are heretics. They have not yet told us which ones. So even though they are ordering us back to class under the new president, they cannot be serious. They cannot want us to sit at the feet of heretics. So we will declare a moratorium on class attendance until they designate who the real heretics are. Then we will go back to class—but only to the classes of the orthodox teachers.

So they refused to go to class, and without any students in any classes, the seminary was closed down. The seminary board not even thinking of the students, I'm sure, got blind-sided. One day later the faculty, still reeling and not really as feisty or clever as the students, and possibly not as faith-filled, agreed to "join the students in their moratorium." Students triggered the birthing of Seminex. We faculty did the midwifery.

Four hectic weeks of life on campus followed—but none of it in the classrooms—four weeks of "the most intense theological education I ever had," as many later said. Constant meetings, unending conversations on campus. At the upper echelons official negotiations in many venues of the synod, all of which went nowhere.

Needless to say, the Board of Control did NOT identify for the students which of us were to be avoided. The chaos was far beyond that by then. The mantra of the acting president, a retired Air Force chaplain (Major General), for coping with the chaos was simple. We heard him say it: "The way to handle a rebellion is to crush it." He tried to do so. The stone fell on him.

When the Bd of Control gathered for their next monthly meeting 4 weeks later (also on a Sunday, Feb. 17) they instructed the acting president to give the faculty majority—all but the five loyalists, of whom he was one—this ultimatum: be back in the classroom teaching, acknowledging my authority as president, by high-noon on Monday or you all are sacked for dereliction of duty. I still have the document saying that. But to have one of our prime accusers as our leader was, of course, unthinkable. How on earth could they seriously expect us to agree to that? So we all got sacked at high noon on Monday the 18th. The next day students and professors together decided on the contours of a new venture of seminary in exile. And THEN we had our celebrative parade walking off the campus.

It has become a Missouri shibboleth, both in the vocabulary of our critics and, even worse, of our friends, that we staged a “walkout.” Absolutely not. AFTER we were fired, we “walked OFF” campus. Yes, with some holy hoopla. At the end of the march we were welcomed by the deans of the two seminaries who offered us shelter, Eden (UCC) and the Jesuit School of Theology at St. Louis University. Note well: not until we were fired did we walk. And we HAD TO walk, for our letters of dismissal—remember, I still have mine—told us we were now trespassers where moments earlier we were professors. The timetable for vacating offices and faculty homes was spelled out.

It was insane. It was the worst of times, the best of times. But it happened. You had to have been there.

The march off campus was on February 19. My brother Ted was one of the students. Feb. 19 is Ted’s birthday. Did we have something to celebrate that night, or what?!

Of the 38 faculty folks who walked “off,” 14 have already walked on through the valley of the shadow of death. I list them here

with "Seminex at 30" in memoriam. Herb Bouman, Bob Bertram, Doc Caemmerer, Bill Danker, Alfred Fuerbringer, Carl Graesser, Paul Lessmann, Erv Lueker, Art Repp, Al von Rohr Sauer, Gil Thiele, Carl Volz, Walt Wegner, Andy Weyermann.

And their works do follow them.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

P.S. Marie and I have accepted the invitation of the Lutheran Church of Singapore to work with them March 1 to May 31. I know of one person on the Crossings listserve who has "sg" in his e-address. Do we have other Singapore readers? If so, let us know. [Need a chuckle? The earlier name of the Lutheran Church there was Lutheran Church of Malaysia and Singapore, the LCMS.]

"Lord, Bless This Mess, Please!" A Sermon at the Daystar Conference

Colleagues,

Last week's ThTh #291 concluded with something like this: I've been invited to the Daystar conference next week here in town. They want to remember and rehab the 1965 "Mission Affirmations" for implementation in the LCMS [Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod] today. If I hear something that grabs me, and if I can get permission, I'll pass it on to you. The

presentations were a mixed bag. But that's no surprise really, since Daystar is a coalition. It is literally an INTER-NET-work, a conversation group in cyber-space. Now and then they meet in face-to-face conversation as they did Sunday, Monday, Tuesday this week. They are a group of unhappy campers in the LCMS. But not all are unhappy about the same things. Yet there was agreement that all the agents of unhappiness within the synod were also disastrous for missions. [For details on Daystar, GO to their web site: <day-star.net>]

Creme-de-la-creme at the gathering, I thought, was Steve Krueger's sermon at the eucharist. I have his permisison to pass it on to you. Steve pastors an LCMS congregation in San Diego, California. If you wish to respond, here's his e-address: <skreegs@earthlink.net>

The mess he addresses is the one in the LCMS. But other denominations are also afflicted with this malady. You can probably name one or two on your own.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

***"Lord, Bless This Mess, Please!"
Reflections on the Baptism of Our Lord at the
DayStar Conference
The Eucharist
January 12, 2004***

1. What a mess! Tonight we DayStars are gathered as the community of faith around Word and Sacrament because we

as a church are in a mess and we come from a synod that does not do well with mess (maybe that's part of our pathology...maybe that's part of the "purity cult's" problem: it can't deal with mess). We have a history of not liking messes. And that's too bad. Because the world into which we say we are in mission in Christ's name is a messy place, as a sinner's world usually is.

Yet tonight we gather as people of hope, anyway, recognizing that we are in a mess as a church. Recognizing that, maybe, that is the real mess. The real mess we're in is that we don't do well with mess. And maybe we need to ask, "Why?"

But we can be people of hope, anyway, because we have a Lord who does. Who handles messes just fine. To Him tonight we cry out, "Lord, bless this mess, please!" Trusting that He does. That is why He came: to bless this mess of the whole human predicament, even ours.

2. In our churches this past Sunday, we celebrated the Baptism of Our Lord. To hear rightly the proclamation of the gospel of that day is to hear about how the Lord blesses messes. He takes them on as His own. Matthew's Gospel picks it up most clearly (although we are in the year of St. Luke). When Jesus, whose incarnation into our condemned flesh and its mortality we just celebrated at Christmas...when Jesus begins His earthly ministry, He begins it by taking on a sinner's baptism as His own. John's baptism was a baptism for sinners, for dealing with the messy, sordid business of their sins, with a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of those sins. And in Matthew especially, John is aghast at the irony! John, we are told, tries to prevent Jesus from immersing Himself in such a baptism. 'It ought to apply to me, Jesus, to us...but not to you!' "I need to be baptized by

you and do you come to me?" John says (Matthew 3: 14). "Do it!" Jesus says, "to fulfill all righteousness" (3: 15). As if, therein is—if it doesn't beat all—the righteousness of God! In God's willing. Christic, solidarity with sinners and the messy, sordid business of their sins. Where God, in this wondrous Trinitarian moment at the baptism of Jesus, where the whole Trinity gets in on the action you will recall, and finds God's chief delight in taking on the mess of a whole, broken, sinful and fallen world as God's own, and suffering that mess up in God's self through God's Son, so that sinners could be free of the curse of it, the weight of it, the mortality of it, and live in freedom for their God again.

"Do it! Baptize me!" Jesus orders his cousin, John the Baptizer, "give me a sinner's baptism to fulfill all righteousness." The righteousness of God now consists in God's hanging out with sinners! And being crucified for them. God's righteousness now in Christ is found in taking on the world's accursed mess as God's own and offering new life in exchange.

And thus, in Christ, in His new way of being righteous, is our hope. Our new life. The reason to be Christ's mission to a world full of mess in the name of a Savior.

Ernst Kaesemann, the great New Testament scholar, taking his cue from one Martin Luther, in his commentary on St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, plays with Paul's monumental phrase "the righteousness of God," which is now revealed through faith in Christ. And what is revealed, according to Kaesemann, is this radical thing. In Kaesemann's words: "God's grasping of his world" through grace (p. 93). As if righteousness does not consist in purity! God's righteousness consists in Christ's willing

solidarity with sinners through which they are redeemed, through whom their lives are justified, and in whom sinners are offered a brand new chance at life with God! It is in blessing messes that God is righteous in Christ, claiming the rights to those messes as God's own, including messes like you and me.

At the baptism of Our Lord, as Jesus commands his cousin John to immerse Him in a sinner's baptism, "to fulfill all righteousness," the whole Trinity gets in on the act. The Spirit descends as a dove and a Proud Poppa in heaven speaks His Word, "That's my boy! That's my child! Of whom I am proud as punch!"

God's major kick, His "proper work" as Luther called it, is identifying redemptively with messy sinners and their lives. The purists won't like it. They've got some wrong-headed notion of righteousness that excludes sinners and the mess of their sins...but they just don't get the righteousness of God in Christ. God loves hanging out with sinners and redeeming them and their lives. Just read the Gospels and get it straight!

3. Yet, therein is our real mess, isn't it? The crux of it. We don't have it straight. And what we in the Missouri Synod don't have straight is not just a God-pleasing view of scouting or the hundreds of other ditties that supposedly divide us, but the main thing! This gospel! This dispute is finally about the gospel. It is about Jesus. It is about how big our Jesus is and how deeply we let Him and His mission go into a messy world. It is about breaking through the impediment against Jesus by even his cousin John of not letting Christ get on the hook of the law and its curse upon sinners and their messes, and not keeping our Jesus nice and sanitized and

clean and pure, far from the mess of life. Our dispute is about our doctrine of Christ and Christ's gospel and its central place in the life of the church! But as Luther wrote about over and over again—read his latter commentary on Galatians (volume 26 of Luther's Works), there's even a good paper on it on the DayStar Web Site, I wrote it—if you do not have a gospel that lets Christ on the hook, if you do not trust Him to get Himself involved with the messy business of sinners and their sins, if you do not let Him be righteous like He wants to be righteous, and have the rights to you, He can't do you any good! All His benefits are lost on you! All His freedom from the curse of the law eludes you.

Bob Bertram called that the "Pharisee heresy" and our synod is full of it. The legalism of the Pharisee heresy is infecting us all . . . even us on DayStar. We, too, cannot write by-law revisions and finesse political strategies fast enough, as if appealing to the law would save us and defeat our mess. Friends, let me tell you, there is only death there. When you hang your heart on the law, it just gets worse and worse.

Our appeal must be to Christ and Christ alone, whose righteousness alone covers messes, even ours. Only a Jesus who takes what our mess deserves as His very own to a cross can help us. Only a crucified God for a world full of mess can do us any good. The mess is so grave, so weighty and so mortal that only He can bear it and defeat its power over us. But that is what Christ does so willingly, so lovingly, so faithfully, as if dying for sinners were His chief delight. It is His righteousness, offered freely to us all.

4. Faith sees that. Faith sees what our reason cannot: the blessed truth of the true gospel. Faith sees that in that

Child of the manger God has entered in His grace and truth our mortal, condemned flesh for us all. Faith sees that in His baptism a Savior entered deep into a world-full of mess under divine condemnation. Faith sees the hope for outcasts and sinners when He makes it His business to seek them out and eat with them. Faith sees in a cross God bearing up in redemptive love the mess of a whole broken and hurting and sinful world. Didn't you see Him hanging on a cross over Yankee Stadium [after 9-11]? Just on whose back do you think that whole horror is placed? Thank God someone was there as His witness to name Him, who hears all the prayers and groans and sighs of all His children who cry out to Him and who answers all our prayers in that Son of His stretched out for the world as He is on that cross. Thank God Dave Benke was there to say, "You want to know where God is in this unspeakable horror and mess? Look! There He is! There's where to find your Tower of Strength! In Him and Him crucified." Faith can see that and necessitates our showing up on such occasions in a messy world. It's what the Mission Affirmations are all about. If Christ can be there, we'd better show up, too! Faith sees the true gospel – the one about Christ's divine solidarity with sinners and the mess of their sins – and believes that gospel and runs with it with joy. That's why we are here this evening and gathered for this conference. We've got a Christ big enough to follow as His Church into a messy world. The church is Christ's mission to the world, because it can be! When you've got a Christology big enough to handle mess, you can go anywhere with the message of hope in Jesus Christ, the Friend of sinners and the outcastness of the mess of their sins.

5. It seems to me that in our DayStar witness to the church we need to be saying that. We need to be appealing to

Christ again. We need to be appealing to Christ's gospel again. There's all the case we need! There's all the authorization we need to be Christ's people in mission to a messy world...and a messed up church. We've got a Christ who's good with messes! And the purists, our opponents, who seem to be around in every generation? Let's diagnose their dilemma in the light of the Reformation gospel. They're afraid to trust a Jesus who blesses messes and dives right into them to save. That's why they can't handle mess. Their Christ is all locked up somewhere in some kind of purist's formula and is far too small. And because that is so, they've hung their heart where there's only death: on the law. And may God have mercy on their souls and someday, in His grace and mercy, set them free from their prison. That they have to hi-jack a whole church from the gospel and its mission they do at their eternal peril. But our prayer can be for them, too, as we pray, "Lord, bless this mess, please." He died even for messes like them.

But we dare never let them and their unbelief in the true gospel stop us. For the church is Christ's mission to the world. It doesn't belong to them. Nor, for that matter, to us. "Our beloved synod" was never ours to begin with. It always belonged to Him, to be a blessing to messes, in His precious name. Remembering whose church the church is and what it's for is what "The Mission Affirmations" try to be all about.

In these days ahead as we get pounded on and smeared and ridiculed and condemned, accused of messing things up as we DayStars are accused of every day, we know where to go to find again our strength, our courage and our hope.

It's called Baptism. The theme of this week of the Baptism of Our Lord. Martin Luther knew it so well. When

he would be wracked by his doubts and there were many; by the devil's accusing taunts; by the weight of a movement that Luther had set in motion but that he could hardly control, that's where Luther would go. He would remember his Baptism. "Baptizatus sum," he would say [in Latin]. "But still, in it all, how do I know I belong to Christ?" Baptizatus sum. "I'm baptized." That's how I know whose I am.

There God the Father called us by our name. And the heavens opened up, and the Spirit as a dove descended. And faith was born through water and the Word. And a voice from a proud heavenly Poppa, busting with pride at what His own Child did for humble sinners such as you and I, said, "That's my boy! That's my girl! That's my child forever!"

We've hard days ahead, we DayStars, to confess Christ and Him alone. No question, we'll be doing a lot of that in the context of mess. What a mess we are in! Good thing ours is a Christ whose specialty is blessing messes. And because that is so, there's hope, springing eternal, even for us.

Baptizatus sum!

In the precious Name of Jesus. Lord, bless this mess, please! Amen.

Stephen C. Krueger
San Diego, California

The LCMS Mission Affirmations of 1965—Then and Now

Colleagues, Contrary to popular perception the LCMS is not a monolithic entity. Nor was it ever. Some say they were squabbling about doctrine before they even got off the boat in 1839. And it continues today even after the sweeping purge of “liberals” 30 years ago that created Seminex, and (tell it not in Gath) nudged the expelled Missourians to nudge the ALC and LCA of that era into becoming the ELCA. In the current Missouri debate—framed superficially as “conservative vs. moderate”—there are a number of hot potatoes. One is about missions. How could there be a debate, you ask, about missions? Well, in Missouri anything is fair game for a fight.

One facet of this one is the allergic term “church growth,” a mission method and theology that has many fans in Missouri, though none of its roots are patently Lutheran. ‘Fact is, they come from “the Reformed,” an ancient dirty word within Missouri for items of theology or practice that “ought not to be so among us.” But Missouri’s current leadership has made “church growth” the synod’s approved mission theology [See ThTh #258, May 22, 2003]. So the folks who purged the liberals in the 1970s are on the ramparts to do it again, this time to fellow conservatives who somehow have been bewitched by alien mission theology.

No wonder then that the “Mission Affirmations” [hereafter MAs], approved at the synod’s Detroit convention way back in 1965—after almost 40 years of hibernation—are coming front and center in the hassle these days. Lines are being drawn in Missouri’s sand: it’s pro and con on the MAs. One of the groups within the LCMS today pushing for “Gospel-grounded openness in the synod” is the Daystar network, a collection of “moderate”

Missourians (a few of them Crossings-types, I'm told, but not all). They are coming to St. Louis next week to rehab the MAs. At least, that's what I get from reading their conference program on the Web. And the "con" folks, so one Missouri insider told me, are "agin 'em"—opposed both to the MAs and to the Daystar folks. So much so, said this source, that "if THEY start pushing the MAs, it'll blow the lid off." The current story of the LCMS, which may still surprise some, is a tale of two cities. Though they both are "in Missouri," they are definitely not on the same page.

Some folks were "agin" the MAs back in 1965 when they were adopted with wide support at the LCMS Detroit convention. The MAs were patently too ecumenical for these folks and, even worse, the MAs had some hard words for Missouri's unfriendly attitudes toward other Christians. Both of these for the "agin-ers" were no-noes. Those allegedly unfriendly attitudes, so said the "agin-ers," were nothing more than a concern for doctrinal purity and Biblical truth. And if you are from Missouri, what's wrong with that? There is no higher priority.

But the critics didn't stop the MAs in 1965. How could a synodical assembly say no to "mission affirmations"? So they passed with broad delegate support. But they didn't go anywhere—at least at home within Missouri. More obvious already at that convention was the other trouble brewing in those days focused on professors at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. So four years later at the Denver convention President Oliver Harms, who had pushed for the MAs (and had NOT held the sem profs in check), was unseated and a clean-house president put at the helm.

He did clean house at the seminary—and then at the synod's mission department, where the MAs had been welcomed as fresh air indeed. With the demise of those mission execs the MAs too

became a dead letter—and have been so for 30 years in the LCMS. Still they are “on the books.” They are the synod’s canon law, in LCMS jargon “our official position.” And the fight that never happened 40 years ago might happen now as partisans line up on both sides of the gulch and check their muskets.

So the Daystar crowd is coming to town. Their conference program is the original MAs from top to bottom. A number of those coming are friends and former students. With today’s ThTh 291 I’m welcoming them to our town.

Although I was around when the MAs were being put together, I wasn’t involved. The grand master of the MAs was Martin Luther Kretzmann [Hmm, an MLK!], known as “Mick” to his friends. I too was his friend, mostly via my job at Valparaiso University where his oldest brother O.P.Kretzmann was VU’s president. But I was a generation younger, and besides that, folks at “Valpo” (especially those in the theology department!) seldom got asked for help on LCMS agendas.

To my knowledge the LCMS mission board asked Mick, dean of Missouri’s missionaries with life-long service in India, to consult with his mission colleagues and produce a consensus of their own “affirmations” to present to the synod. The end product was presented at the Detroit convention in 1965. Insiders knew that it articulated Mick’s own personal mission theology hammered out in decades on the Indian mission field, and that it was a departure from Missouri’s tradition, but he had broad support among his colleagues. I’m not privy to “how” it all happened. So I’ll now move to looking at the text itself and saying what I see.

The MAs are 6 single-sentence affirmations. They are succinct and pungent. One of MLK’s associates from those days “appreciated the aphoristic quality of Kretzmann’s titles.

They're easy to hold in mind and to mull on." But as aphorisms it's not easy to detect just what they mean on first reading. That was doubtless deliberate (and politic) on Mick's part. Each one a simple subject, then the word "is," then a predicate. My hunch is that many delegates at the Detroit convention didn't quite know what they meant either. Perhaps the mystic simplicity enhanced their majesty. They were just too good not to be true.

Here they are:

1. The Church is God's Mission
2. The Church is Christ's Mission to the Whole World
3. The Church is Christ's Mission to the Church
4. The Church is Christ's Mission to the Whole Society
5. The Church is Christ's Mission to the Whole Man
6. The Whole Church is Christ's Mission

Comments:

1. First of all, novelty. The very rhetoric of the MAs was new in Missouri. They are assertions, "doctrinal" assertions even, but none of them sounded like the doctrines (plural) regularly taught in Missouri's catechism classes—or preached from pulpits. Where was the language we all knew—inspiration, redemption, justification, sanctification, et al.? The very word "mission" wasn't in the vocabulary of Missouri's doctrines. Not even in Schwan's explanation of Luther's catechism. So the language was novel. But it sounded good. Who could object?
2. Their aphoristic form urges the catechetical question: What does this mean? So the Daystar conference is following the tease of the MAs themselves—to mull them over and figure out just what the Whereases and Resolves that followed each affirmation are saying. [They were presented as 6 separate resolutions to the convention,

voted on and passed one-by-one.]

3. There is some breast-beating in the opening prayer that leads to the resolves. "Our disobedience against Thy Law and our littleness of faith in Thy Gospel." "Preserve us from that pride which thanks Thee that we are not as other men are." [Of course, the language is non-inclusive. It was 1965.] In the resolutions that follow we hear of "our sins of self-centered disobedience...our own institutional self-interest." And in the final resolve of MA #6 we have a string of "we deplores," some of which are patently "in house" maladies, though the text doesn't actually say so.
4. The theological construction. What are the MAs built upon? What are the groundings, the foundations, for the resolves? Just what is being affirmed? And then by contrast, what is being negated? Let's take them one at a time.

4.1. The Church is God's Mission

After five whereases that rehearse the history of salvation concluding with a Pentecost whereas "The Father and Son together sent the Holy Spirit into the world as the great Missionary until our Lord's return," the resolves assert that God's in charge of mission, for us it's not optional (though we've treated it that way in Missouri "giving self-preservation priority over God's mission"), and we commit "ourselves, our congregations, and our Synod into God's living hand as willing instruments of His great mission to the world."

Summa: Mission is God's own operation. Negated is that it's "our" operation, or "our synod's" bailiwick. No, God is the proprietor. God assigns the task to us, but he is still the owner-operator.

4.2. The Church is Christ's Mission to the Whole World

Since “God so loved the world” and since “Jesus sent his disciples out into all the world to make disciples of all nations,” the conclusion is obvious. It’s the whole world where God is already actively at work—even in folks of “other faiths.” That entire resolve was “new” in Missouri. It reads: “Christians will approach men of other faiths in humility and love. They joyfully acknowledge that God is active in the lives of all men through His continued creative and providential concern, through the Law written in their hearts, and through God’s revelation of Himself in creation and nature. Christians affirm a common humanity with all men. They confess a common sinfulness. They rejoice over a universal redemption won for all in Jesus Christ.”

After such left-hand-of-God appreciation of other religions comes then this friendliness to other Christian folks out there on the mission frontier (also something possibly never before articulated in orthodox Missouri’s history): “Resolved, That we recognize that our sister mission churches in other lands have been placed by God into other circumstances and are subservient not to us but to the Lord, who makes His church His mission to the whole world.”

It is at these two points that the “agin-ers” then and now bristle. Where is the critique of the false doctrine in these other churches—and, for God’s sake, surely in those pagan world religions? Negated is that very “mindset” of Missouri’s tradition where all non-Christians are simply godless heathen, AND where even other Christians, because of their doctrinal defects, are not in the same ballpark with us—and possibly (though we pray it is not so) not in the same ballpark with God.

Reminds me of a story. A Missouri pastor and a Roman priest in the same small town became good friends (mirabile dictu!), had coffee each Monday morning and rehashed the weekend. Upon leaving the LCMSer regularly said: "OK, Ron, let's get back to doing the Lord's work. You in your way and I in His." MA 2 says no to that.

4.3. The Church is Christ's Mission to the Church

What does that conundrum say—church in mission to the church? Answer: the church's witness and ministry is not just to outsiders, but to church-insiders too. Mission is also in-house ping-pong amongst folks whom Christ has linked to himself and who call him Lord. Consequence? "To enter into a real and living unity with every other member of Christ's holy body, the church." That was ecumenical dynamite within Missouri, calling Missouri to use its Lutheran Confessions not to build doctrinal fences, "a kind of Berlin wall," but "in good conscience both to witness and TO LISTEN to all Christians. . . . By virtue of our unity with other Christians in the body of Christ, we should work together . . . [to] edify Christ's body and advance His mission."

Negated again here is the fear of "unionism," Missouri's scold-word term for mixing with the heterodox. Standard in my growing-up in Missouri for avoiding non-Lutheran Christ-confessors was Romans 16:17, "Mark them that cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine you have learned, and AVOID them." MA 3 says no to that.

How this open-armed ecumenism got a majority vote at a Missouri convention in 1965 is a mystery. Must have been the wind and fire of the Holy Spirit.

4.4. The Church is Christ's Mission to the Whole Society

Luther is specifically invoked here to commend openness to the world, the place where “the Christian does God’s work in the world through various vocations in the home, church, and state.” Curious here is the negation of the term “secular” for such work, a term which Luther himself used as a “good” work (“weltlich” in German) for such “world-work,” whether done by Christians or the unbeliever. The final resolve pushes Missourians to full engagement in the otherwise “secular” world. “Resolved, That Christians be encouraged as they attempt, under the judgment and forgiveness of God, to discover and further His good purposes in every area of life, to extend justice, social acceptance, and a full share in God’s bounty to all people who are discriminated against and oppressed by reason of race, class, creed, or other unwarranted distinctions. Christians recognize that all their fellowmen come from the Father’s creating hand and that His Son’s nail-pierced hands reach out in love to all of them.”

The contra here addresses the blindness—not only in Missouri—that God’s work is confined to church-work and that world-work, though not necessarily the devil’s terrain, is not as godly as church-work is. Missing here in the MA itself is the “Aha!” that God’s world-work and God’s-work-in-Christ, though from the same God, are not the same work. Preservation of creation and its redemption are two very different operations. The latter entails the death of God’s Son, the former does not. They are hardly the same. More about this below.

4.5. The Church is Christ’s Mission to the Whole Man

The contra here, to which MA 5 says no, is the heritage common in more than one Christian denomination that

mission is about "saving souls." This MA puts bodies into the salvation equation. Its supporting grounds for that are the body-soul-mind ministry of Jesus recorded in the gospels, and the words of Luther in his exposition of the 10 commandments. "Christians help and befriend their neighbor on our small planet in every bodily need. They help their neighbor to improve and protect his property and business by bringing him economic help and enabling him to earn his daily bread in dignity and self-respect. Christians minister to the needs of the whole man, not because they have forgotten the witness of the Gospel but because they remember it."

And finally

4.6. The Whole Church is Christ's Mission

Mission is not the preserve of the clergy. Au contraire: "Every Christian is commissioned a missionary through baptism." No distinction on this one between the ordained and the "merely" baptized. "All who are baptized into Christ are baptized into His death and resurrection, into His MISSION, and into His body; therefore be it

Resolved, That we affirm that the whole church is Christ's mission."

Even "church-work" is not the preserve of the ordained. And from that affirmation comes a string of "we deplores." "Therefore we deplore anything that seeks to divide what God has joined together" with clericalism and laicism leading the list. There follow other deplorable dividings of what God has joined—not all grounded in the fusion brought on by baptism. "We deplore the racism which refuses to repent of its sin and denies the unity of all Christians in Christ and His mission. We deplore the

desecration of Christianity by the multiplication of sects as though the Gospel were a religion of human design instead of God's outreach after men in the giving of Himself. The divisions in the institutional church are as real as the unity in Christ's body which joins all Christians together. We deplore the wars and political struggles that set Christians and other people in one nation against those in another."

And in closing, MA 6 makes this humble admission: "We recognize that the Christian lives in the tension between his own imperfect understanding of God's truth and his knowledge that in spite of errors and divisions he is joined together in Christ's body with all who truly believe in its Head. The Christian lives in the tension between Christ's lordship, which is perfect, and his own disciple-ship, which is not. The Christian rejoices over the existence of every fellow believer in Christ his Savior, because thereby Christ is preached and His mission is implemented, for the whole church is Christ's mission."

Comment: At this summer's Lutheran World Federation assembly Marie and I had lunch with Iteffa Gobena, president of the Mekane Yesus church in Ethiopia, our friend from days gone by when we were mission folks there. Mekane Yesus has been growing by hundreds of thousands (sic!) each year. Its membership is over 3 million. Bigger than Missouri. In a couple years it will be bigger than the ELCA. What's the secret? "Everybody knows," said Iteffa, "that if you are baptized, you are a missionary." And then he added this: "In a recent survey of new members we learned that only 8% of them heard the Gospel through a pastor or evangelist. All the rest heard it from people who were 'merely' baptized." And he laughed.

Summa: The MAs were dynamite in their day for the LCMS. And in the LCMS mission fields, so one veteran told me, they were explosive—palpably liberating and energizing. But at home they were not. Could be that their time has now come in Missouri's current tug-of-war. If so, they could be made even better, and I was going to offer the Daystar folks some hints for doing just that.

Specifically—in their Gospel-grounding. E.g., Christ is the cornerstone throughout the MAs, but his cross and Easter don't get mentioned, and if not mentioned, then not used to build this otherwise feisty missiology.

—in offering some hermeneutical help to reduce the fuzziness of their concept of mission—still common throughout the missiological world—that everything God does in creation is finally the same ball-of-wax, and that it is all the one “Missio Dei.” Here's how one grown-up-in-Missouri missionary put it: “The MAs use ‘God's mission’ and ‘Christ's mission’ more or less interchangeably, as if there's no distinction to be made between ‘God’ and ‘God-in-Christ,’ between ‘God-at-work-in-the-world’ and ‘God-at-work-for-the-world-in-and-through-Christ.’”

My take on this: Yes, Jesus did “social ministry” left and right. Yet the folks he fed, healed and raised from the dead subsequently got sick and died again. Lazarus too. Not so the folks whose sins he forgave. That forgiveness never died. Which is the headline screamer of John 6, Jesus's long sermon on bread in the wilderness and THE bread of life. Jesus himself makes the distinction. It's not a Lutheran invention.

What that missionary is calling for is to make that cardinal distinction between God's law and God's promising Gospel, especially when it comes to mission. But few in Missouri in 1965, and few now (so it seems to me) see that distinction as

primal for actually “doing” theology. Thus “law-and-gospel” becomes a shibboleth (also in the MAs, sad to say) which all affirm, but few use (or know how to use?) in the theological enterprise. Ditto for the ELCA today.

Enough already. This is the calling of the Daystar crowd. A number of the names on their conference program (yes, there are women there!) learned this cardinal distinction for doing theology in earlier years. [I know. I graded their exams.] Perhaps they will remember. I hope so. It really is their job. If I hear that something like that happened at their get-together, and if I can get permission, I’ll pass it on to you.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

2004 Won’t be a Happy New Year in the USA, So Long As

Colleagues, 2004 won’t be a Happy New Year in the USA – as long as we’re still in denial.

Background:

For the Sundays in December Fred Danker and I have been Bible Class leaders at our parish church here in St. Louis. Fred, as some of you know, is the world’s superstar lexicographer for the Greek New Testament. [Check <Amazon.com> for the specs on his “Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament,” most recent edition 2000.] Our parish PR said: “Read the Christmas stories

together with Fred and Ed.” The two of us did a pas-de-deux on Luke 2 (shepherds et al) and then on Matthew 2 (Herod and the Magi). Fred gave the “big picture” presented by each evangelist. I took each text through the Crossings matrix (diagnosis-prognosis) and then crossed it over to us folks in the room.

So last Sunday, December 28, it was my turn with the Magi. I took Bob Bertram’s classic on this text from back in 1980 and presented the paradigm. It’s all about authority. There are two kings of the Jews in the text. Herod in Jerusalem and Jesus in Bethlehem. It’s about regime change. You know there’s gonna be trouble. Bertram calls it a cliff-hanger.

Herod, though king of the JEWS, exercises his authority in “gentile” fashion—authority OVER with the folks under. When push comes to shove, the underlings get sacrificed so that the monarch remains. Au contraire the king down in Bethlehem. He comes with “Jewish” authority, authentic Jewish authority, where the king is shepherd, and when push comes to shove, the king dies so that the sheep may survive. David is the classic model—though he too strayed into the gentile mode with Bathsheba and Uriah—and the one in Bethlehem is a son of David. That’s not just genealogy; it’s the label for “authority UNDER” the ones you’re shepherding, not authority OVER them. To wit, “down” in Bethlehem.

See Matthew 20 for Jesus’ own discourse on these two different paradigms for authority—over and under. I used two visuals for this. Two equilateral triangles, each with a crown at one of the points. One triangle held point-up with crown at the top, one held point-down with the crown down. Thus one where the underlings are there to keep the king at the top. The other with the king underneath to keep the people up. Though all his disciples get exposed as lusting for gentile authority, “it shall not be so among you,” Jesus says. His authority is Jewish,

not top-down, but bottom-up, with the ruler beneath the ruled, serving them, not being served by them. Authority not restricted—and jealously guarded—by the one at the top (and only one can be king of the mountain), but shared—yes, wantonly passed on—by this king at the bottom to all whom this king upholds. Especially the authority to be called—and rightfully so—God’s own kids.

Underlings are always potential threats for the spot at the top. They get uppity. But in the other paradigm, with the monarch down under, they are themselves already “overlings,” no threats at all for the crown at point-down. ‘Fact is, their advance is his success.

But I digress.

So we did the 3 steps of diagnosis—astray, excluding, excluded—and 3 of prognosis—shepherded, including, returning (with this Bertram bon mot about the Magi “returning via the Jerusalem by-pass.” Returning to their old tasks in the Gentile world, but with a twist that must have looked upside down to their fellow point-uppers). Then came the crossing to us. How do these six terms link to our lives? Seemed that most all of the paradigms of our daily life are Gentile Herodian triangles—workplace, families, societies, economies, even denominational structures. Nations, even democracies, work with point-up models of authority. And now after 9/11 in the USA, so it seemed to some, with Herodian vengeance against those seeking to topple us from our pyramid-peak position. Others said not so. As discussion warmed up, I sought a temporary calming interlude.

Glad to see grandson Peter in the crowd, home for Christmas from his first semester at Reed College in Portland, Oregon, I tossed the ball to him, asking how Matthew’s parsing of authority would play at his egg-heady institution. “Well,” he said, “the

Marxists on campus wouldn't like it." "Haven't they heard," I replied, "that the Berlin Wall fell 14 years ago and with it the Marxist Empire of Russia?" "I think they're still in denial," he quipped.

I took Peter's quip and crossed it over to these United States. I asked: Aren't our people and our leaders "still in denial"? Well, the discussion got warm again, and I won't continue this partisan report about it. But Peter's words are my words about my country, "still in denial." That's one big reason why it won't be a Happy New Year 2004 for us. Denial does not make for happiness.

To give this opinion some substance I might start with a quote by an earlier US president named George Bush. "It's the vision thing," he too once quipped. Denial is a "vision thing," looking at the same data as other observers do, and seeing something quite contrary from what they claim to see.

No wonder the OT prophets were called "seers." It's the vision thing. They were see-ers. They saw stuff that most folks didn't see. Not that they had a vision in the night with no one else watching, but (most often) they looked at the same historical realities that everyone else did and saw something completely different. Sometimes there was even a stand-off between seers, each of whom claimed God as witness for the clean-contrary pictures they painted for the people.

Jeremiah types, Amos too, and most of the prophets whose visions got into the Hebrew scriptures, looked at the historical data of their day and said "God is lowering the boom"—on us. God's boom = our doom. Folks labelled "peace-prophets" saw it differently. "No way," they said, "it's shalom, shalom." Everything is going to be all right if we just keep doing what we've been doing. And trying even harder to do more of the same. Then as now the

watchword was “security.” And the model for “saving” the people from insecurity? Persisting in and intensifying Herodian authority. Our USA foreign policy and domestic policy too—George W. Bush’s vision thing, and Ashcroft’s too—have ancient precedents. But they are authority-over “gone astray” (Diagnosis level one in Matt. 2). In Jesus’ “Realpolitik,” in all the NT Gospels, authority gone astray always winds up dead wrong.

A front-page headline in this week’s St. Louis Post-Dispatch hypes our local major employer, Boeing, getting an x-billion dollar contract to make umpteen even more super-duper jet fighters. Especially since the terrorists are still out to get us, this will help to preserve the “shalom” of America. Cross all this over to Matthew 2. The prognosis is grim. Herod’s preemptive strike against Bethlehem pretenders left Herod finally dead and the intended Bethlehem victim still alive. But, said one of the Bible class critics: “That’s your opinion. Mine is different.”

So which seer do you listen to, which vision do you trust? Seems to me that the Jesus-Herod stand-off throughout Matthew signals that Jesus linked himself to OT seers of the Jeremiah and Amos type. Not so much for interpreting current history in the Roman empire (though there is that), but for probing to the roots of the alternatives. If we’re amongst Jesus’ crowd, the chief gives the signals and calls the shots. Jesus linked the vision thing and the denial thing. They go together.

You deny what you can’t see, especially what you can’t see when you think you’ve got your eyes wide open. So what else is new? One of the most vivid vision/denial stories in the Bible comes in John 9. Here a clinically blind man “sees” who Jesus is, whilst the Pharisee crowd with 20-20 eyesight looking at Jesus “just can’t see it.” The guy who couldn’t see at all saw the Messiah. The 20-20 vision folks said over and over again: “We

know that Jesus is a sinner.” So who was blind, and who could see? That is the parabolic conundrum. Then and now. The Pharisees denied that they were sinners, so who needs a sinner’s healer? Jesus finally closes the case with this epigram: Had you “seen” that your own “vision-thing” was de facto blindness, you could have been healed. But so long as you stay in denial—“no vision problem with us”—you are stuck in your blindness and no healing can happen.

Throughout history empires and emperors are regularly in denial. Their denial links directly to their demise.

For our American empire—

1. We are in denial that we were lied to about Iraq’s WMD. Though that seems perfectly clear to me, one Bible class person gave an emphatic “not so” – and he too has a doctor’s degree. Policy-makers telling lies are in cahoots with the Father of Lies, Jesus claims. Not with the one he calls Father.
2. We are still in denial that we lost the Vietnam war. Thus denying that we are beat-able. Even credentialed political analysts in our land are saying that, and opining that with such denial goes the Herodian reflex act to whomp some other Asian people(s) right now so we can cover for that defeat.
3. We are in denial about our own Herodian empire, denying what St. Augustine (and Luther after him) found to be “perfectly clear” that no empire (in his day the Roman one) can be an empire without incriminating itself in the blood of the peoples it claims to benefit. Pax Romana and Pax Americana don’t look like peace for those receiving on the receiving end of it. If it’s enforced with military might, it’s oppression. For both Augustine and Luther such “perfectly clear” political analysis was grounded in their

reading of the Bible—specifically about God’s law and injustice measured thereby. America now has a Bible-reading president. He too tells us that the correlation between his actions and the Bible is perfectly clear. But it’s the vision thing—and for reading the Bible it’s the lenses that create the vision. Bush’s lenses aren’t the ones used by Augustine and Luther. It parallels the stand-off in John 9. Who is blind? Who can see?

4. Linked to that is our even greater denial about who runs world history. As the last empire around these days we think we do—and, of course we MUST do it. It’s noblesse oblige. And if we’re in charge, then God, though invoked, is not. It’s a given: our will is God’s will. That no longer needs to be verified. Yet in Jesus’ day that was the Pharisee heresy. Not only is it untruth. It becomes lethal when we can no longer “see” God in any way critical of us. We then can no longer read our own history to see God’s own “third use” of his law: You have been weighed and found wanting, and here are your just deserts.
5. Yet the Scriptures do not leave us with this stalemate: I read it like this and you read it like that. We contradict each other, and we both think we’re right. but there’s no way to adjudicate who “sees” aright.
6. Not quite. At least in the Bible’s proposal for clear vision, there’s one additional fundamental element. It’s called repentance. Not breast-beating, or “feeling sorry.” But a turn-around action that clears the vision—like opening the eyes of the blind—about everything, starting with my own self, my own country. Perfection, un-marred, un-blemished, non-sinners—we are not. No one is. But those stuck in denial of that truth about themselves are doomed to mis-read everything, first of all their own selves. “Because you deny your blindness, you are stuck in your sin—and you’ll stay that way till God’s doom-boom comes

crashing down.” The vision thing is always a product of something that comes before—for good or ill. Jesus’ proposed sequence is “Repent, and THEN believe the Good News.” Repentance is the beginning of new vision for sinners. It is “the truth” about ourselves. This truth does not yet “make you free.” In fact, it more likely will “make you FLEE.” But there are two ways to flee when you “see” this truth—either into despair or into the hands that beckon “come unto me.” Such “truth” undoes denial. But it does not heal it. Needed is “grace,” the Messiah’s beckoning open arms. Thus John’s Gospel in the prologue contrasts Jesus with Moses. “Law came through Moses.” Yes, God-given, but law rests finally on coercive authority. It is always critical, also critical of the critic criticizing the obvious wrongdoers. With sinners on the scene the law is bad news. And the knee-jerk response of all of us is to deny it. Needed is “truth” about the law and our culpable dilemma “under” it, as Paul likes to say. But that won’t rescue anyone. So we need—and at Bethlehem it comes—the “grace” of the genuine King of the Jews with upside-down authority. That and only that is the way of escape from livfe under the law, and under the Herods who administer it. So “the law came through Moses.” Ouch! “Truth and grace came through Jesus Christ.” Hallelujah!

Summa:

Denial starts crumbling when truth intervenes. Vision changes when truth replaces cataract-cluttered lenses. Hearing the truth about America’s Herodian pyramid of power and the way we exercise it is not good news. It is regularly contradicted by alternate seers. But were such vision-change (not regime-change) to happen, it would be step one toward a de facto Happ-ier New Year 2004.

Given the current lay of the land, that will take some witness-

stand plain talk from those who've been blessed with such vision. For 2004 also to be genuinely Good News, it will take a sequel-sermon from these same witness stands, e.g., yours and mine in every venue where we live out this new year. A sequel sermon—and a sequel praxis— of Jesus' upside-down authority. We are called to articulate such “authority under” inside, not outside, the zillions of point-up pyramids where we too will live in 2004. 'Course there'll be conflict. Even with other Christians. So what else is new?

But the sequel sermon on the “Grace that came through Jesus Christ” is what it takes for blindness to be healed after it has been exposed by Christ's truth. Paul's words to his Roman co-confessors remain a grace-imperative to us: “And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?”

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder